

# RESETTLING RUSSIAN MUSICIANS

## From Emigre To Artist-Entrepreneur

TERRY L. APPLEBAUM, D.M.A. AND M.B.A.

*Associate Dean, Northwestern University School of Music, Evanston, Illinois*

AND

PATRICIA VILE, M.S.

*Manager, Community Relations, Jewish Vocational Service, Chicago, Illinois*

*The economic climate for musicians is not encouraging; it is even more difficult for emigres. To better understand the needs and opportunities for Russian musicians in the American marketplace, the Chicago JVS surveyed emigre musicians and developed a Musical Advisory Committee. Through evaluations of their performing ability, networking workshops, and public relations efforts, the JVS is encouraging Russian musicians to become entrepreneurs; that is, free-lance musicians.*

### BACKGROUND

Approximately 100 refugee musicians have arrived in Chicago since 1987. Many of these creative professionals held high positions in the former Soviet Union. Several played with important symphony orchestras and conservatories in major Soviet cities. Others held less prestigious positions in smaller communities or performed Russian popular music throughout the Soviet Union. Still others functioned as teachers or teacher/performers. The quality and style of art varied, but all of these people were employed full-time in musical careers.

These individuals are eager and full of hope, anticipating that they will pursue their careers in the United States. They have little except their musical talent to help them regain their professional stature and personal self-esteem. Because they came to America expecting to find artistic and financial rewards, they have great difficulty understanding and accepting the possibility that there may be few musical opportunities for them.

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Copies of the Chicago JVS Survey of Soviet Musicians can be obtained by writing Patricia Vile, Jewish Vocational Service, 1 South Franklin Street, Chicago, IL 60606.

Employment in the United States for artists of all kinds is based on often fickle shifts in taste that create both tremendous opportunity and harsh disappointment. The U.S. economic system is not well equipped to accommodate the special needs of newly arrived Russian emigres. Individual refugees, often with limited language skills, must learn how the private enterprise system works and determine how they might best function in it. The task is formidable. Even native-born artists present special challenges to employment professionals nationwide. Assisting refugee artists to re-establish their professional careers is that much more difficult. In Chicago, the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) is trying to meet the special challenges posed by Russian musicians by using external advisory groups, market research techniques, and available media resources.

From volunteer advisors, representing an array of musical professionals, we learned what works in the U.S. marketplace. This corps of networking professionals is interested in assisting refugee musicians to better understand both their capabilities and the opportunities available to the most skilled.

Based on the data, our hypothesis is that a viable way for Russian musicians to

survive here as musicians is to become freelance musicians. This is an established way for musicians to earn a living in the United States either as performers or as teachers. By becoming aware of the refugees' understanding or misunderstanding of the job process, we identify educational gaps and strive to bridge them. Encouraging the refugees to pursue an entrepreneurial route is being done through evaluations, networking workshops, and publicity.

#### **THE CAREER ENVIRONMENT IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION**

In the former Soviet Union, a system of state support created opportunities for musical performers and teachers. Throughout the country, small pit orchestras were maintained for local performances. Because the dramatic arts were extremely popular in the Soviet Union, theaters and musicals, folk music, children's theater productions, and small operas were found in virtually every community. Although the quality of these ensembles by U.S. standards was not always high, performers were assured of jobs.

Obtaining positions in symphony orchestras was different. These jobs were coveted because few orchestras were in operation — approximately 100 as compared to more than 1,800 in the United States — and most were located in major Soviet cultural centers. Audition requirements for these orchestral positions were rigorous, and competition was keen. Yet, although a competitive environment existed, its intensity was eased because of two factors indigenous to music training in the Soviet Union. First, emphasis was placed on performance pedagogy, and second, conservatories did not produce inordinate numbers of music graduates. Thus, conservatory graduates unable to win symphony posts were able to find teaching positions (Personal communication, Victor Yampolsky, Professor of Conducting, Northwestern University, March, 1992).

#### **THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT FOR PERFORMING MUSICIANS IN THE UNITED STATES**

Today, the economic climate for musical performers in the United States is not encouraging. The number of qualified performers far exceeds the number of available full-time playing jobs. It is not uncommon for 100 or more people to audition for a single symphony orchestra position. Still, thousands of music majors graduate from our universities each year. Technology has also reduced performance opportunities, both through the development of high-quality recorded music and the use of synthesizers, which dramatically reduces the number of musicians required. Consumers also enjoy alternative leisure outlets, the number of concert-going teenagers is smaller, ticket prices have soared, and people have less disposable income to spend (Vogel, 1990). As a result, "the economic conditions for most performing artists is substandard when compared to other workers in the society. The median income for both dancers and musician/composers is below the poverty line." (Cantor, 1987).

#### **CAREER PATHS IN MUSIC**

Traditionally, in the United States, a career in music has meant a career as a performer. It is this narrow vision of the music industry that limits the career options for artists entering the profession. When defined from the broader perspective of how music is channeled to consumers (Reed, 1989), the picture becomes brighter. This perspective allows musicians to expand career options to embrace satellite careers — as agents, technicians, or merchandisers — beyond that of a performer. The performance and satellite careers together comprise a worldwide industry that exceeds \$40 billion in annual gross sales (Baskerville, 1990).

Musicians willing to accept a broader definition of their profession are more likely to secure a full-time position, but employ-

ment is not guaranteed. Satellite fields also have too many people competing for too few jobs. Many drop out because they find the competition discouraging or cannot afford the financial costs of lengthy job searches.

Some musicians achieve fulfilling playing careers, but very few find success as solo artists. The soloist path is so narrow and the competition so great that achieving success is highly improbable. Orchestral positions offer the stability of regular paychecks and fringe benefits, but are subject to rigorous competition.

Jobs for music educators are available in public and parochial elementary, junior high, and high schools. These jobs require instructors to teach general music or conduct bands, orchestras, or choirs. Full-time teaching positions provide financial stability, but offer fewer artistic outlets than direct performance.

Many American musicians have taken the entrepreneurial approach, becoming free-lance performers and teachers. Free-lance performers can generate reasonable annual wages by taking a flexible approach, performing diverse styles of music and working for a variety of contractors. Free-lance private music teachers build a class by word-of-mouth. To generate enough money to live comfortably, they may teach as many as 100 students per week. Not assured of regular paychecks, free-lance musicians must pay for their own fringe benefits. However, they enjoy more autonomy than classroom instructors.

#### **CAREER COUNSELING FOR EMIGRE MUSICIANS**

Newly arrived creative artists need to consider career options because the work they did in the former Soviet Union may not be available to them in the United States. To address the very real issue of self-sufficiency, career counselors may direct refugee musicians to a variety of non-musical jobs. Those who possess a vision of where they want to be and believe in themselves as artists become offended and

often depressed if job counselors suggest that they take such jobs. Their initial expectation is that JVS will be able to create a musical job for them. One emigre questioned why JVS did not create a music school in order to employ Russian music teachers.

Further complicating the process are issues of discrepant cultural norms, language limitations, the refugees' newly discovered freedom and flexibility surrounding career choice, and their unfamiliarity with ways to gain access to the U.S. job market. Refugee musicians also face barriers created by a weak economy, their lack of a professional network, and the lack of a good instrument. Often, the challenge is to assist these musicians to redirect the focus of their energies from disappointment and anger over unrealized expectations to the excitement over the new opportunities available to them.

To improve the counseling process for Russian musicians, Chicago JVS staff convened a "brainstorming" meeting with established Chicago musical professionals. A July, 1991 meeting was attended by representatives from universities, rock and classical radio stations, and klezmer bands. Also attending were a rock musician, an emigre baritone, a practicing lawyer/musician, principal players from professional symphony orchestras, a newspaper arts columnist, and a representative from the Illinois Arts Council.

Those participating in the meeting considered a range of obstacles facing these "foreign" musicians. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for a network of professionals to help identify emigres with determination and talent. It was suggested that the volunteer professionals might call on community resources to help musicians seek jobs. These volunteers could also open new doors by helping prepare resumes and cover letters, by arranging for auditions, and by helping refugees prepare for them. Several other creative ideas were discussed, along with the often-repeated prediction

that "very few" refugees would be able to find full-time musical employment; the job market was poor for everyone. Several professional musicians volunteered to become more directly involved by forming a JVS Musical Advisory Committee.

To gain a better understanding of the refugee musicians and thereby be able to provide improved services to those with talent and determination, JVS surveyed newly arrived musicians in Chicago. Emigre musicians attending a November 1991 meeting of the Musical Advisory Committee completed a JVS survey about their professional training and experience and their perceptions regarding barriers to employment in the musical professions. The survey also asked questions about their expectations and understanding of the job market and the devices or techniques that they thought would help them in their job search.

#### Survey Findings

The survey findings are based on a sample of 42 emigre musicians who attended the Musical Advisory Committee meeting. The surveys were returned to JVS at the conclusion of the meeting or were mailed to JVS. All surveys were self-administered. JVS staff members attending the November 1991 meeting were available to assist those individuals present to complete the survey. JVS staff called the respondents if demographic information was missing. The findings provide broad observations about this refugee population, which may prove valuable to resettlement professionals in their efforts to resettle creative artists.

Survey respondents arrived in Chicago between September 1987 and February 1992 from wide-ranging geographical areas that included Siberia, Byelorussia, Ukraine, and the Asian republics. Ninety-five percent of the respondents lived in major metropolitan areas in the former Soviet Union, including Kiev, Minsk, Moscow, and Kishinev. Although some respondents had arrived recently and were still in the first stages of

the resettlement process, others were able to provide considerable details about their musical status in this country. The respondents played a wide array of musical instruments, ranged in age from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties, and were divided evenly between men and women.

The single issue uniting this disparate group of emigres is their strong desire to continue their musical careers. Of all the questions on the survey, only the question, "Would you like to continue in the field of music?" was answered yes by 100% of the respondents.

When asked to indicate their musical experiences in the former USSR, 83% responded that they had been teachers, either as their sole profession or one maintained in conjunction with performing. Forty-eight percent indicated a background in classical performance, 38% performed traditional or folk music, and 31% performed jazz or rock music.

A frequent complaint to JVS counselors that was validated by the survey was the emigres' lack of a musical instrument. One-third of the survey respondents did not own an instrument. More than one-half stated they needed an instrument, in some instances to replace one of poor quality. The most frequently listed instrument played was the piano (64%), followed by the guitar (12%), the Russian accordion (*durma*) (10%), the violin (10%), and cello and keyboards (7%). Another 12% of the respondents were vocalists.

Forty-one percent indicated that they currently derive some income from their music, and 38% indicated a willingness to perform without pay. Forty-eight percent reported that they have had to earn their living in a non-musical career.

When asked to evaluate the obstacles they faced while seeking to become a musician in this country, 29 (69%) noted their lack of American experience, 24 (57%) indicated their limited ability to speak English, 23 (55%) noted the poor job market for musicians, and 22 (52%) cited

Table 1.

RATINGS OF PROBLEMS FACED WHILE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT AS A MUSICIAN (N = 42)

	No Problem		Minor - Major Problem		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	Not sure how to compete	8	19	18	43	16
Lack of American experience	2	5	29	69	11	26
Lack of a (good) instrument	8	19	18	43	16	38
Ability to speak English	7	17	24	57	11	26
Age	17	40	5	12	20	48
Education in the former USSR	20	48	2	5	20	48
Not enough money	2	5	19	45	21	50
The job market for musicians	1	2	23	55	18	43
Understanding of music technology	17	40	2	5	23	55
Lack of a professional network	4	10	22	52	16	38
Performance ability	13	31	5	12	24	57

the lack of a professional job network (Table 1).

Survey respondents demonstrated a high degree of self-confidence when questioned about their technical expertise, playing ability, and training. In conversations with the JVS staff, refugee musicians often discussed their excellent education and training. All 42 respondents indicated they had received a professional music education. When asked what would help them find employment, 26 (62%) agreed there was a need for performance opportunities, 25 (60%) observed a need for a local network of professionals to assist them, 22 (52%) wanted help in obtaining instruments, and 18 (43%) felt a need for public relations efforts (Table 2).

#### Music Evaluations

The most important characteristic of successful musicians, and also the most difficult one for the JVS counselors to identify, is talent. Without abundant gifts of talent, few, if any, of these emigres will find the success they so fervently desire.

Musicians who indicated on the questionnaire that they had a performance background in their native country were

invited to a JVS "evaluation" in March 1992. The evaluation was conducted at a concert hall at Northwestern University by a panel of three well-established music professionals, all members of the Musical Advisory Committee. One purpose of the evaluation was to identify musicians with substantial talent for possible orchestral referral. A second purpose was to become familiar with folk/traditional performers, accompanists, and emigre chamber groups and rock bands that were being formed so that JVS could promote them in the Chicago metropolitan area.

Performing musicians were contacted by a JVS counselor and asked to participate in the evaluation. Four refugees declined to participate because they did not understand how the evaluation would benefit them. When they asked, "Will I get a job from this evaluation?" they were told that the process would only indirectly help them in their job search. Other performers said they had not practiced enough to participate at this time. Three who initially agreed to participate later declined because they were anxious about the process. Of the 12 who eventually agreed to participate, 10 actually came to the evaluation.

Table 2.  
RATINGS OF ASSISTANCE NEEDED TO FIND EMPLOYMENT (N = 42)

	No Need		Some or Great Need		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Auditions	1	2%	17	40%	24	57%
Performance opportunities	0	0	26	62	16	38
Help in obtaining instruments	2	5	22	52	18	43
Public relations	2	5	18	43	22	52
A network of Chicago professionals to consult	1	2	25	60	16	38

The performers were told on the phone and by letter to prepare 8 minutes of music and to arrive 30 minutes before their scheduled evaluation. One musician arrived early, and two came as directed. The other seven participating musicians arrived exactly at their scheduled evaluation time or were late.

The evaluation identified one cellist with substantial talent, three excellent pianist/accompanists, and several groups and folk artists who could successfully pursue an entertainment/party/club career. The results of the evaluation were discussed with the musicians and formed the basis of a JVS Musician Registry to promote local performers.

The event was successful to the extent that the JVS now has an evaluative tool to help it best allocate its limited resources among those musicians able to compete as performers. For example, performers with extensive orchestral experience may be given financial assistance to obtain a quality instrument or cover travel expenses to important auditions. For other performers, their greatest need may be access to the local network of music contractors and agents.

#### MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM JVS CLIENT TO PROFESSIONAL MUSICIANS: STIMULATING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Helped by a better understanding of the music market and the cultural impact of the

U.S. system on clients, as well as the results of the music evaluation, JVS counselors are better able to assist musicians with talent and determination. Methods are being identified to help them effectively transfer their skills into professional careers as musicians in the private enterprise system.

One approach being tried is to stimulate their entrepreneurial spirits. This strategy has merit because free-lance playing and teaching form a well-recognized career path for musicians in America. Further support for the entrepreneurial approach may be found among earlier Russian emigres who have demonstrated the ability to pursue small business ventures in non-musical fields.

Entrepreneurship involves small business, innovation, better use of resources, economic growth, and autonomy. More jobs are created in the United States by small entrepreneurial ventures than by corporations; the same relationship certainly is true of the music industry. Most definitions of entrepreneurship exclude single-person businesses because their potential for economic growth and job creation is too limited. Still, individual artists who pursue their careers as private small businesses have qualities that are identifiable as entrepreneurial in nature.

Studies of entrepreneurship and observations of successful musician-entrepreneurs have identified certain characteristics and attitudes shared by successful entrepreneurs (Applebaum, 1992; Ronstadt 1984; Timmons 1989).

- Entrepreneurs are not born; they can be trained.
- Entrepreneurs often emerge from groups subjected to geographic, social, or economic displacement.
- Entrepreneurs are talented at what they do.
- Entrepreneurs believe in themselves; they do not attribute success or failure to luck, fate, or other external forces.
- Entrepreneurs possess a vision of where they want to be.
- Entrepreneurs are deeply committed to their vision.
- Entrepreneurs realize that the vision is the primary goal; earning money primarily serves as a measure of success.
- Entrepreneurs are persistent; they are intensely determined to achieve their goal.
- Entrepreneurs accept responsibility and take the initiative.

Many performing artists possess these characteristics, and the musicians served by JVS are no exception. Other approaches are being developed to enhance the entrepreneurial spirit in the growing number of emigre musicians. For example, a Russian Musical Registry has been created to increase performance opportunities. Based on the results of the music evaluations, the Registry promotes individual artists and musical groups. Information concerning the Musician Registry has appeared in newsletters, Jewish publications, and mailings to Chicago area Jewish congregations.

### CONCLUSION

The survey of emigre musicians and the development of a Musical Advisory Committee of volunteer professional musicians have provided greater understanding of the problems and opportunities for Russian musicians in the American marketplace. Evaluation auditions have further identified emigre musicians with the ability to succeed as performers.

The artist-entrepreneur needs to identify innovative ways to provide musical services that satisfy needs in the marketplace. To do so, he or she must first learn the language and practices of the local business community. Entrepreneurial opportunities may consist of providing specialized but appealing musical offerings, such as performing authentic folk music at weddings and other ethnic celebrations. Or, it may entail providing a standard service in a more convenient way, perhaps teaching private lessons in students' homes. These options are also valuable as catalysts that will help stimulate the process of nurturing the entrepreneurial spirits of gifted musicians seeking artistic and financial fulfillment.

Developing the skill to compete is a challenging task for Americans; it is especially difficult for Russian emigres, most of whom did not have to compete to obtain their former jobs. JVS counselors and members of the Musical Advisory Committee can help emigres "package" their offerings and thus help them become more competitive in the marketplace. It routinely takes Soviet refugees approximately 8 to 10 months to gain the necessary job search skills and an understanding of the U.S. job structure needed to compete in this system. To help Soviet refugees prepare for employment in artistic occupations, JVS and its Musical Advisory Committee must provide additional seminars and workshops to help them learn the language and practices of the music business community, offer assistance in locating instruments, and provide introductions to music agents, contractors, and community orchestra administrators.

Some Russian musicians have achieved success since their arrival in the United States. They have learned to compete in the U.S. music profession by adopting an entrepreneurial spirit. As other emigres become more adept at the language and practices of the business community and become more competitive, they may be able to achieve their goals of finding artistic and financial fulfillment in their new homeland.

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