

# Q&A for New Members Interested in Musical Theatre

## **I want to play musical theater gigs. Do I need to join the union?**

Yes. The legitimate theaters that hire musicians to play their musicals are supposed to hire only union musicians.

## **How do I get a job playing a show?**

It doesn't work to approach the theater directly. They are supposed to use contractors. From the Union office you can get a list of Union contractors who do the hiring for theater jobs locally. Assuming you have some experience, call or e-mail the theater contractors, give them your name, contact info and a resume. Ask if there is any need for subs on your instrument.

## **Should I network to get work?**

Yes. Get to know the people who are doing the kind of work you are seeking. You can ask the contractors for the names of the people they use who play your instrument. Contact those players and let them know you are seeking work and would be interested in subbing.

## **Do I need to be flexible when I'm starting out?**

Yes. Be available. Subbing calls are often last minute emergencies.

## **What's the pay scale?**

It is usually determined by collective bargaining agreement (CBA) negotiated by the Union. These are posted on the Union Web site. The pay scale is often related to the size of the theater. For example, the Kennedy Center pays more than Signature Theatre.

## **What's doubling?**

That's when you play more than one instrument during a show. For each extra instrument, you get a supplement or "double," which decreases with each additional instrument. In some cases (e.g., percussion, harp), you may be paid a "cartage" fee for loading your instrument(s) in and out.

## **What's the subbing policy at these theaters?**

Currently, subbing is at the discretion of the music director or contractor. In some cases, you must commit to the whole run without subbing, while some players might be allowed to sub out. The Union has negotiated this point in at least one CBA (Signature Theatre) and intends to explore this point in other CBAs when those are up for renewal.

## **How does playing a theater gig physically differ from a classical or other gig?**

Orchestras for theater gigs are normally in fairly tight quarters, with unusual seating

arrangements and little storage for your cases or equipment. Normally, the lighting is minimal, and there may be smoke, strobes or other distractions, and you will normally not be allowed to have food or drink (other than closed containers of water). Talking or reading will normally be forbidden. You may be required to play with headphones, or very close to other instruments, which may be louder than you might be used to in a traditional setting. In some cases, you might even be on stage or visible to the audience! (Normally, you will dress in black, but if you are required to wear a costume, you will normally get a separate fee for that.)

If you have any specific issues with the playing environment that have an adverse impact on your ability to perform, you should bring it to the attention of the contractor or music director. You may also report your issues to the Regional Theater Committee. Simply scroll to the bottom of the Regional Theatre Committee web page in the Members Only area of this website. Double click on "Issue Reporting Form," print, fill out and submit to a Theatre Committee representative listed on the web page.

### **How does the music and playing style differ?**

Often, especially with a new show, the score may not be prepared very well, and you will be expected to make cuts and do music prep on your own. Cuts and new material may be handed to you on the night of a performance, or you are seeing it for the first time during rehearsal. Strong sight-reading skills, flexibility and patience are important traits for a successful pit musician. Conductors may conduct from the keyboard, or may have unorthodox, non-traditional styles more akin to stage band playing.

### **What are rehearsals like?**

The rehearsal period is typically very short. There may be one or two orchestra-only rehearsals, a "tech" rehearsal (mainly for lighting and actors to walk through), a dress rehearsal and then public performances. In some cases, such as national tours, you may have one rehearsal and will receive the music only a few days in advance, with or without a practice CD. You must absolutely come prepared, no matter how little advance to you have been given, in order to keep up.

### **Am I (or my sub) paid for auditing?**

It depends. Some theaters or music directors will authorize an audit fee (less than scale) for your sub to watch/listen to the show from the orchestra pit. Others will expect the sub to attend on his or her own time and nickel.

### **What about comps (complimentary tickets)?**

Sometimes the theater will give you a form to request a few free tickets during the dress rehearsal or run. The offer might be repeated during the run if sales are low and the theater needs to fill the house. Otherwise, expect your family and friends to pay like any other member of the public, especially if playing locally for a national tour, where you might be allowed to use the request form for "house seats," which allows you to purchase well-located seats that are normally set aside by the company at full price (space available).

### **What's the "call time" for a show?**

Most theatrical productions have a nightly countdown to the start of the show, starting with the half hour call 30 minutes before curtain time. The actors are required (by their union) to

sign in by half-hour for each performance. The call for musicians is the start time for the show; if you are required to be there earlier then you are "on the clock" starting at that time. **Most musicians tend to arrive between 30 and 15 minutes before the performance; getting to the job early is a good habit that the contractor (and music director) appreciate.**

**The hardest thing about playing a show is...**also the easiest: playing the exact same thing night after night (and twice on weekends!) and keeping it consistent and accurate. Once you're familiar with the music the biggest challenge can be staying focused mentally. Playing the usual run of eight shows per week takes stamina: five of the eight shows are usually performed between Friday and Sunday evening.