

Unexpected the Expected

By Justin Locke

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This is a story of a kid who lived on a farm in the Midwest. A family friend gave him an old, beat-up plywood string bass, and he started to play it just for something to do. His family couldn't afford lessons, so he taught himself out of a method book.

He was not particularly talented; he was just doing it for fun. But one day, he saw a magazine article about Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony. Impulsively, he decided to give up farming and work as a bassist in the Boston Symphony or the Boston Pops.



Off he went to the big city to seek his fortune.

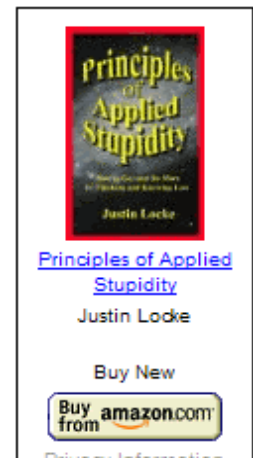
I should mention that when it comes to professional music, I am somewhat of an expert. I spent many years playing the double bass in the Boston Pops, so I know just how hard it is to get hired for the gig. Quite frankly, if you told me about a kid with the above résumé and that kind of lofty unrealistic ambition, I would have difficulty not laughing out loud.

The competition is intense. Auditions for some seats only happen every five to 10 years, and it's not uncommon for 500 highly qualified applicants to show up — musicians with really good instruments who have been studying with the best teachers for years.

But there is one piece of wisdom that all of my years of experience cannot see or share with you, and that is the existence of unexpected — even screwy — opportunities.

For example, in this kid's case, no one could have predicted that his instrument, a free hand-me-down from a family friend, was in fact a really fine, old, Italian bass.

It would also be hard to believe that this somewhat unfocused and undisciplined kid would suddenly commit to practicing eight hours a day, every day. Nor would it be reasonable to expect that, at just the right moment, one of the established bass players in Boston would suddenly leave town to study at Juilliard, leaving the Boston Pops personnel office scrambling to fill a now-open slot in the next 20 minutes.





It might be most difficult of all to imagine that in desperation, the Boston Pops called this kid.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, if you were to see this plot performed on a stage, you would condemn it as an improbable fiction. But it's an honest-to-god true story. That kid was me.

It's always good to ask experts for advice, but the need for guidance and certainty always threatens to lead one into a rut of conformity and lowered expectations. Fortune favors boldness. There are any number of invisible opportunities, unexpected breaks, new ideas and alternative unused pathways to success that are lurking just outside your peripheral vision. You may not see them until they are right in front of you.

I take great pride in my hard-won expertise, but it would not have been very helpful when I was younger. I would have strongly advised my 16-year old self to not even attempt something as difficult as a professional musical career. Fortunately, at the time, my older, wiser self was not available to tell the younger me to give up.

Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

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