

Orchestrating Your Dream Gig

How to Get a Drumset Gig with an Orchestra and Get Called Back Again!

By Sean J. Kennedy

I am honored to have been selected to present a session at PASIC 2024. Having attended numerous sessions at PASIC over the years, I have often wondered how I might contribute to the educational impact of this esteemed event through my own playing and teaching experiences. After extensive reflection and discussions with trusted friends and colleagues, including soon-to-be PAS Hall of Famer Neil Grover, I chose to focus on how to establish oneself as an independent drumset artist available for work

with orchestras. This niche is one I have successfully navigated, and I am eager to share my insights.

Following is a preview of the itinerary for my in-person session this coming November, along with some key takeaways for those who may not be able to attend.

WHAT WAS MY DREAM GIG?

My dream gig was to hold the drumset chair in either the Boston Pops under John Williams or *The Tonight Show* band drumset chair with Doc Severinsen. Growing up in the 1980s, drummers Fred Buda (Boston Pops) and Ed Shaughnessy (*The Tonight Show* band) were frequently on television, and I aspired to be like them. My formal percussion lessons began in the mid-'80s when Ed and Fred were prominent on TV. Eventually, I graduated with a degree in music education and a master's degree in percussion performance. Armed with a degree and technique, the question was: how do you turn that knowledge into paying gigs and get called back repeatedly?

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE YOUR DREAM GIG

Here are six steps to help you reach your dream gig:

1. Listen, Listen, Listen! Listen to everything you can. Study what you listen to and try to replicate it. Pay special attention to the field of percussion you want to

specialize in, whether it's drumset, world music, orchestral, etc.

2. Be an Exceptional Sight-Reader Time is money. The quicker and more accurately you can read and produce quality music, the more you'll work. Read everything: treble clef mallet instruments, bass clef for timpani and keyboard, drumset charts, world percussion instruments, etc.

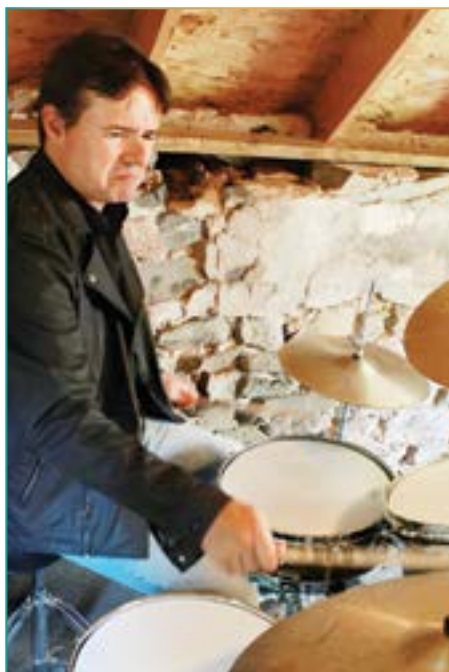
3. Be a Great Communicator Don't make anyone wait for your reply. Be honest, friendly, and articulate in your communications. Even if you can't do a gig, don't just say "no." Offer to help find someone else to cover the spot.

4. Do Your Homework If you get a gig, do your homework! Print the music, mark it, practice it, tape it together, put it in a binder, etc. Listen to reference recordings. Know the repertoire cold before you go to the first rehearsal. Ensure you have the correct gear for the genre — cymbal choices, drum sizes, stick options, etc.

5. Be On Time Early is on time. On time is late. Late is unacceptable.

6. Don't Turn Down Any Gigs Especially when you're starting out, you can't afford to say no. Keep your passion and keep honing your craft in your ideal area, but remember, a gig in a genre that you don't love could lead to the gig you want.

How do you establish yourself as an independent drumset artist available for work with orchestras? It's akin to the classic tales of a want-to-be actor starting as



SEAN J. KENNEDY

an usher or page in a major TV studio and eventually finding an opportunity to get on stage because they were already on the scene. A similar story applies to me; I've always considered myself a drumset player who is also an orchestral percussionist.

HOW IT STARTED FOR ME

Keep all of your professional drumming opportunities open. Even though drumset is my passion, I have always taken any opportunity to challenge my skills. I have managed to navigate both the orchestral and commercial/jazz worlds simultaneously, taking advantage of a variety of opportunities that have allowed me to grow and showcase my versatility as a musician. Here are some examples in both areas:

ORCHESTRAL OPPORTUNITIES

I have had the privilege of performing as a substitute percussionist with various regional orchestras, gaining valuable experience and expanding my network within the classical music community. My versatility has allowed me to play as a section percussionist on pop gig tours, blending orchestral precision with the energy of pop music. I have also participated in many diverse productions, including live video-game-music shows and concerts with renowned artists, which has broadened my exposure and enriched my performance skills. Soloing with symphony orchestras on notable pieces such as "Bolero" and the Rosauero Marimba Concerto pushed me to hone proper rehearsal techniques and precision.

In addition to live performances, I ventured into producing virtual videos and albums with world-class musicians, collaborating with such artists as Dame Evelyn Glennie and members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Canadian Brass, and The Boston Pops. One significant project involved recording and producing all 50 etudes from the Cirone book *Portraits in Rhythm*, which I then posted on YouTube, providing a valuable resource for percussion students and enthusiasts.

DRUMSET OPPORTUNITIES

In the world of jazz and commercial music, I led my own jazz quartet, which allowed me to explore my creative voice and refine my leadership skills. Performing and recording with my quartet and working with such elite jazz players as Bob Mintzer, Bernie Dresel, Clayton Cameron, and Bernard Purdie was both challenging and rewarding, pushing me to elevate my playing and broaden my stylistic range.

I appeared on television and radio, further establishing my presence in the jazz community and reaching a wider audience. A highlight for my quartet was opening for Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra at Philadelphia's Verizon Hall.

Composing my own music provided an outlet for personal expression and innovation, while playing and recording with The Doc Severinsen Tribute Band, led by Jay Webb. Performing and recording with the Gardyn Jazz Orchestra added another dimension to my portfolio, blending orchestral sensibilities with jazz improvisation.

In addition to live and studio performances, I embraced the digital age by performing on virtual videos and recording tracks in my home studio for various clients. This adaptability ensured that I remained relevant and in-demand, regardless of the medium or platform.

WORLDS COLLIDE

All of these experiences came together in the early 2000s. I was hired to sub on an orchestra tour with Maestro Peter Guth. My role in the section was auxiliary percussion — bass drum, glockenspiel, and triangle.

It happened that the section was too small and couldn't cover all the parts. The maestro suggested replacing the concert bass drum, piatti, and snare drum with a drumset player. Despite being the low man on this gig, subbing for a regular member, none of the regular players wanted to do it or considered themselves drumset specialists. Oddly enough, the bassoonist

knew me primarily as a drumset player, so he blurted out to the maestro in front of the entire orchestra, "Sean should do it! He's a great drumset player!" Guth asked, "Who is Sean?" I acknowledged him, and he asked, "Do you mind playing all of the battery percussion in the polkas on drum kit?" I responded, "I'd love to, maestro!"

This was the first time I played drumset with a professional orchestra on tour. We performed at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., Verizon Hall at The Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, The State Theater of New Jersey, and Avery Fisher Hall in New York City. While this was not what I watched Fred Buda and Ed Shaughnessy do, it was my first chance to show a larger, hiring audience what I could do on drumset. Remember, everyone and anyone in that group could be a contractor!

After that tour, I started to be recognized as a drumset player by people in the orchestral contracting community. It is a word-of-mouth business. Being on the scene, being easy to work with, and being able to bring what is needed to the project gets you called back.

Following this serendipitous event, I was eventually called to perform on drumset with The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, The Philly POPS, The Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, and The Allentown Symphony Orchestra, to name a few. I have also held the principal drumset chair for the Philadelphia Boys Choir and Chorale for over 20 years, and currently hold the drumset chair for the Doc Severinsen Tribute Band featuring Jay Webb and The Gardyn Jazz Orchestra.

CONCLUSION

This is just a glimpse into some of the tips, advice, and methods that I'll share with everyone at PASIC 2024. Other topics I'll cover include navigating these areas: Conductors; Listening vs. Reading; The Balancing Act; Putting It All Together. Plus, I'll be performing live with tracks from the Philadelphia Boys Choir and Chorale and The Doc Severinsen Tribute Band!

I hope to see you there! **PN**