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San Francisco Chronicle

Freelance musicians have violins, will travel

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

Saturday, January 26, 2008



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French horn player Meredith Brown had a busy weekend.

Last Saturday morning, she drove from her home in Vallejo to San Rafael for two back-to-back rehearsals with the Marin Symphony, then played an evening concert in San Jose with the Symphony Silicon Valley. Sunday's schedule was more grueling: morning rehearsal in Marin, afternoon concert in San Jose, evening concert in Marin.



And you thought your commute was rough.

Brown, 34, and her husband, 41-year-old trombonist Bruce Chrisp, are among the dozens of orchestral musicians who piece together a living in the Bay Area with this kind of schedule - playing a rehearsal here and a concert there, often with hundreds of miles of driving in between.

They perform with orchestras in Santa Rosa, Stockton, Oakland, Modesto, Sacramento, Fresno, sometimes even Reno. In some weeks, they clock almost as many hours behind the wheel as they do in the rehearsal studio, a schedule that has given this loose-knit guild of musical freelancers its nickname.

They're called the **Freeway Philharmonic**.

"It's a very competitive situation," Chrisp says. "But with 20 orchestras in the area, it's possible to scrape together a full schedule."

Chrisp has been working the **Freeway Philharmonic** circuit since 1989, when he returned home to the Bay Area after college to earn a graduate degree at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He has regular contracts with six of the local orchestras; Brown has nine which is about as many as her schedule can accommodate

Both supplement their income by teaching privately and in universities. And both make sure to leave as much time as necessary to take the auditions that represent the only path to the next career level - a permanent job with a full-time orchestra.

Just this week, Brown declined an invitation to substitute with the San Francisco Symphony because it conflicted with an orchestra audition.

"It breaks my heart to turn them down," she says. "But I've been telling myself: No flaking on auditions. Otherwise, I'm going to be a freelancer the rest of my life."

Brown and Chrisp are among a group of orchestral musicians profiled in "**Freeway Philharmonic**," an engaging hourlong documentary by filmmaker Tal Skloot that airs Sunday on KQED-TV. In interviews - many of them shot during marathon drives on the Bay Area's roadways - and through concert and rehearsal footage, Skloot and co-producer Steven Baigel throw a light on a little-known corner of the region's musical life.

It's a world he discovered as a classical guitar major at UC Santa Cruz through two roommates who were freelance players.

"I got to see this crazy lifestyle firsthand," he says. "I watched them running in and out, and I thought this was a story that needed to be told."

Among all the large and small ensembles that make up the Bay Area's vibrant orchestral scene, only the three leading organizations - the San Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Ballet and San Francisco Opera - provide their players with full-time employment. The rest draw on musicians who are dividing their time and energy among a half-dozen or more orchestras.

So in addition to their musical skills, says bassist Andy Butler, 42, an 18-year **Freeway** veteran, players need to be able to master the jigsaw puzzle of competing schedules.

"If an orchestra offers you seven concert sets," he says, "the standard arrangement is that you need to work at least five of them. So when the calendars come in, in June or July, you sit down and make a big grid and puzzle over it. You try all these configurations to make the pieces fit together."

The pay is far from lavish. Section players typically earn between \$100 and \$130 for a 2 1/2-hour service (the umbrella term that covers both rehearsals and concerts); pay for principals and associate principals runs a little higher.

In a good year, a musician working steadily might earn \$40,000, and that's with no benefits; musicians either cover their own health insurance or do without.

For cellist Robin Bonnell, 45, a 22-year veteran juggling six contracts, the financial and physical strain is beginning to tell.

"I'm going further into debt every year," he says. "I've been putting off thousands of dollars of dental work. I need \$2,000 to \$2,500 to fix my cello, and I don't see when I'll ever have that."

But Bonnell, a boundlessly energetic talker and performer, is obviously someone for whom music is central. The visceral delight he takes in playing comes through clearly in Skloot's film.

"Sometimes you get a set that's wonderful, or a soloist or a performance of a piece that's wonderful, and it all falls into place."

The same devotion to music keeps Butler going through the rough patches.

"After 36 services in 31 days, or three oil changes in one month," he laughs, "it's good to be reminded that you're working, which is great, and you're working in *music*, which is *fantastic*."

"It's a tough business to go into, and I wouldn't encourage anyone to do it unless they're crazy about music and love to practice. But otherwise there's a lot of opportunities to play at a high level."

Still, no one comes out of the conservatory with a career in the **Freeway** Phil as their goal.

"I think a lot of people fall into this," says violinist Karen Shinozaki Sor, 38. "When you start out, you take a bunch of auditions and get into whatever orchestras you can get into. And then time goes by."

"I always thought I'd do this for a while and move on, but so far that hasn't happened. And in the meantime the work keeps coming, and you have to pay your bills."

The result, says her husband, 38-year-old cellist Eugene Sor, is a social microcosm ranging across different ages and career stages.

"You have young upstarts who are recent college graduates that you know aren't going to stick around. You have the folks approaching middle age, like Karen and me, who are basically content but also have a lot of ambition still. And there's the crusty old veterans who punch in and out and aren't necessarily happy."

And one byproduct, of course, is romance. The Sors, who both grew up in the Bay Area, didn't meet until they began playing the same orchestra gigs. Brown and Chrisp also met in the concert hall and insist that sharing the same unpredictable schedule is the key to a happy home life.

"I've dated people who have day jobs," Brown says, "and it's not easy. Civilians, as we call them, are less likely to understand what we do and why it's important."

On the other hand, Butler - who dated mostly musicians before marrying a woman who works regular hours at a corporate job - says the interlocking work schedules have advantages.

"For raising kids it's ideal: I'm home when she's not, and she's home when I'm not. And to have one paycheck coming in regularly on the 1st and the 15th of the month relieves a lot of the stress."

Even for players who marry outside the fold, the social aspect of life in the **Freeway Phil** is central.

"If you're doing a double in Modesto," Sor says, "then you're probably going to carpool with someone, which is a social thing, and between services you're going to eat a meal with them. At the end of the day you've spent a whole day with them."

His wife adds: "There are three things you want out of an orchestra job - that it pays well, that's you're playing with good friends, and that you're playing good music.

"And if you have two out of those three, you can make it work."

Documentary

"**Freeway Philharmonic**" airs at 6 p.m. Sunday on KQED-TV (Channel 9) and screens at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Cerrito Speakeasy Theater, 10070 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito. For more information, go to www.freewayphil.com.

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*This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*



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