

A Sustainable Musical Life

Practical lessons for building a portfolio career, running a private studio, and protecting the time that makes the work possible.

Brent Williams, M.M. | Washburn University guest lecture
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The work behind the work

My career brings together public school teaching, freelance trumpet performance, and a private studio. I have also directed church music, choirs, and instrumental ensembles. Much of what keeps that work going is the practical business knowledge I learned through experience.

Musical preparation matters. So do the less visible tasks: planning lessons, helping students practice, communicating with families, arranging travel, tracking payments, and keeping a calendar that you can trust. Those responsibilities belong in your picture of a musical career from the beginning.

Make room for the whole job

1. **Teaching:** Choose materials, plan lessons, adapt to individual students, and communicate progress with families.
2. **Performing:** Learn the music, maintain your fundamentals, and understand travel, rehearsal, and performance expectations.
3. **Administration:** Keep scheduling, billing, income, and expense records organized. Leave time to answer messages and follow through.

The balance will change as your life changes. I no longer have the same amount of practice time I had as a student. Focused work on a specific goal helps me keep improving within the time I actually have.

Start with one honest question

Which part of the work feels least familiar right now: finding freelance work, running a studio, protecting your time, or handling competing commitments? Use that answer to decide which systems you need to build first.

About the presenter

Brent Williams is a freelance trumpet player, music educator, and owner of Brent Williams Music Studio in Bakersfield, California. He holds a Master of Music in Music Education from Boston University.

Be someone people can rely on

Playing well opens doors. Clear communication and consistent professional behavior help keep them open.

Follow through on the job you accept

Reply clearly during the time you have set aside for communication. Know whether you can make the commitment before accepting it, then honor it. Arrive on time or early, be prepared, and follow the agreed role. Trust develops through repeated experiences of working well together.

Your professional presence extends beyond the performance itself. How you warm up, interact with others, and conduct yourself during a break can shape someone's impression. In my experience, a performance can lead to another gig or an inquiry about lessons.

Clarify the details before you commit

- Date, location, and the person to contact for venue access
- Your role, required preparation, and rehearsal expectations
- Fees, covered expenses, invoices, and payment date
- Travel and lodging arrangements, including what you handle yourself
- What you may record, post, share, or livestream

Many of the contractors I work with set their own fees and terms. If those terms do not work for you, you can say no. An opportunity still has to fit your time and commitments. Do not assume that permission to perform includes permission to record or publish the performance.

Build relationships in your community

Word of mouth has been central to my studio. Referrals often come from former students and families years after we worked together. Think in terms of steady growth and lasting trust rather than an instant influx of students.

Let local school directors know what you teach and whether you have openings. Simple flyers and local music education organizations' teacher lists can help, especially when you are new to an area. Community and church music connections can also introduce you to prospective students.

Give your studio a clear structure

Clear expectations help families decide whether your studio is a good fit and help you teach without renegotiating the basics every week.

Define what you offer

Start with the questions I wish I had asked earlier: Who can I teach well? What will students learn? Where and when can I teach reliably? What does tuition include? Begin with your strengths and be honest about the limits of your expertise.

Research lesson rates in your own area and field. Consider your experience and the costs of the teaching space. If you rent a space, do the math before committing to it.

Put the expectations in writing

A written studio policy makes expectations clearer. Share it with families and ask them to acknowledge it before lessons begin. Useful topics include:

- Tuition, included lessons, dates, and payment expectations
- Student absences, teacher absences, and makeup windows
- Booking, credits, and refunds
- Communication channels and when you respond
- The process and notice expectations for leaving the studio

Use systems that reduce repeated work

I use My Music Staff for scheduling, reminders, billing, and lesson records. A reliable calendar and organized income and expense records help keep the business running.

In the lecture, I also discussed instrument and studio liability insurance, and the value I have found in working with a CPA. These are areas to discuss with qualified professionals for your own circumstances, rather than copying another musician's setup.

Handle lesson technology thoughtfully

If you use AI to record or summarize lessons, get the student's and family's permission first. Avoid putting student names into AI tools. Keep your own voice in family communication.

Protect your time and keep learning

A musical career needs room for good teaching, focused practice, and a life outside work.

Set boundaries before the week fills up

Earlier in my career, I taught around 40 private students a week alongside a school schedule. That experience changed how I think about taking on more.

Define teaching blocks and makeup windows. Decide when you will answer messages, and use a separate studio number or other communication channel if that helps. You do not need to remain available every evening simply because a message arrives.

Pay attention when exhaustion becomes persistent, when you feel increasingly distant from the work, or when your confidence in your effectiveness drops. In the lecture, I encouraged reducing or redistributing demands and seeking support from a trained professional. Protecting your time is part of being able to continue the work.

Teach the student in front of you

Model on your instrument, help students learn how to practice, and invite them to explain an idea back to you when that is useful. Younger students often need more guided practice and structure. Older students can take a greater role in setting goals, but some still prefer a structured lesson. Tailor the approach rather than assuming age tells the whole story.

Check in with families about progress. Be consistent and follow through.

Be willing to say I do not know

You will encounter questions you cannot answer. Be honest, explore the question with the student, and consult another teacher when needed. If a student would be better served by a specialist, help them make that transition. Their progress matters more than keeping every student in your studio.

Put one change into practice

Choose one step from the lecture: clarify your gig details, write your studio policy, organize your calendar and records, or set a teaching and communication boundary. Build something you can use consistently, then adjust it as you learn.