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# CALENDAR



## PLAYING THE FIELD

*It used to be that a classically trained female musician was expected to settle down to life with a symphony. No longer. See today's LAT piece on three, ground-breaking freelance women playing their so-called "classical" instruments to great acclaim in and around Hollywood.*

By Adam Baer

In the great-expectations, high-anxiety bubble that is life at a classical music conservatory, the last thing a graduating student wants to discuss with her teacher is the possibility that she may not be entirely fit for the regimented, full-time life of a symphony orchestra.

"'So what do you want to do?' my teacher asked me upon graduation," says Sara Schoenbeck, 33, an L.A. bassoonist now known for her solo contributions to contemporary and crossover concert music, the international jazz improvisation scene and Hollywood studios, where she's played on big-budget scores for the "Matrix" trilogy and "Spanglish."

To her teacher's chagrin, her reply was, "There have to be other options."

At just 23, Schoenbeck was rebellious in her confidence but correct in her assessment of how useful to the music and entertainment worlds a classically trained musician — even a bassoonist — can be. A regular participant in the Bay Area's youth orchestra scene, she had studied at the storied San Francisco Conservatory. Never, though, had she wanted to pursue a job in a major orchestra. It just didn't feel right. Instead she graduated and took a different route: moving into Los Angeles' diverse musical community and earning a master's at the California Institute of the Arts, a freer, more interdisciplinary place that encouraged her to study dance, jazz, and new and world music.



"It may sound shocking, but I got studio work from playing contemporary music," Schoenbeck says. "A prominent film composer heard me improvise, which just confirms my belief that if you do what you want artistically, people will notice you. You've got a distinct voice. You take chances."

Schoenbeck is just one member of a small but growing and spirited subculture of young, classically trained female L.A. musicians who have skirted the symphony audition path to play "alternative" musical genres and enjoy eclectic entertainment-industry work now that the Hollywood studios are no longer boys' clubs.

Along with more highfalutin work, the jobs these women get include acting in movies as nonspeaking but pleasant-looking musicians with classical skills, improvising in hip-hop orchestras and playing solos for liquor commercials a few hours before recording Stravinskian jazz riffs for an art project. They may not pull down either the standard symphony income or the generous residuals earned by studio regulars who troll only for "Star Wars"-style scoring sessions. But the impressive range of styles they play provides them with a level of excitement and performance satisfaction that more traditional musicians cannot claim — and they wouldn't have it any other way.

"Of course I had to do some silly things to help make a living at the beginning," says Schoenbeck, referring to a 2000 gig that required her, a bassoonist, to "dress sexy" and mime violin-playing in an all-female string ensemble employed to "back up" one of pop music's ubiquitous boy bands. "But we're in Hollywood, and L.A. is good for musicians like me. In fact, it has made me a better overall musician. I like the challenge of having to transpose and harmonize on the spot, to improvise a fast microtonal scale or play jazz with performers like Anthony Braxton, who I'll collaborate with this summer at Belgium's Middelheim jazz festival. I learned I could do all of that here in L.A., and I know I wouldn't get those chances with a full-time spot in the Phil."

In fact, some of her male colleagues may even be a little jealous. Local violinist Julian Hallmark was a student of Yehudi Menuhin, among others, and has a busy freelance career. But, he says, "If I, as a guy, could get more gigs like that, I'd want them. They pay well and are fun."

## A more flexible lifestyle

Another talented freelancer with pop backup experience like Schoenbeck's, violinist Melissa Reiner, 31, has found still other ways to use the classical training she received from years of study with "serious" musicians at the San Francisco Conservatory, Aspen Music Festival and Peabody Conservatory. An improvising member of the popular country-rock band Kane and a Hollywood session musician with credits including "The Tonight Show" and the Grammy Awards, Reiner has played in videos for David Lee Roth and P. Diddy while maintaining a schedule of rigorous chamber music and collaborative small-orchestra performances.

"Classical music will always be my first love, and I still play it, but I was driven from the full-time pursuit of major orchestra jobs by the inherent elitism and narrow-mindedness," she says. "I realized as a teenager that I was deeply moved by other forms of

music and wanted a more flexible lifestyle. One of the most rewarding parts of any live performance is the immediate positive feedback from the audience — and from one's colleagues sharing the stage. Unfortunately, the nature of classical music — which requires silence and complete attention from everyone — produces a disconnect between performer and audience. When I perform with a rock band, listeners are encouraged to share their appreciation and enthusiasm during the performance. It's much more visceral: not necessarily better, but certainly more primal and immediate."

Reiner, who is recording a solo classical album, credits her traditional training with challenging her to play at the highest level in any, but especially a popular, musical environment. Like Schoenbeck, she seems to epitomize an L.A.-specific open-mindedness that's foreign to many classical musicians with a "conservatory" outlook.

"Some of the most inspiring and gifted musicians I work with in L.A. are nonclassical performers," she says. "They improvise, arrange, think outside the box. And because I both play with and learn from them, I have been able to reach large swaths of listeners when only the most famous of classical violinists, like Itzhak Perlman, can say that. Plus, I actually enjoy the contrast between high culture and pop culture, performing on MTV with Brian McKnight, filming a scene for 'Judging Amy' and recording Prokofiev's Violin Concerto — all in one fiscal year."

Obtaining such an array of assignments requires not only Hollywood business skills but an ability to fulfill the needs of the music and entertainment industries — among them, "miming" female groups, which must exhibit a "look," and true performance groups, with the know-how to expertly lay down the tracks that stream behind the mimers. That kind of ability is also not a standard part of a classical music education. But violinist Daphne Chen, 29, a string contractor and leader for jobs with such pop artists as Destiny's Child and Mariah Carey, says she's thankful for having taken those offers. Otherwise, she says, she wouldn't have gained the knowledge that she uses to successfully pursue a self-run career with many entrepreneurial aspects.

A USC alum and former CalArts graduate student, Chen grew up winning classical concerto competitions in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. As a young freelancer in Hollywood, however, she began to play with the Latin rock band Quetzal and was soon performing new music for the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella series. Currently, she spends a large portion of her time taking studio assignments as a member of The Section Quartet, a group of local, classically trained musicians that also plays live shows of rock hits arranged for an amplified string foursome with a punk-rock spirit.

"Playing as a lead instrument with Quetzal, which is bilingual, multicultural and rock-oriented, taught me there isn't just one kind of music that either me or my instrument is suited for," she says. "It taught me to improvise onstage and arrange scores, the challenges of which I love. Unlike classical playing, these styles of performance dictate that if you make a mistake onstage, you need to, as rock stars say, 'repeat it like you mean it.' Like you 'rule.' "

Though she still considers herself a classical musician and hasn't abandoned the field, Chen believes that many music schools instill a belief in young artists that they have a unique brand of "potential" which can be fulfilled only in a few formulaic ways — mostly, playing in an orchestra or in front of one.

But "my goal is to be happy," she says. "Which isn't necessarily that stuff only. I realize the silliness of the glitz and glam of some nonclassical gigs offered to women, but I'm also honest enough to admit that I get a kick out of some of it. I just need other things in my life along with classical. And I can find all kinds of quality nonclassical work that actually allows me to express my brand of creativity better. I want to get to a point where people want me, not just a violinist."

Chen has used her varied assignments to learn guitar pedal effects, electronic music skills and how to secure a place for the violin in nontraditional arenas by communicating the nature of the instrument to popular musicians — to whom violins may be foreign entities.

The bottom line to all this is partly the bottom line. As violinist Hallmark observes, while there may remain a "classical norm," one restricted to orchestral and chamber work, "only one-half of 1% of us is going to make money like that. The classical world is having a problem bringing in audiences, and if you don't want to be a martyr starving musician, you have to learn how to diversify. You have to be able to both turn on the Tchaikovsky concerto and back up pop musicians you can't stand — and do it well."

Says Chen: "Like a lot of us in this business, I have one mission, and that's to prove that classical instruments aren't just classical, that they can add the missing excitement and desired aggression needed by popular styles of music. The music industry just has to allow a space for them, or give us the chance to show it how to break one open."

Still, during a week in which her schedule boasted a Bach choir concert, a TV recording session, a Go: Organic improvisational orchestral show and the Playboy Jazz Festival at the Hollywood Bowl, Schoenbeck summed up what drives her community of pioneering freelance colleagues the most:

"You have two bank accounts, a monetary one and a creative one. If one falls out of whack, your balance is off. Then you're not the truly independent performer you set out to be that day you walked out of classical music school."