



Careers for music lovers

Sara Royster | February 2015

Rock 'n' roll. Jazz. Calypso. There are many different types of music, each with its own style. And just as musical styles vary, so, too, do occupations in the music world.

Musician and singer are popular choices for a musical career. But even if you can't carry a tune, you can incorporate music into your work. [Dancers](#), [composers](#), and [sound engineering technicians](#), for example, all work with music in various ways.

And for many, making music a career is a lifelong dream. "I started playing the piano at age 6 and fell in love instantly," says Ciara McAllister, a pianist and music teacher in San Francisco, California. "I feel lucky to be able to make a living in music, my biggest passion."

This article provides an overview of different types of careers for music lovers. The first section profiles several occupations that involve music. The second section describes how you can prepare for a music-related career.

The third section details some of the high and low notes of working in music. Career resources are presented at the end.

Musical occupations

Many occupations involve music, sometimes in ways you might not expect. And some of these occupations combine music with other interests, such as dance or technology.

Broadcast and sound engineering technicians

Working behind the scenes, [broadcast and sound engineering technicians](#) set up, maintain, and operate equipment to produce music for concerts, soundtracks, or radio and television programs.

Job titles and tasks vary. For example, audio and video equipment technicians use microphones, sound speakers, and soundboards to control the volume and quality of the music. Broadcast technicians use equipment such as transmitters and computer software to air radio and television programs. And sound engineering technicians use computer software to record, edit, and mix music.

Dancers and choreographers

Some workers interpret music through dance. Accompanied by music, [dancers](#) execute choreographed movements to entertain an audience. Most dancers are members of a company that specializes in a particular type of dance, such as ballet, modern, or tap. Dancers perform in a variety of settings, including cruise ships, theme parks, theaters, and other performance venues.

To prepare for performances, dancers spend considerable time practicing and rehearsing. They work with [choreographers](#) to learn dance moves and also may study new techniques, types of dance, or musical accompaniment.

Choreographers modify or create new dances to express an idea or tell a story to music. They choose music, audition dancers, and lead rehearsals. They may also assist with costume design, lighting, or other aspects of the performance.

To improve their skills, choreographers study new or different types of dance and music. They also may assist with a dance company's administrative tasks, such as budgeting or scheduling performances.



Music directors and composers

Creating or supervising the performance of music is the job of directors and composers. [Music directors](#), also called conductors, lead performances of orchestras, choirs, or other groups. They select musical pieces and guest performers or soloists. Music directors also audition new performers, attend rehearsals, and practice to improve technique.

[Composers](#) write original music and arrange existing music into new compositions. This music is used in a variety of ways, including live performances, movie and television scores, and advertising jingles. Some composers specialize in a particular style of music, such as blues or opera. To write music, composers use instruments or computer software. They also may work with other musicians, such as lyricists, to complete their compositions.

Musicians and singers

[Musicians and singers](#) play instruments or sing for live audiences and in recording studios. Some may specialize in one musical style, such as country or hip-hop.

Musicians and singers rehearse for performances. In addition, they practice playing or singing to improve their technique and style. They may also audition for positions in orchestras, choirs, or other groups.

Music teachers

Music teachers instruct their pupils in different areas of music—such as in playing an instrument, understanding music theory, or exploring music history. In schools, music teachers plan lessons and teach groups of students. They may also organize school concerts and direct student orchestras and choirs.

Private music teachers instruct individual students. Some work in their home or at a studio where students come for lessons; others travel to their students' homes. Usually, these teachers specialize in an instrument or skill that they themselves have mastered, such as piano or voice. For each student, private music teachers create lessons based on that student's ability. They may also hold recitals where students perform music they have learned.

Employment, wages, and outlook

As a whole, music occupations do not employ many workers, according to data from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS) [Employment Projections](#) (EP) program. In 2012, for example, EP data show that there were about 10,200 choreographers, about 28 percent of whom were self-employed.

BLS data from the [Occupational Employment Statistics](#) (OES) survey show that wages for music workers are generally higher than the median annual wage for all workers, which was \$35,080 in May 2013. But OES data exclude the self-employed, and many music workers do not pursue music as their primary source of income.

Employment

Measuring the employment of music workers can be difficult for several reasons. Employment numbers for music-related occupations are often small. Furthermore, music is a secondary career for some workers, who may need or prefer to have another job to make a living.

And job duties in these occupations do not always relate to music. For example, some [broadcast and sound engineering technicians](#) may work on television programs, not musical performances.

Because of these challenges, it's sometimes difficult to identify music workers in BLS data. For example, BLS counts music teachers in several occupations. Music teachers in elementary, middle, or high schools are counted with other types of teachers in those schools. Private music teachers are counted with other types of self-enrichment education teachers. Only in colleges and universities—where they are counted with postsecondary arts, drama, and music teachers—is the occupation more distinct.

Workers in many music-related occupations are self-employed. EP data show that about 36 percent of [musicians and singers](#), 29 percent of [dancers](#), and 23 percent of [music directors and composers](#) were self-employed in 2012.

Wages

As with employment data, wage data for music workers may not always accurately reflect working conditions or total pay in these occupations. For example, OES data exclude the many self-employed who are working in music. But understanding wage data for these occupations can help to clarify how music workers earn money.



Workers in some music occupations—including [musicians and singers](#)—are usually paid by the hour and do not work year round, full-time. As a result, BLS estimates their median hourly wage, not the median annual wage. For example, musicians may be hired to work on the score of a feature film for a specific number of hours. These workers earn an hourly wage only for the duration of the project, so an annual estimate would overstate their overall wages.

In other occupations, workers may have a source of income that is not counted as part of their wages. For example, in addition to drawing a salary, [music directors](#) may also earn fees for guest engagements at other music companies.

Outlook

The job outlook that BLS projects for music occupations varies. For example, employment growth is projected to range from as fast as 24 percent for [choreographers](#) to as slow as less than 1 percent for [sound engineering technicians](#). Employment growth in music occupations is affected by factors such as technology and the availability of funding for the arts. However, job openings are expected in all occupations because of the need to replace workers who leave or retire.

The variation in projected employment growth of music occupations between 2012 and 2022 has several different causes. For example, employment of [music directors and composers](#) is expected to grow more slowly than average because of limited funding for musical groups. In contrast, employment of [choreographers](#) is expected to grow much faster than average, as more people interested in pop culture enroll in dance schools.

The job outlook for teachers is projected to vary during the 2012–22 decade. But employment projections for most teaching occupations do not specify subject area, and music programs may be more susceptible than others to funding cuts. At the college level, music teachers are identified among postsecondary arts, drama, and music

teachers, an occupation that is projected to have faster-than-average employment growth because of rising enrollment in colleges and universities.

High and low notes

The lure of artistry or working in the spotlight might make music seem like an exciting and glamorous career. But like any career, a music career has challenges as well as rewards.

Rewards

Music workers like being creative and helping others develop their talents. “I love teaching, especially beginners,” says choreographer and dance teacher Stephanie Yezek-Jolivet. “When you see students finally connect with a dance move they’ve been trying for weeks, they get so excited. That’s rewarding.”



Working with other artists is another perk. “I love the collaborative aspect of dance,” says Yezek-Jolivet. “Getting to know someone really well and creating something with them—that’s really fulfilling.”

The variety of music work is yet another draw. “There is no monotony in my job,” says conductor Christopher Allen. Every day is a different experience.” Sound engineer Dean Hurley likes being able to mix different interests: “My job allows me to combine technical and pragmatic stuff with artistic and creative stuff,” he says.

Another draw for some music workers is the opportunity to travel. Allen, for example, has gone to Austria, South Korea, and other countries for guest performances with orchestras and opera companies. “I love to travel,” Allen says, “and this job allows me to travel all over the world.”

Challenges

But travel and performances also make for a hectic lifestyle. Some music workers are away from their families and friends for long periods. “Even at its most glamorous, the work is full of sacrifice,” says Allen.

Music work can be highly competitive, too. The prospect of fame and money draws many people to these occupations, but not everyone is successful finding work. “The really good jobs are few and far between, and there are lots of people vying for them,” says Hurley.

As a result, many workers struggle with a lack of steady income. They often work on a project-by-project basis, so they may earn money sporadically. In addition, self-employed music workers may need a long time to establish themselves before they earn enough for a stable living. “Not getting paid a lot is tough,” says Yezek-Jolivet. “I love what I do, but there’s a point where you have to earn a living, too.”

Balancing business acumen with artistic integrity often adds another challenge. “There is no clear market value for a song or a dance,” says McAllister. “We have to believe that our art is worth something to the world and not be afraid to ask for that.”

And, even when your livelihood depends on it, artistic inspiration doesn’t always come easily. “Sometimes, I find it difficult to get the creative spark,” says Hurley. Some workers advise incorporating creativity into the daily routine. “Pick a time each day where you’re going to sit down and create something,” says pianist McAllister. “It may not be something you save, but you learn to exercise that creative ‘muscle.’”

Despite the difficulties involved in building a career in music, the results can be worth it: “You need to have faith that if you put something out there, people will respond positively to it,” says McAllister. “And when they do, it’s amazing.”

Composing a career

Working in music requires specific skills. Depending on the occupation, you also may need formal education or experience. And networking may be more important for building a career in music than in many other fields.

Skills

Among the most important skills for working in music is something that’s often innate. “You need to be immensely talented,” says Allen. “There is a lot of competition, and you need to be good.”

Talent, however, is usually only part of what it takes for a successful career in music. Knowing how to promote yourself and having some business sense are just as important, especially for workers who are self-employed. “No matter how talented you are,” says Allen, “you won’t have a career if you don’t work hard at it like a business.”



Creativity is also crucial for working in music, and not just in the artistic sense. Success often results from being original and doing something in a unique way. “Be creative with your career,” says Allen. “There isn’t one standard approach, and you need to stand out.”

Music workers need to constantly practice to improve their technique, style, and performance. “Discipline is important,” says McAllister. “Musicians really do need to practice for hours and hours.” And perseverance helps workers weather the difficult times when their career isn’t progressing as planned.

Because music workers may travel frequently, keep grueling schedules, and be on their feet for hours, they need physical stamina. And workers like dancers and choreographers must be in top physical shape to perform.

Education

Getting a formal education is one way to enter an occupation in music, and it is often an important step to beginning your career. Specific requirements vary by occupation.

You can start preparing for a music career in high school—or sooner, in the case of private music lessons. Business classes, for example, could help you learn how to manage your money, create a business plan, and market your skills. Classes in math, computers, or electronics are helpful for understanding concepts used in broadcast and sound engineering. And communications courses can improve workers’ interpersonal skills.

Some occupations in music usually require education after high school. The following music workers typically need specific certificates, degrees, or other credentials:

- [Audio and video equipment and sound engineering technicians](#) need a certificate in their field.
- [Broadcast technicians](#) need an associate’s degree in broadcast technology or a related subject.
- [Music directors and composers](#) need a bachelor’s degree in music theory, composition, or conducting.

- Music [teachers](#) in public schools need a bachelor's degree in music education or a similar field and must meet other state certification or licensure requirements.
- [Postsecondary](#) art, drama, and music teachers need a master's degree related to the subject they teach.

Other occupations in music have no formal training requirements, but additional education may be worthwhile. For example, some workers find that earning a postgraduate certificate in music or vocal performance is beneficial.

And although a high school diploma is the highest level of education typically required for some music-related occupations—including [dancers](#), [choreographers](#), [musicians and singers](#), and private music teachers—there are many bachelor's and higher degree programs. Admission into performing arts programs usually requires an audition during which prospective students demonstrate their skills to program faculty.

Experience

Getting experience in a related occupation is important for some music occupations. [Choreographers](#), for example, nearly always begin working as [dancers](#). And [music directors and composers](#) often start out as [musicians](#) or [singers](#).

Even in occupations that don't require experience, workers usually need to master their skills. [Dancers](#) and [musicians](#), for example, often study their craft for many years, beginning when they are very young.



Experience might come from taking lessons, practicing, or performing. This experience can also be combined with paid activities to help you develop your skills. McAllister, for example, started out giving piano lessons to neighborhood children and performing with local choirs.

As you become more proficient, McAllister also suggests finding a good mentor. Allen agrees. “Get yourself into a position where you’re mentored by someone you admire,” he says. “Learn what they did to make themselves successful.”

Internships are another good way to get experience related to a music career. A good internship provides an opportunity for hands-on learning. “You see how people really work,” says Hurley, “and you learn shortcuts or better ways to do things.”

Networking

Networking is important for any career, but especially for one in music. Communities of music workers are often tight-knit. They support each other’s work and help each other make connections.

Aspiring music workers should tap into that network. “Seek out the music community where you live,” says McAllister. “Go where music people hang out and ask questions about how they got started.”

Social media is another important networking tool. For example, McAllister uses social media to promote her band and has raised money through crowdfunding websites.

Through self-promotion, workers in music can share their creations and alert current or potential audiences to their performances. Online methods usually accomplish this task at little or no cost. Some websites, for example, allow musicians and sound workers to post “demos,” or demonstration segments, which prospective employers can view when they are hiring.

Some workers hire an agent to help them plan and promote their career. Allen, for example, has an agent who books him for guest engagements and helps to direct his career.

There are many ways to start—and manage—a career in music. And the best plan for success is to find the one that’s right for you. “Everyone I know in music has a completely unique story about getting into it,” says Allen. “There’s not one clear path, so you need to create your own.”

Finale: Learn more

This article highlights just a few of the occupations that require creative talent. Learn more about these [occupations](#), and hundreds of other career options, in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook \(OOH\)](#). The OOH describes what workers do, along with their working conditions, pay, education or training requirements, job outlook, and more.

Visit your local library or talk to your school guidance counselor to find additional resources for exploring musical careers.

To learn more about schools that offer music and dance education, contact:

[National Association of Schools of Music](#)

[National Association of Schools of Dance](#)

Professional associations also have information that can be helpful in career planning.

To learn more about becoming a musician, contact:

[American Federation of Musicians](#)

[American Guild of Musical Artists](#)

[Crescendo Young Musicians Guild](#)

To learn more about mentorship opportunities for composers in film and television music, contact:

[Society of Composers and Lyricists](#)

For information about working as a broadcast or sound engineering technician, contact:

[National Association of Broadcasters](#)

[Society of Broadcast Engineers](#)

For information about certification and careers for audio and video equipment technicians, visit

[InfoComm International](#)

[National Systems Contractors Association](#)

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Sara Royster, "Careers for music lovers," *Career Outlook*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2015.

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