

For The SCL Score

Respecting Our Profession

By
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For over twenty years I was privileged to serve as Walter Scharf's musical assistant. When his eyes grew weary, I'd orchestrate his detailed symphonic sketches, and when the strains of standing six hours a day became too much for him I'd conduct the orchestras as he would listen from the booth. While I was honored to help extend his creative career, he repaid me immeasurably through his instruction and insight.

In between assignments I would often go to his office just to be with him and talk music. His encyclopedic memory could recall precise orchestral and operatic score pages and his seventy-five year knowledge of the music business, both in America and Europe, was comprehensive. Can you imagine - I was orchestrating for a composer who had orchestrated for George Gershwin!

On one occasion he said to me: "Michael, I hate it when our musicians demean our profession".

"What do you mean Walter?" I'd ask

He'd reply: "You know when they say "Ax" instead of instrument, "Band" instead of symphony orchestra, "Chart" instead of arrangement or orchestration, or "Gig" instead of engagement. Don't they understand the damage they are doing to themselves?"

I'd be quietly amused thinking that, perhaps, Walter was a bit too sensitive about the jargon and reading too much into it. But I don't think that anymore. As usual, Walter had hit the nail on the head.

If musicians don't treat their profession with respect how can they expect others to consider it with esteem?

Can you imagine a physician saying: " I'll pick up my ax and meet my bros on the gig with the charts" instead of "Your prognosis suggests that I consult with my colleagues regarding alternative therapies and procedures." Language communicates how we feel about ourselves and how others relate to us.

I cannot remember a time when our profession has been so financially and procedurally discounted. Composers and lyricists are asked to work gratis under the most extreme conditions simply for a front-end credit or a back-end royalty. Music is downloaded without payment, and supervisors usurp the worth of original scores by assuming the creative functions once held by composers. The ultimate slap in our face is that we are not even permitted to collectively bargain as a profession.

How much of this do we bring on ourselves by our own attitudes and behaviors?

When we discount the language and value of our labor, when we too readily opt for electric music instead of demanding finer acoustic solutions, or when we accept other's inferior musical decisions under the credit of our own names we belittle ourselves and the way we are perceived by others.

Perhaps, when we say "Enough! When we insist that our skill and art merit the same respect, courtesy and professionalism shown to other practitioners will we be treated in an appropriate manner.

Walter Scharf was correct. We must first value ourselves before we can hope to command that worth from others.

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