This month, music students around the world are considering their careers. In a rapidly changing profession, high unemployment and the crippled economy are always on people’s minds, yet with change in the marketplace comes new opportunities. Today’s emerging string players are looking beyond the traditional career roles of being a soloist, orchestral player or chamber musician – and as the final-year students interviewed here show, the next generation of players are committed to forging their own paths.

Some have a clear vision of their intended future, and others are still exploring. Many are going on to further studies to refine their skills and expand their options, and there are those who are interested in creative collaborations across disciplines, exploring a diverse musical palette, connecting with audiences and making a difference.

During their undergraduate studies, many string players find that their goals and sense of their future undergo metamorphoses, as they gain experience, knowledge of the field and feedback on their own playing. Ambitions and plans typically become more refined and players often find projects or interest areas they want to explore further, whether it’s new music, early music or a particular project where they want to take a leadership role.
From combining music and architecture to exploring the connection of music and technology, for the next generation a music career is more than earning a living or making a splash — it’s about contributing something of value. To help, here are six strategies for advancing your own career:

- **Cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset**
  Most musicians daydream about special projects — creative ventures they’ve always wanted to tackle but never get around to. Dreaming isn’t enough: the time to act is now. Whether it’s the plan for a recording, a commission, an ensemble or a festival you want to launch, take that first small step: learn as you go but get started.

- **Articulate your vision**
  What are your ultimate goals? What’s the life you imagine for yourself one year from today and beyond? Get specific so that you can communicate this to others in just one or two sentences. Clarity of intent is essential.

- **Cultivate your network**
  People skills are crucial because the music profession is so interconnected and relationship-focused. As a professional, you need to get out and connect with new and old colleagues, to gather ideas and suggestions for your projects. Cultivate your own personal advisory board, an inner circle whose advice and counsel you value. Success requires others: you can’t do it alone.

- **Perfect your pitch**
  How well do you connect with others, verbally and in writing? Are you able to interest others in your goals and projects? For biographies, fundraising or covering letters, grant proposals, or any other promotional piece, you need to be able to articulate what is distinctive about you and your music making.

- **Work your plan**
  To bring your vision to life, break it down into manageable action steps. Having realistic short-term goals and practical ‘to-do’ items completed each week will keep you focused and motivated. Clarify what concrete steps you can take — this year, this month, or this week — to help you towards your long-term goal.

- **Take care of business**
  Organise your finances. Create a budget. Know what you spend each month so that you can live within your means and make good decisions about the work you take. Manage your finances and you help to manage your stress.

Above all, fire up your love of music and share it with others. You need to be able to motivate yourself as you forge your own entrepreneurial career path.

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**OFIR SHNER** Violin
Buchmann—Mehta School of Music, Tel Aviv University, Israel

**MY CAREER AMBITIONS** have changed since I began my studies. I only started playing Baroque violin at the end of my first year, when the Jerusalem Baroque Orchestra was looking for a violinist. I didn’t think it would be my career. Now, however, I’m going to do a master’s degree somewhere in Europe — I haven’t decided where yet, but I’m hoping to continue with both Baroque and modern violin.

It’s true that I don’t have to do the master’s, but I feel that there’s a lot more for me to learn. Also, paying for private lessons would be more expensive, and continuing in higher education means I’ll have the chance to play with other students. There are several Baroque groups in Israel now — and they all seem to be busy — so I hope it’ll be possible to continue with our ensemble when we’re all together again.

There’s no early music department here, so we’re mainly on our own, especially when it comes to organising performances. All of us lend a hand when it comes to ringing round venues and publicising our concerts, from handing out leaflets to updating our website and sending out email alerts. We’ve had to learn all this for ourselves. There aren’t that many good places to perform, but that’s less of a problem for a small ensemble like ours.

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**CAROLINE PETHER** Violin
Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, UK

**FOR THE IMMEDIATE** future, I want to focus on my work with the Zelkova Quartet, an all-female string quartet we formed two years ago. All four of us are leaving the Royal Northern College of Music this year, and we’re getting engagements through the college’s external engagements office. I hope we’ll be entering national and international competitions, once we’ve developed a bit more repertoire. Our chamber music teacher said that until we devote all our time to it, we’ll never know if that’s the life we want.

I know it’s tempting when you come out of college to go straight for a secure job, but I want to have a go at many different things and find out what I really enjoy. It’s important as a musician to look on your career as something that evolves and changes, and isn’t just one path. I know that what I do in five years’ time is not going to be what I’m doing in 30. I expect we’ll remain in the north-west, at least in the short term, but I wouldn’t rule out moving elsewhere. It’s possible we might apply for junior fellow posts at conservatories, which might take us to London or even abroad. It would depend completely on what we were offered, if anything.
DANG VIET HA Violin  
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore

MY IMMEDIATE PLANS are to study for a master’s under Julia Bushkova at the University of North Texas. It will be a performance-based course, but I’m actually more focused on becoming a teacher. I think that in order to teach performance at the highest level, I need to know how to play really well. I expect I’ll start by teaching children and then, hopefully, work my way up to teaching at the Hanoi Conservatory of Music in Vietnam. My parents are both teachers in Hanoi and they’re both supportive of my ambitions.

During my first two years of studying, I wanted to be a chamber musician. I only decided to concentrate on teaching in my fourth year. In July 2011 I entered the Mozart International String Competition held in Bangkok. I won second prize in the senior division, but even before the competition, I was asking myself if this was what I really wanted to do. My teacher was encouraging, but also agreed with me when I said I was more interested in teaching.

In my view, being a performer is a tough life — it requires a lot of practice and a lot of travelling. I’ve never thought of teaching as a bad idea, and there’s the attraction of a stable income.

MAX TURPIN Violin  
Mannes College The New School for Music, New York, US

I ALREADY HAVE a part-time job in the computer department at Mannes. I’ve always had a passion for computers, and in the long term I want to do something where I can use both my computer knowledge and my knowledge of classical music.

My impression has been that when you’re a student at a music school, you’re valued as a musician. But when you get out, it seems the exact opposite. People are always happy to hire you for gigs around the city when you’re a student, but where are those people once you graduate? It’s a tough business, and the arts cuts in the US are making it harder.

I want to use my computer skills and my music training to do something that’s helpful, and is valued by people. I don’t plan to quit playing. I play every Friday at a synagogue in New Jersey, and I still plan on gigging around New York. But in terms of how I want to make my living, I’m not going to rely as much on playing as I had originally planned.

AMAHL ARULANANDAM Cello  
University of Toronto, Canada

I’M STARTING A MASTER’S in performance this autumn with Matt Haimovitz at McGill University. My original goal was to end up doing something in a jazz idiom, but I always wanted to get a classical education to develop my technique. At Toronto I played in a jazz ensemble for three years, and in a rock band outside school, which got me work with singer–songwriters and in pit orchestras for small musicals. My teacher, Shauna Rolston, is a very adventurous cellist, and she was very supportive of me going outside the box, and doing a wide mix of performing.

As much as I like performing chamber music, what I would most like to do when I leave school is play in small clubs with jazz ensembles. The kind of improvisation and intimate interaction you have in that setting is like performing in a string quartet at the highest level. And I would relish the touring lifestyle.

I chose Montreal for my master’s partly because of its large independent music scene. I want to test the waters there, but Germany is another possibility for the future. Obscure contemporary music is very strong there, and I like being exposed to as much weird music as possible.
RACHAEL HALES
Viola
Newcastle University, UK

AFTER COMPLETING the Folk and Traditional Music degree, I’m staying on at Newcastle to do a master’s in electroacoustic composition. After that, I’m hoping to do a doctorate in a similar field.

Until I took a creative music technology course last year, I had never heard of electroacoustic music. I was also new to folk music when I started the degree – I was completely classically trained but I wanted to study and play traditional music.

My compositions are as much sound art as music. I combine traditional folk tunes with sounds of instruments and found objects, and environmental sounds such as birdsong and water. I’ve performed one of my pieces at the Morpeth Gathering, a local traditional music festival, where I’ve played before as a folk fiddler and viola player. The festival has encouraged me to collaborate on a more substantial work with visual artists or poets.

I’m in a couple of ceilidh bands and we play at folk festivals including Sidmouth and Whitby. I’m hoping that the people who know me as a folk musician will be interested in hearing my work, especially if they know it has been influenced by folk music.

DOUGLAS KWON
Violin
San Francisco Conservatory of Music, US

I WILL BE STAYING at San Francisco to pursue graduate studies with my current teacher, Ian Swensen. I was fortunate enough to be offered a place on the chamber music programme. I have been playing in a quartet for a year, and next year could be a chance for us to enter competitions. I will also get to play with faculty members in various ensembles.

From the start of my degree, I always wanted to make a career in chamber music. Being in student orchestras made me think about an orchestral career, too, but I felt it was important to have a narrow, specific goal to focus on. I knew that whatever direction I take, my violin playing has to be of a very high standard, so my biggest focus has been on improving my technique.

What I like best about chamber music is the collaboration and interaction. In a great orchestra you get a chamber music quality as well, but I have realised that my strengths are in chamber music.

SAM BALLANTYNE
Double bass
Manhattan School of Music, New York, US

I’M WORKING WITH architects and designers on developing the Moveable Feast Orchestra. It’s a project that I founded about a year ago as a way of bringing musicians in a chamber orchestra physically closer to the audience. A violinist friend got a job in Cirque du Soleil and I started to think of how the circus is both a performing arts ensemble and a venue. I set out to reinvent the circus tent idea, and create something that instead of setting up outside, would set up inside and make use of the plentiful unused retail space in New York. We’re on track to have our performance superstructure ready by the autumn.

A lot of young people are trying to reinvent the concert and make it more social, and Moveable Feast is in the same vein. Beyond the ideas behind the project, what I like most about it is being able to work with talented and committed musicians and other collaborators.

I have always wanted to write, and my plan has been to complete an undergraduate music degree, and then do a creative writing degree at somewhere like Columbia University. But the Moveable Feast project is too important to me to think of abandoning. I will see it through and see what happens.

HERMIONE JONES
Cello
Royal Academy of Music, London, UK

I’M GOING TO TAKE a year out but will continue to study privately. Next year I want to train as an animateur or workshop leader, because I love working with young children. On the Royal Academy of Music’s Open Academy programme I devised and led a workshop for children and I also shadowed a teacher giving large-group cello lessons, gradually taking over leading the groups. This experience helped me use my skills in a different way, which I found extremely liberating and exciting. Being enthusiastic when teaching others has made me more enthused about what I’m doing, and has affected the way I play, making me more spontaneous.

When I started the degree, I wasn’t interested in teaching at all. But sometimes you have to take a risk. Music students need to be open-minded. Going up in front of a class of 30 could be an absolute disaster, but for me, it paid off, and I relished it.

I want to lead more workshops, particularly with early years. I have done projects at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and I find that using my musical skills in an unconventional setting to do something that is so obviously benefiting people, and giving comfort, is very fulfilling.

The funding situation in music education is worrying, and with this kind of work, I will have to be ready to adapt.

INTERVIEWS BY CHRISTIAN LLOYD AND PETER SOMERFORD