

Street Performance for Pleasure and Profit

Looking to make a little money while traveling, or just play before a ready audience? Street performing could be your ticket.

by Heidi Montgomery

Ask any true extreme-sport enthusiast the reason for hurtling headlong down steep, snowclad mountains or clinging to stony precipices, and the response will undoubtedly have something to do with thrill and challenge, glory and achievement. Ask any musician, whether soloist or fourth-chair cellist, what makes him or her walk out on stage time and again and the answer is essentially the same. Whether racing around boulders and trees or through a string of rapid-fire 16th notes, the heart can pound and the adrenaline pump. And both can be addictive.

As addictions go, the lure of performing is no great cause of distress, unless, of course, the addict has insufficient access to concert halls, coffeehouses, or bar gigs. The solution? Hit the pavement! Create your own venue and go where the people are. I'm talking about street performance or, as it is more commonly known, busking.

As well-seasoned a performer as you might be, busking takes a different set of skills and tests a different set of nerves in comparison to stage performance. It is one thing to play a venue where you have been contracted to appear (that alone offers more security and confidence than you may realize). It's quite another matter finding a spot in the middle of a busy pedestrian thoroughfare where neither shoppers, nor storekeepers, nor police will object to your presence.

The first thing to understand about busking is that there are no steadfast rules. However, there are certain guidelines that, when followed, are likely to increase your tips, and others that will most assuredly keep you in good graces with fellow buskers—an angry juggler lobbing a flaming bowling pin into your tip basket is not a good thing.

Be Prepared

Before packing up and heading into the streets, go over the following checklist:

1. *Appearance*. Anything goes, but being clean and groomed keeps you from being considered just another worthless beggar. Something with a bit of flair can help draw attention, too, especially in more crowded or spacious locations. Make it easier for people to spot you.

2. *Sheet music*. Leave it behind. Not only is it at the mercy of the faintest breeze, it also creates a barrier between you and the audience. Memorize a minimum of 20—30 minutes of material, and keep your head up and your eyes on the passersby. This goes for group performers as well; I've seen countless string quartets perform at London's Covent Garden without stands and sheet music. In fact, they prance and spin and stomp through the likes of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and *Radetzsky's March* and are immensely popular with the crowd.

3. *Repertoire*. As lovely as they might be, airs, largos, and other slow-paced works just don't cut it. Bright, toe-tapping tunes are the best crowd pleasers. Put snobbery aside, cut out the schmaltzy, pedantic bits, and stick to classic music excerpts, if you must. Tunes from popular songs and folk-dance music work well. Celtic pieces—reels, jigs, polkas, and quick-paced hornpipes—are my personal favorite.

4. *Tip catcher*. Have something—your case, a large hat, a box, or a basket—into which people can throw tips. And they do throw, so make it something with a wide opening; some folks like to drop their offerings without ever slowing their pace. Choose something reasonably easy to see and not easily tipped over (dazed pedestrians routinely stumble over even my royal-blue-lined fiddle case). Depending on the venue you choose, you might even hire a charming friend or a winsome older child or teen to pass a jar or basket through the crowd.

5. *Seed money*. Don't leave home without it! This is one of those unexplained mysteries of the universe—an empty tip basket takes longer to fill than one that has been "seeded." Moreover, if you want to grow dollar bills, don't plant copper pennies. Generally, a single dollar bill and a couple of quarters will suffice. In other countries (did I mention that busking is an excellent means of supplementing travel funds?), you will probably want to stick to the higher-denomination coins.

Location, Location, Location

Once you are prepared and ready for your performance, you'll want to head for areas heavily trafficked by pedestrians who are not in a hurry to get anywhere (by contrast, sports fans en route to a game are not likely to register you as anything other than a bothersome obstacle). Outdoor pedestrian shopping malls are great, as are old town centers with narrow streets traveled by shoppers and tourists, wide sidewalks near tourist attractions, and museums. Locate yourself near some place where people loiter—outdoor cafés and markets or snack-bar kiosks, even bus and metro stations—and have reason to pause and reach into their pockets. Public parks and city squares where people go to socialize and relax are also good. The timing can be critical, but will vary according to location. Generally, late morning or early afternoon is the soonest you'll want to venture out. Early evening, 4:30 or 5:00 p.m., is often a good time as well.

Scout around for a spot that will work to your best advantage. Don't look too long, as other buskers can slip in quickly and take the best spots, but take enough time to ensure that you are not intruding upon another performer's space, physical or sonic. You might even choose to wander the fringes of outdoor cafés or hop on subways (although the legality of this is dubious) with a hanging tip basket or a partner to collect tips for you. When possible, set up near a wall or in an unused alcove, such as a closed shop front, that will project your sound outward. Put yourself out toward the front where folks can see you. Narrow, winding pedestrian streets have the same acoustical effect, but try to find an intersection to reach a larger audience. Underground subway passages also have good acoustics and sizeable crowds, but it is not always legal to perform in them. In London, daring buskers routinely ignore posted signs threatening penalties of up to £200 (\$300).

Often, you will not have the luxury of optimal acoustics. In that case, I usually try for a lamppost, a tree, or a fountain to put my back to—something stationary that forces the crowd to part. Strange as it seems, unless you have a sound system or play bagpipes, people will manage to stumble over your tips, if not you. Avoid crowding close to stores' entryways (customers feel panhandled) and blocking window displays.

Fair Play

Some cities require permits for street performance, although I've not yet seen it enforced anywhere. It's best to ask the local police or chamber of commerce about any restrictions—although unless signs are posted, you'll most likely just be asked to move on. In London's Covent Garden, I was just nearing the end of my first reel when a policeman gently tapped me on the shoul-

der. In typical British fashion, he politely asked that I not perform on what he explained was privately owned sidewalk. Then, with a smile, he pointed to the other side of the building. "I think if you move down toward the station, you'll find the tips much better there, anyway." In Dusseldorf, Germany, a territorial shoe salesman waited exactly 30 minutes before confronting me with emphatic tones and waving hands, which clearly stated that I should clear out. Although I doubted his right to do so, I acquiesced, rather than cause a scene.

Some places requiring permits do have rules about changing locations every 30 minutes, or have a grid system, which will be explained to you. In unregulated towns, you may occasionally find that you have inadvertently set up in some regular's spot. On the other hand, sometimes fellow performers, particularly bands, will be singleminded and hardly notice your presence. It is best to pack up and leave of your own accord, dignity intact, rather than have them blast you away. Others will loiter, usually waiting for a break in your routine to inquire how much longer you will be. Be gracious and accommodating; they might prove to be useful connections. Sometimes if you are friendly and professional and their performance is more visual than auditory (mimes, balloon artists), they might offer to share the space. This arrangement often works to mutual benefit: people who wouldn't slow down for music will stop to watch the antics of a juggler and wind up enjoying—and tipping—both.

A quick word on using amplifiers: If you choose to go this route, show a little courtesy towards fellow performers. There are plenty of fans and tips out there for all of us. There is no need to crank the volume so loud that you clear the area of other buskers for blocks around.

Safety First

Once you have found your spot, place your case or tip basket (with seed money!) approximately two to three feet in front of you, if the pedestrian traffic permits. Generally, people like to maintain a "safe" distance, preferring not to get too close.

While I have neither experienced nor heard of any foul play while busking, I am always watchful. If I set my fiddle down, I hover over it; if I stop to talk to someone, I move closer to my tips, remaining alert. I keep my belongings in front of me, within leg's reach. Though I have never felt myself or my instrument to be endangered, I have been wary of the interest that some passersby (usually beggars) have taken in my tips. In that event, I keep an eye out, ready to kick my case closed over my tips if I see them again or if they venture too close.

When I've finished, I pause a bit, loosening my bow, preparing my fiddle for storage, giving listeners the opportunity to realize that the show is over. Usually at least one or two people surprise me with a last-minute tip and compliment. Then I scoop my earnings into a bag—never stopping to calculate the take—tuck it quickly away, and disappear.

Powerful Performing

When you perform, stand up if you can. It makes you more visible, and you appear more energetic, which appeals to an audience. I find it helps to be passionate about performing. Dance and sway to the music, enjoy yourself. Pour energy into the crowd, and it will generally be returned—both in smiles and tips. In Madrid, after nearly 15 minutes of performing with timid uncertainty and travel weariness, I received little more than scorn from the high-class matrons and indifference from the rest. So I did a quick attitude adjustment and decided to kick back and just enjoy myself, despite the fact that I needed the money. Within minutes, the tides turned. Faces lit up with delighted smiles, photos were snapped, tips were tossed along with words of praise. There is something to the adage "As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

As a solo performer, particularly if you do not use an amplifier, you are not likely to draw a crowd. This is no reflection on your talent, just a matter of comfort or even culture. In many countries, people seem slightly intimidated by soloists. In a group, the attention is dispersed, making it safer to stop, enjoy, and move on, often without tipping. If it is just you and them, there is a sense of guilt for "taking" your music without leaving something in return, so listeners tend to keep their distance. They will loiter before window displays, lean against trees while waiting for their spouses, rest on nearby benches—but you can spot them. Their feet will be tapping; they may even permit a smile to grace their lips. Some might even jig a step or two as they pass. Children will turn their heads and clap their hands. They may not tip, but they are enjoying what you offer, and they are, after all, your audience. Accept it, laugh about it, relax, and have fun.

Excerpted from *Strings* magazine, [January 2001, No. 91](#).