

To the Precollege administrators of Manhattan School of Music: pick up the clue-phone!

The following is an email exchange I had with an administrative assistant from the Manhattan School of Music Precollege. If any MSM administrators are reading this, this might clarify some things.

Hi Jay,

Long time no talk! I hope that you are well! We are in need of a reed player (soprano sax and clarinet for sure and flute and/or piccolo if you are comfortable) for our Musical Theater Production of Once On This Island. We pay \$40 per service and the dates we would need you would be:

May 3 – 6-9pm

May 4 – 11am-1pm (dress)

May 10 – 6 -9pm

May 11 – 11am-1pm (performance)

Please let me know if you are available and interested!

Sincerely,

Administrative Assistant
Precollege Division
Manhattan School of Music
120 Claremont Avenue
New York, NY 10027

I politely declined, saying I had a regular gig on Friday nights, and absent-mindedly offered to think of some other peoples' names, as I usually would do when I am unable to accept a gig...

Hi Jay,

Would you be able to do it if you didn't have to play on Friday? I can talk to the conductor and see what he says? I'm really having trouble finding someone for the gig so other names may be helpful.

Administrative Assistant
Precollege Division

Manhattan School of Music
120 Claremont Avenue
New York, NY 10027

Hi -----,

I know you're the "messenger" in this situation, and are not responsible for coming up with the numbers, so please don't take anything I'm about to say personally.

I think the reason it's so difficult to find someone to play is that the precollege is offering \$40 per service. At or near the bottom of the gig financial totem-pole in New York City is the lowly restaurant/bar gig. From what I have been told by older musicians (including some of my teachers at MSM), about 30 to 40 years ago, it was standard for a musician to make \$50 for playing in a restaurant or bar for a couple hours. Given what rent and other costs of living were, that worked out pretty well. For decades, this scale persisted unchanged though, despite inflation in all other areas. Until quite recently this went unquestioned. In the past few years, the standard rate has moved to \$75 or \$100 for that type of gig, though \$50 restaurant gigs are still not entirely unheard-of. \$40 is laughable though. Nobody will play in a restaurant for \$40. Plus those kinds of gigs provide a meal. And they're incredibly low stress -- just playing tunes and improvising. It's fun! And each musician is only playing one instrument, their main instrument of choice. And there are usually tips involved. And there's always that chance that someone dining will decide to hire the band for their holiday party or whatever. You see where I'm going with this. And if I were to actually compare this to the union fee scale for any sort of musical theater production -- forget about it! Or take teaching for instance... I'm not sure what the precollege teachers make for an hour of teaching private lessons, though I know that's been a matter of some contention, to say the least, but in other more small-scale private music lesson schools around the area, \$40 an hour is reasonable. I only teach privately, dealing directly with the students and/or their parents, and my hourly rate is \$65, and I'm given to understand that that's on the low side of what I could/should charge. So when the precollege offers musicians \$13.33 an hour on a Friday night, or \$20 an hour on a Saturday morning to play three or four instruments on a stage in front of an audience, it will be difficult to find any takers. The only situation I can think of where this kind of "fee" is acceptable is for some sort of crazy avant-garde gig in Brooklyn where it's a couple guys making animal noises on their instruments for tips in the back of a hipster bar.

Then consider the fact that this is an offer from a music school that charges \$35,000 a year to train "professional" musicians. When that school turns around and asks graduates or even current students -- professional musicians -- to play for \$40, it's downright insulting.

As I said, this is not at all directed at you, so please don't take it personally, but please do pass it on to your higher-ups or whomever is in charge of coming up with these silly offers. On a Saturday morning it is worth more than \$40 to me to be able to sleep in late or stay at home and practice. And when I think about people I could recommend for this gig, I don't even want to give their names for fear that they would feel insulted that I would consider them worthy only to play for \$40. If an executive/administrator at the school would be willing to give up a little money from their paycheck to free up some funds for this purpose, I think \$150 per service would be an offer worth entertaining.

Anyway, hope you're well!
Thanks,
Jay