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From Oboe to News Desk

Reporting On Her Own Career Change

Blair Tindall

We want to share with you a lively account of a major career change connected with an alumna of our testing program. We hired this author to relate her story after hearing of it from her.

The crystal chandelier glittered like diamonds as I stepped onto the Carnegie Recital Hall stage in 1991. Glowing in shades of ivory and gold, the elegant auditorium looked like a jewel box filled with 235 people, one of them a New York Times critic who would give me a rave review a few days later.



Blair Tindall

I felt like Cinderella at the ball. But returning home to my decrepit New York apartment, I saw that the fairy tale was over. I was really a freelance musician, barely piecing together an income by schlepping between Broadway shows, retirement-home concerts, and the occasional Lincoln Center performance. Unless I made a big change, I would be living in squalor for the rest of my life.

Like many classical musicians, my career path started before I was mature enough to decide my own future. Showing talent on piano at age five, I was enrolled in specialized training by my parents and well-meaning teachers. But even the choice of oboe was not my own, as it had been the only instrument left over when the sixth-grade band director, handing out flutes and clarinets to students in the alphabetical order of their last names, had reached me, third from last.

I was good at the oboe, however, and by age fifteen, was attending a music boarding school that offered almost no general academics or college counseling. Though I wasn't particularly interested in classical music, I could see few other choices than going on to music conservatory, where I earned bachelor and master of music degrees. I was trapped in someone else's dream.

Still, as my musical career developed, my oboe took me on exciting adventures to Asia, South America, and Europe as a substitute musician with groups like the New York Philharmonic and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. However, after spending \$30,000 traveling to 25 auditions around the world for a permanent orchestra job, I had to face the reality that I had hit the wall in this competitive profession at age 31.

During the decade after graduation, my disillusionment with a financially unstable career increased. Performing limited my social life with its evening, weekend, and holiday schedule; I would always be working Saturday night, New Year's Eve, and Easter Sunday. In addition, I grew weary of the repetitive practice, and playing the same Beethoven and Brahms Symphonies over and over.

Worst of all, I was terrible at making oboe reeds, the fragile mouthpieces that must be fashioned one at a time by hand from a type of bamboo picked in the south of France. Some 90 percent of my preparation time was spent at the reed desk, often without result.

In the meantime, I was fortunate to be offered a pit orchestra job with the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*, which paid well. The situation had its drawbacks – the show's run could end at any time, and repeating the same music 416 times a year was mind-numbing. But the job gave me freedom to explore my options.

I participated in every career seminar and test I could find: through a local university, the musicians' union, and The Actors' Fund of America, and by taking a pricey weeklong course that was geared more towards executives looking for rewarding work rather than artists simply desperate to survive.

Self-conducted evaluations like Myers-Briggs didn't work for me. If I could identify my abilities and preferences, I wouldn't need to take the tests in the first place. Since I'd forced myself into the narrow role of classical musician, I had no idea if I preferred working with people or alone, in an office or outdoors, or even with objects or ideas.

I nearly gave up after taking the Strong Campbell Interest Inventory, which listed only one job for which I was suited: poultry inseminator.

Haunting the library for answers, I performed the exercises in Richard Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute?* In the book's appendix, I found The Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation, which provided tests to evaluate the natural aptitudes of teenagers and adults who were choosing career paths. When it was launched by General Electric in the 1920s, the organization aimed to reassign the company's employees



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who had been displaced by technology. That also described my situation as a classical musician in modern society.

From the beginning, I could tell that Johnson O'Connor was a very different kind of resource for people like me. Their aptitude tests didn't ask the subject's impression of his or her strengths, but instead tested them objectively by having the client perform various tasks relating to skills of sight, sound, language, music, memory, manual dexterity, analytical and inductive reasoning, and spatial visualization.

I babbled on to William Sherer, who was administering my tests, that I knew all about my weaknesses. I had a terrible memory, poor language skills, and no talent for math, design, or spatial orientation. I was rigid, uncreative, and an introvert whose only strengths were logic and analysis.

"Put your preconceptions aside and treat this like a game," said Sherer, "even if you feel you're doing poorly." He explained that the tests would evaluate my natural aptitudes, not what years of trying to adapt to a profession I wasn't suited for had taught me.

Suddenly, he threw me a curve ball. I reacted, catching the baseball. "Just checking to make sure you're right-handed," William said quietly. Next, he showed me a page of drawings representing a cocktail napkin folded in specific patterns. An imaginary hole was then punched through the resulting layers. If this were three-dimensional, where would the holes be located when the napkin was unfolded?

"I can't do this," I said immediately.

I'm terrible at this kind of thing. This testing is for other people, smart people. What was I thinking by coming here?

"Remember, it's just a game," said Sherer, with a warm smile.

I labored over the first diagram and hesitantly picked a solution. I went through all twenty examples and finished within the time limit, although I knew most of them were wrong. My brother would be great at this, I thought. He got all the math genes.

"Almost all are right," said the Sherer. "Eighty-fifth percentile." I started to feel a gray fog lifting. My excitement built as the tests explored subjects I'd never considered, like design aptitudes and memory for numbers. I was having so much fun I didn't want to quit.

George Wyatt, the Johnson O'Connor associate who was counseling me on the basis of my aptitudes, spread the computerized results

across his desk. I was astonished to see scores in the ninety-ninth percentile for "ideaphoria" (a creativity measure), musical pitch discrimination, and into the nineties for number memory, graphoria, and observation. Other high scores included memory for design, rhythm, and language. I'd done reasonably well with manual dexterity and other number aptitudes, and scored sky-high as an objective personality. I'd bombed at the only things I'd claimed as strengths: logic and analysis.

"You're an extreme example of someone trying to fit a square peg in a round hole," Wyatt said. He explained that he'd worked with other musicians, some of them famous. Those happy as performers possessed almost the opposite profile from mine; subjective personality and low "ideaphoria" enabled people like performers and researchers to concentrate for hours on perfecting a minute task, while working all alone.

Wyatt's analysis was encouraging. He told me I was strong in "people-influencing" skills, and listed professions that would maximize my aptitudes. Teaching, advertising, journalism, and international business (because of a foreign language aptitude) would all be careers where I might find more satisfaction. If I stayed in music, Wyatt said, I'd be happier composing or conducting, where I would be generating new ideas instead of refining someone else's work of music.

Over the next few weeks, I remained skeptical but started noticing how easily I remembered phone numbers and foreign phrases, that I observed situations far more accurately and in greater detail than many of my friends, and that I brimmed with ideas – which I'd thought was just an annoying trait of bad discipline. I had been so certain of my inadequacy, I'd never given myself permission to explore these assets until now.

Not only did these epiphanies give me confidence and salvage my self-esteem, it also altered my judgment of others. Now I understood that my colleagues might hold a different collection of aptitudes, often in categories where I was weak. Once I could recognize the unique gifts of others, and how they complemented my own, my hidden extroversion emerged.

Johnson O'Connor had given me the key to my future, but finding the right door was another matter. I struggled to develop my aptitudes by studying various subjects through the School of General Studies at Columbia University, a college for returning and nontraditional students. There, I took the same courses with the same faculty as

undergraduates on the Columbia campus.

At age thirty-six, I started out with basic math, moving on to algebra and trigonometry. Before enrolling in a year of general chemistry, I was required to take pre-chemistry, as the subject had not been offered at my arts prep school. Before long, I had accumulated the basic knowledge most people acquire in high school and continued on, taking economics, calculus, statistics, and political science.

I returned for a follow-up appointment with Wyatt at age thirty-eight, telling him I wanted to enroll in a graduate program in a field outside of music, to overcome two degrees from the obscure music conservatory I'd attended. I considered marine biology, or medical school. But although my aptitude results indicated that I could succeed in those fields, I felt more of my strengths could be put to better use elsewhere.

Reviewing my case, Wyatt suggested journalism school.

My aptitudes supported a writing career – with my rapid flow of ideas generating story ideas, and the objective personality making interviewing others a natural activity.

I had doubts. Who would take me seriously, with only a music school education and little academic background? I'd never written a thing in my life. And my employment history, in symphonies and Broadway pit orchestras, showed little incentive for studying journalism, aside from a desire to escape the music business.

"You'll never know if you don't give yourself the opportunity," said Wyatt.

I had a month to apply. Quickly, I took the required Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and earned respectable scores. I smiled proudly, remembering how I could not understand any of the math on the similar test for business school only three years before. Next, I picked four schools. Columbia and the University of Missouri were on the list because of their outstanding journalism graduate programs. I picked the University of Wisconsin as a "safety" school, and Stanford University as my dream school, since their journalism program boasted two Pulitzer Prize winners among the five faculty members advising no more than a total of fifteen students.

The application process included letters of recommendation, GRE scores, transcripts, and an essay. I labored over the personal statement. I also took Columbia University's mandatory "news quiz," preparing by memorizing the year's events as listed in the World Almanac while playing *Miss Saigon*. Then I waited.

A thin envelope arrived in mid-January from Stanford. "My first rejection," I said to a sad-faced older musician neighbor in my building's creaking elevator. I threw the envelope away unopened, along with a Victoria's Secret catalog and two recital notices from people I'd never heard of.

Making an early dinner before the show a few hours later, I fortified myself with a glass of wine and decided to read the rejection. I fished it out of the garbage, sighed, and sat down to read the inevitable. "You have been accepted to the graduate program in journalism at Stanford University," read the single sheet of paper. What?! The words swam for a moment. But Stanford cost \$24,000 to attend. I could never afford it. I read on.

"We are pleased to award you a full tuition fellowship in the amount of \$24,000," continued the letter. I burst into tears and called to read the letter aloud to my mother in North Carolina, who was certain that I had been mugged because of my hysterical delivery.

In the summer before moving to California, I published my very first stories ever, in both the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Later, my thesis ran in Harvard's *Nieman Reports*, and the Hearst *San Francisco Examiner* hired me as a business reporter while I was still in school.

The biggest benefit of my career change caught me by surprise. Now that I no longer have to perform for a living, I have found great joy in making music. After substituting regularly in the San Francisco Symphony while in school, I moved back to New York, where I play in Broadway shows, the New York City Ballet Orchestra, City Center's Encores! series, and the New York Pops.

Today, I write about classical music for the *New York Times*, and environmental issues for *Sierra* magazine. My first book, **Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs and Classical Music** will be published in June. I am leading a rewarding life, one that includes contributions to society I could not make as an oboist.

Today is my forty-fifth birthday, and a happy one. Every day holds new promise, in a way the Cinderella scenario of my long-ago debut recital could not. And without Johnson O'Connor, I would never have found my way.

Blair Tindall's book will be published by Grove/Atlantic Press.

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