



BROADWAY'S ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

BY TAREQ ABUISSA



Broadway theatre emerged in the 1860s in response to London's West End. It began consolidating in Manhattan's Times Square when many theaters were built there in the 1920s. In 1927, *Show Boat* pioneered the dramatic integration of dialogue, musical score, and choreographed movement. Rodgers and Hammerstein's blockbuster *Oklahoma!* kicked off the golden age in 1943, running for 2,212 performances.

In recent years, Broadway theatre has attained new commercial heights. According to The Broadway League, the 2018–2019 season grossed \$1.83 billion and attracted 14.77 million patrons, one-third locals and two-thirds tourists. Broadway productions support 87,100 local jobs, including singers, musicians, music directors, and arrangers. Six such music professionals have interviewed with The Society of Composers & Lyricists. Their Broadway careers illuminate the expertise, dedication, and collaboration that sustain this classic form of American entertainment.

MUSIC COORDINATOR JOHN MILLER

Music coordinator John Miller has assembled the orchestras for some 140 Broadway shows, starting with *Barnum* in 1980. The key first information a new production will share is its instrumentation. From there, the music coordinator will be responsible for calling the musicians perfect for that show. Discussions ensue within the music department, amongst the show's conductor, arranger, dance arranger, and choreographer. A producer will then expect the music coordinator (or alternately, contractor) to solve all problems that arise independently, within union parameters, and hopefully, cost-effectively.

Broadway teams carry vested interests in who their musicians are. Everyone has a name to pitch, and players don't actually audition for these orchestras. John keeps an open mind, without ever falling back on go-to lists, and carefully assesses each show's particular needs:

"I'm really relentless with the orchestrators. If they say, 'We need someone who can play flute, clarinet, saxophone, oboe,' I say, 'Which has the most priority right now? Is it the flute?"



"What is the highest note the lead trumpet plays? And the personality of who the conductor is, and which people would really work well with that conductor."

Once the players have been selected, their contracts will be regulated by the union, much akin to the Actors' Equity Association. The American Federation of Musicians Local 802 AFM establishes standard pay rates, hours, overtime, and benefits for Broadway orchestra musicians. Further, each player is obliged to take three weeks' annual vacation

at minimum, amounting to 24 shows available one at a time. John has witnessed major shifts during his career, such as when the union began allowing players to take up to half of all performances off, while still protecting their positions. As a result, many musicians involved with outside commitments began to view Broadway jobs as an attractive option.

Anytime a player takes off a show, of course, a capable substitute will cover their part. The union requires five subs' names on file per chair, approved in advance by the conductor. John's experience has led him to take this practice yet a step further: he asks for an indication of how close each sub is located to the theatre! With conflicts routinely arising throughout the run, sometimes on only hours' notice, this system helps him make the right call the first time.

Today's Broadway pit orchestras are leaner than those of decades past. The average number of chairs has dropped roughly in half—perhaps from 25 to 12. Producers must keep weekly operation budgets economical while closely adhering to union regulations. The Local 802 AFM strengthens musicians' contracts by guaranteeing orchestra "minimums," aiming to resist trends toward using virtual orchestras, prerecorded tracks, or production loops. The exact number in each pit depends on the size of the Broadway

theatre. However, exceptions can be granted in special cases, such as a musical clearly based on a rock quartet.

A studio bassist with stunning credits of his own, John considers himself no different than the musicians he contracts. He is empathic to their pursuit of freelance work—new and established players alike. With only 38 Broadway musicals running last season, decisions must be made. But John cherishes the privilege of giving deserving work to deserving musicians, often culminating in moments of pure musical awe:

“The part that’s really beautiful is when you make this call, and you have this idea of how great this is going to sound, and then you hear them play for the very first time. It’s a pretty emotional thing for me, knowing the process of the names written on a yellow pad. The whole is far greater than the sum of the parts—something really spectacular happens.”

ACTOR-MUSICIAN KATRINA YAUKEY



Actor-musician Katrina Yaukey is a triple threat, if not more. She performs on Broadway as a singer, actor, dancer, and multi-instrumentalist. When she’s cast as a musician “swing,” she even learns instrument books and dance parts for multiple tracks, depending on who is performing in a given

number. In the 1998 revival of *Cabaret*, she played clarinet, alto/tenor saxophone, and keyboards. And in the 2006 production of *Company*, more instruments still: oboe, flute, clarinet, saxophone, piano, trumpet, and tuba. She played accordion while singing in the 2016 production of *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*, and has additionally appeared in *War Horse*, *Billy Elliot*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Victor/Victoria* on Broadway.

Theatre director John Doyle propelled the actor-musician paradigm into the spotlight in England before also introducing it to Broadway. His productions of *Sweeney Todd* and *Company* did away with supporting bands altogether, showcasing an ensemble of actor-musicians on stunning, reduced orchestrations. Katrina first encountered this pioneering director in a series of auditions for 2006’s *Company*. As usual, she played her own accompaniment while singing—and in this case, rolled in with a cart full of instruments and baffled Mr. Doyle by playing them all. The two have become close collaborators on Broadway productions, tours, and workshops, finding a formidable foil in each other’s talents. Katrina loves playing in these actor-musician shows, and has made it known she’ll be on board for anything he asks her to do.

When Katrina rehearses with a cast of musicians and singers, she says, every day is a sitzprobe. The instruments are an integral part of the entire process and piece. In most rehearsal environments, the singers won’t hear the full orchestration until being joined by the band in the theatre before opening. But being able to cover both at once engages Katrina’s whole self as a performer, and her presence in her body onstage. She cherishes these opportunities, reflecting:

“They sort of feel married to me. The whole experience in the way that you speak onstage, or you sing onstage... an instrument becomes an extension of that voice, or of that moment. I guess they really are all connected.”

As a performer, Katrina strives to directly honor the composer’s intentions. She understands that each piece contains a message to be conveyed, complete with its own world of musical and textural decisions. She considers it a gift to interpret these choices through her own instincts as a musician, but is not signing up to be a co-orchestrator. Besides offering pointers on left-hand accordion technique, Katrina ultimately seeks music grounded in a sense

of deliberate clarity. Composers interested in writing for theatre would do well to consider this musician’s ideal working relationship:

“I very much appreciate guidance, and people saying, ‘This is what I feel for what I’ve written.’ I more often than not prefer when people just tell me what they really want. What’s the intention that you’re looking for, and how can I make that come to fruition for you?”



WOODWIND DOUBLER RICK HECKMAN

A woodwind doubler and oboe specialist, Rick Heckman has played in 39 Broadway shows to date. His career began with 1983’s *Marilyn: An American Fable*, and extends to the current revival of *West Side Story*. Rick has never played in a single show for more than three years, whereas his wife, a fellow Broadway musician, has remained on four shows during the same period. Each musical has its own stylistic signature, perhaps crossing multiple genres, and demanding a particular woodwind palette. Of his two latest shows, Rick reflects:

“West Side Story is pretty balanced between the instruments, actually. I play clarinet, tenor sax, oboe, and English horn. But in my previous show, Beetlejuice, it was probably 80 to 85 percent alto saxophone.”

Broadway orchestra rehearsals are intensive, albeit within a limited time frame. In Rick’s experience, the orchestra might convene for three days of dedicated six-hour rehearsals, culminating in the cast collectively joining to sing through the sitzprobe. Being in the same room as the singers is a highlight of the production process for Rick, especially when he spots familiar faces and gets a chance to reconnect. Once the group moves into the theatre, there are usually two early mornings of seating setup and sound checks. Technical rehearsals follow, allowing fuller run-throughs in the house. And finally, only previews remain before the production’s opening night.

The woodwind demands for some shows have been so unusual that they required skillful reconsideration and negotiation. One score originally called for an oboe d’amore, but Rick talked the orchestrators out of it. Not only did he not own an instrument, he didn’t know any doublers that did. Simply as a practical concern, finding subs would have been impossible. In another instance, Rick was able to pull off a feat of reed engineering for the 2002 Broadway revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song*. The team wanted Rick to play a kind of Chinese oboe, and even bought him one. But when Rick sat down to play the instrument, he quickly realized:

“It was so loud, and it wasn’t really diatonic, and I couldn’t figure out how to play an actual scale on it. So I ended up rigging up an oboe of mine with the big, brass bell from the Chinese oboe, and played really quacky reeds on it. I tried to get close to the sound they were hearing, and they were very happy with that.”

This seasoned theatre performer got his start while still a graduate student at the Manhattan School of Music. A classmate who was involved in an off-Broadway show recommended Rick for an empty seat, which he took. There, Rick met Michael Starobin, who would become a longtime collaborator and one of today’s major Broadway orchestrators. But to win his first Broadway chair, Rick demonstrated his willingness to turn around on short notice. His clarinet teacher had fought to bring him into the band of *Marilyn: An American Fable* in 1983, but someone else was chosen. When that player ended up leaving the show during previews, Rick auditioned for the conductor. He was hired on the spot, and can make the uncommon claim that he never even subbed on Broadway first!

These days, Rick might know up to a year in advance when a new musical is on the horizon. He considers how to best accommodate the needs of the conductor and music contractor, touching base with them months in advance:

“Are there any people you want to hear that I haven’t sent in to sub for me yet? How can I make this transition as easy as possible for everybody?”

VIOLINIST PHILIP PAYTON



Violinist Philip Payton moved to New York in 2002 to pursue a freelance career in music. He began subbing on Broadway the following year, but it would be another six years before he landed his own chair, in the 2009 revival of *West Side Story*. After a conservatory education in Violin Performance, Philip was ready to open a new chapter with a leap of faith:

“I wasn’t crazy about the orchestral audition process. Plus, I wasn’t ready to necessarily live anywhere that there was a job. New York was the kind of city—I didn’t have many connections here, but I knew there would be a variety of work.”

Philip’s bet paid off. Today, he has either held a chair or substituted for an array of Broadway hits, including *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Wicked*, *Spring Awakening*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Kinky Boots*, *Hello, Dolly!*, and *Frozen*. For musicians seeking to break into Broadway,

Philip emphasizes the importance of the subbing network to get on the radar of other players and music contractors. In Philip’s case, new to the city, he approached a violinist colleague who had a gig on Broadway. He made a modest request for advice...and was invited to sub on that very show the following week! Philip was handed the sheet music and recalls a “ballistic” learning process. He continued finding substitute work with the show, not only for that violinist, but even on other string chairs.

Subbing in an unfamiliar Broadway chair is demanding and dynamic—Philip likens it to jumping onto a moving train. The band and its conductor have already run the show so repeatedly, nuances develop that can be intangible to notate. To help close the gap, Philip might be invited into an earlier performance to “watch the book,” sitting next to the player on the target instrument to observe. Once, while Philip was subbing on viola for *Spring Awakening*, another string player desperately needed an unusual double: violin and electric guitar. Philip was no Hendrix, but agreed to try his best:

“I learned guitar for around six songs, with all these pedals and all this stuff, and violin was the rest of it. That was the most stressful week of my life, probably. Once I started doing that, in a given week, it could be four different instruments in the course of five different shows, so it was all over the place.”

While classical training carries with it certain instincts, Philip knows where Broadway playing calls for distinct styles. Philip avoids too soloistic of an approach, rather prioritizing the blend with the band—not to mention vocalists. The role that violin fills varies widely within the orchestration: he might double the singer’s register, soar in on a countermelody, or cover the lead voice in a four-part string (or synth string) texture. Philip particularly loved *Kinky Boots*, a show whose rock ‘n’ roll score had him digging in at the bridge to crank out volume. For composers or orchestrators less familiar with any instrument, Philip has a solution to improve the process for everybody:

“Consult with a friend who plays that instrument. Have them go through the charts and help you figure out if things work well or not. Most people do, and some people don’t, I’m assuming, and it comes off clear that somebody wasn’t consulting with a violinist.”



GUITARIST MIKE ROSENGARTEN

Mike Rosengarten is a consummate theatre-maker. He has subbed on guitar for the Broadway phenomenon *Wicked*, as well as music directed and orchestrated new musicals for workshops and readings. He even acts onstage, and plays banjo in New York's premiere bluegrass show tunes band, The Playbillies. These days, Mike can be heard shredding in *Be More Chill*, a viral hit he's accompanied since the show's very beginning.

Having played in bands so early and late in their productions, Mike sees guitar charts in a variety of states. For readings whose songs are still taking shape, he might be passed a piano/vocal part to follow, or simply a lyric sheet with chords scribbled in. But by the time a show makes it to Broadway, Mike can expect to be playing from beautiful charts prepared by a copyist. This makes it easier to run the show successfully each night, especially when subs are needed to fill in.

Consistency is Mike's top priority as a Broadway performer. Dance moves, certain lines of dialogue, and other actions in the play sometimes correspond with specific musical moments. The sound designers have carefully mapped out each cue and sound level to help the audience hear everything they're intended to. Mike follows the conductor's lead precisely, while finding satisfaction in honing in on his part:

"This might sound monotonous to some, but I enjoy the specific challenge of having to play something 'perfectly'

every time. It almost feels like a live recording session every night, and you know you only get one take."

Be More Chill offers a contemporary example of the path a new musical might take to reach Broadway. Mike's account is also a beautiful testament to the fruits of maintaining artistic relationships:

"I had been playing in the *Be More Chill* composer Joe Iconis' band for years before I heard a show he wrote was getting a regional production in New Jersey in 2015. We had a short run, and were lucky enough to record a cast album. Three years later, due to the viral success of the album, we were given an opportunity to bring the show off-Broadway, and then eventually transferred to Broadway. Many of the band and cast members from the original regional New Jersey run stayed with the show all the way to Broadway, and it really became like a family."



KEYBOARD PROGRAMMER RANDY COHEN

Randy Cohen is a keyboard programmer, a creative technician who has helped 85 Broadway orchestras employ synthesizers to fulfill their needs. Some of his recent shows include *Frozen*, *Dear Evan Hanson*, *Hamilton*, *Kinky Boots*, *The Book of Mormon*, and *In the Heights*. Randy works in conjunction with the orchestrator, music director, keyboardist, and sound designer. Due to the nature of the job, several of Randy's shows can be running at once, by which point he's mainly called on for hardware maintenance. But plenty of versatility is required first:

"My work should be 95 percent done when we hit first preview. However, programming is constantly changing along with the music, as the composer, director, and orchestrator change songs and moments. Once they freeze the show at opening, my job is done artistically."

Keyboards are at the heart of musical theatre accompaniments, and Broadway bands rely on them extensively. MainStage, run on a Mac Mini via audio interface, organizes synth patches like piano, Wurlitzer, Rhodes, clavinet, celeste, or any number of classic synths and basses. Internal sounds may also be drawn from a Nord, Hammond organ with drawbars, or Minimoog Voyager—if possible, Randy says, he'd rather go with the real thing, too. The MalletKAT is another MIDI controller for playing pitched percussion such as marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, and glockenspiel. And a drum set can be outfitted with a drum pad to add effects, such as claps and stomps to enhance the onstage choreography.

Before rehearsals begin, the orchestrator will send sheet music to the keyboard programmer (and copyist) for preparation. If the composer is already using keyboard plug-ins such as Complete or Massive, Randy can import them into MainStage to achieve the same sound live. And if a Broadway show spawns a national tour, it will likely be re-orchestrated for a smaller band, relying more heavily on keyboards to emulate the Broadway sound. All the same, Randy stresses that these digital sounds play a supporting role to the live instruments:

"I'd rather not be a musician-replacer. A lot of orchestrators will try not to do that; they'll find a way to use the keyboard to thicken the sound out, but try to orchestrate to the band they have."

Most of today's Broadway pits include two keyboard performers. The programming is placed into chains, forming a sequence of keyboard patches. With the press of a foot switch (indicated by a sticker on the page), the keyboard layout will change. The new patch might have, for example, one sound in the left hand, another in the right hand, and perhaps one key for triggering a timed harp glissando. The sheet music focuses on which key to press, but Randy is mindful to "program toward the sub"—if the left hand is going to sound up two octaves, the music should say so. While a keyboard programmer may not be there to watch the conductor give the downbeat every night, their contributions are essential to Broadway pit orchestras working in concert.