

# It's ~~all~~ None of Your Business

## Think Outside The Home: Teaching Options And Opportunities Teaching At A For-Profit Organization

Editor's Note: This is the fourth installment in a series of columns exploring various teaching options.

When I graduated with my master's degree in piano pedagogy, teaching in my home was a viable, attractive option. But I soon found it isolating, and I missed my colleagues. When the opportunity arose to teach at a for-profit academy, I accepted! My reasons included:

- Mentoring from an experienced director
- Freedom to focus on teaching and not deal with administrative tasks
- Marketing, space and instruments provided by the academy
- Elimination of home studio issues (zoning, parking, waiting area, cleaning)

For-profit organizations have the goal of making money for their share-

holders (if a corporation) or their owner(s). Non-profit organizations also make money, but the surplus is kept in the business to support the mission rather than benefit an individual owner or shareholder.

For-profit organizations come in many shapes, sizes and business models. The organization might be an independent academy, private music school or retail music store. If considering employment, a key factor to determine is whether you will be hired as an employee or independent contractor (note: the differences were examined in a previous column).<sup>1</sup>

One organization might hire you as an employee, but a similar organization in the same city might hire you as an independent contractor. Two similar organizations with employees might provide very different benefits. At a minimum, prospective teachers will want to investigate:

- Who controls the teacher pay rate, curriculum, choice of students, scheduling
- Who provides professional development
- Who does the marketing and advertising
- What is the level of professionalism

**Musical Arts Center Of San Antonio, Inc.  
(musicalartscenter.com)**

Kenneth Thompson founded the Musical Arts Center of San Antonio in 1999. MACSA now includes two

locations, 44 teachers and more than 1,000 lessons each week. The MACSA facilities were custom designed by Thompson and include private studios with grand pianos, performance hall and waiting areas.

Teachers at MACSA are employees rather than independent contractors. As an employer, MACSA sets pay rates, withholds taxes, provides benefits such as a 401(k) plan and health insurance and offers continuing education for teachers. Professional development seminars are taught by Thompson, guest lecturers and MACSA faculty. Topics covered during 2014 include motivation, student interviews, effective practicing, memory, stage fright, special needs students and technology. Thompson says, "We want this to be a place a teacher can build a lifelong career so we inspire them with training, eliminate business frustrations and provide high-level tools for use in their teaching."

An employer has the right to establish what work will be done and when/where/how it will be done. Thompson recognizes that there are degrees to which an employer will find this practical: "Music teachers are creative professionals, and I want them supported but free to make the best choices for their students.... We agree to a common goal ... reflected in our slogan 'Building a Foundation for Lifelong Music.'"

**Karen Thickstun, NCTM,**  
teaches piano pedagogy at Butler University, directs the Butler Community Arts School and maintains an independent studio in Nashville, Indiana. In addition to music degrees, she has degrees in economics and business. She is MTNA Secretary-Treasurer for 2013–15.



Jessica Mackey first experienced MACSA as a high school student. About a year ago, she returned as a young professional teacher after finishing her master's degree. She says, "MACSA creates a fantastic balance between being able to work together as a unit with many parts, and being able to support each teacher's independence." Mackey cites the role of the placement director who interacts with prospective students to identify personality, learning style and schedule. The student is then referred to multiple teachers to determine the best fit; the teacher can decide which students to accept. "Students and instructors are able to be themselves and to teach, learn and communicate as they feel comfortable and passionate."

### Cincinnati Music Academy, LLC (cincinnatimusicacademy.com)

CMA was founded in 1997 by three music teachers. Today it has 35 teachers, 500 students and encompasses 22 teaching rooms with high-quality instruments, recital hall and parking. Teachers are independent contractors and pay rent to CMA. Teachers set their own rates/schedule and take care of payments from students. An annual agreement addresses CMA expectations and business image.

Four years ago, Margaret Breidenbaugh, a voice teacher, sought out CMA because it looked like a unique opportunity. She appreciates not having to deal with some of the "more stressful aspects of running a business, such as building maintenance or managing an advertising

budget. Our teachers focus on what they do best, teaching."

Breidenbaugh further comments: Because we are each in business for ourselves (as independent contractors), we have a significant amount of autonomy. We decide our own hours, rates and policies. Department heads have additional responsibilities like matching up new students with our teachers. The unique thing about CMA is that there is no sense of hierarchy. We are all there to achieve the same thing, to mold our students into great people who love and live music. On days when I have holes in my schedule, I relax in the break room, knowing that whoever opens the door next the conversation will be intriguing and genuine.



## The High Note in Music Learning

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## Meridian Music ([meridianmusic.com](http://meridianmusic.com))

Music stores often include teaching studios. Meridian Music in Indianapolis offers an education department with a full-time director, 50 teachers and more than 1,100 students. Studio teachers are independent contractors; teachers pay a portion of the lesson fee as rent to Meridian Music. Lesson rates are set by the store and are uniform for all teachers. Teachers establish their own curriculum and have input into which students they will accept.

Rebecca Baker, who was profiled in a previous column,<sup>2</sup> chose Meridian Music when she moved back to Indiana after completing her doctorate. Her decision was partially based on access to a well-equipped studio at a Steinway dealer. She cites additional benefits:

- Students see the "big picture" in an environment that is alive and exciting, where students of different ages, levels, and instruments are studying music.
- Ready access to marketing and potential students; she had a full studio in less than a year.
- Collegiality and interaction with other teachers, including collaborative performance opportunities.

Regardless of the type of for-profit organization, giving up administrative and business tasks to focus more time on teaching can be a smart business strategy, as well as energizing and inspiring!

## Notes

1. "Think Outside the Home: Teaching Opportunities and Options, Part 1 Independent Contractor or Employee," *American Music Teacher*, December/January 2013/2014, pg. 45-47.

2. "Smart, Single, Successful! Effective Business Strategies for Young Professionals," *American Music Teacher*, October/November 2011, pg. 44-46.