



# ACTOR-INSTRUMENTALISTS: PERFORMING IN "FOUR DIMENSIONS"

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When Equity members say they perform in musicals, the common understanding is that they sing and dance in addition to being skilled actors. But for many, their musical talents also include playing music. On some Equity contracts, actor-instrumentalist is a formal category of performer. But all across the country, actors who play instruments while in character say that their work that features their combination of abilities is growing increasingly popular.

Three Equity members shared ways that acting and playing instruments intersect to tell a story onstage, along with their differences and challenges that they encounter as actor-musicians. Leenya Rideout has performed on Broadway in several productions both with and without instruments ("with" includes revivals of *Cabaret* and *Company*). Alexander Sovronsky has appeared on Broadway (*Cyrano*) and across the world, as

well as composing and teaching workshops on music in Shakespearean plays. Helen J Shen is a recent college graduate who has just finished a run of *Teeth* at Playwrights Horizons and is currently performing in *The Lonely Few* at MCC, both off-Broadway.

The members began by sharing how they found themselves at the intersection of acting and playing instruments; they all learned to play music at a young age but took different paths to the stage.

"I had to play in the pit for the orchestra of the musical" in high school, said Sovronsky. "But then in the Shakespeare [production] I'd be like, 'I want to get on stage.' And that was the first time I was like, 'Oh, there are Shakespeare characters that pick up instruments.'"

"I just knew that I wanted to be in the theatre telling stories," said Rideout. "Being in the pit is fun... but I always wanted to be on the stage, too... When I got to college, there were a lot of people who kept saying, 'Oh you have to choose one'... So I was in the string quartets and the orchestras, but then I also was in the musicals and operas, and I took as much acting in the theatre department as I could, and dance... I had to kind of create my own degree."

Shen started both acting and playing classical piano when she was around five.

"But they felt like two lanes that weren't intersecting at all until college," she said. "They felt so similar to me in terms of the storytelling, in terms of the imagination and the expression of it all."



*Helen J Shen and Alexander Sovronsky.*

Shen added the different lanes felt like it was for good reason; the approaches as she learned them were so different.

"I felt like an actor playing the piano, but I didn't really know what that meant," they said. "A lot of people in the classical piano world were very much focused on the accuracy and the competition of it all. And that wasn't what excited me about playing the piano. It was: These feelings that can't be expressed with words; I'm distilling this into a sound."

When auditioning for college programs in performance, Shen would accompany herself on piano for convenience, and lightning struck.

"It felt like such an obstacle for so long that suddenly, when it turned into... a plus, it was a weird shift of mindset for me that suddenly I didn't actually have to choose. I could do both, and it makes me feel like I don't have to be just one kind of artist. All my art can happen through whatever medium I want it to come through."

Being able to access different performance skills at a high level with a sense of ease felt significant to the group. Sovronsky compared being proficient with an instrument to being a trained dancer.

"You have to have a good foundation in your body to be able to trust that your body is going to do the thing, and the rest of you could be thinking about the story you're telling," he said. "As actor-musicians, at least for myself, I think having that foundation of comfort, not just understanding of an instrument... all those mechanics, all that stuff just melts away out of your brain because it's all second nature."

Rideout shared a perspective she heard from director John Doyle, with whom she worked on *Company*:

"What's coming out of my violin is another voice. And it might even be contradictory to what my mouth is singing or saying, but it is. It's not just something I'm doing to accompany myself; it's more subtext. It's another part of the character that I'm playing.

"One of the magical things about doing actor-musician shows is you very seldom will get bored," she added. "It's almost like it's not three dimensions, it's four dimensions. It's another aspect of finding a character, telling the story. It's so rewarding – and kind of hard to explain."

"If you're just embodying a character, we talk a lot about: How does the character move or walk or what kind of voice do they have," said Sovronsky. "But also there's that other question of: Well, then how do they play this instrument? Because I might play the violin like a classically trained violinist. But is the *character* classically trained?... Have the character come through your instrument, not just what you're playing, but how you're playing it."

The members agreed that the challenge of combining these different modes of expression is a great part of what makes it worthwhile.

"I find a lot of joy and comfort in the newness of things," said Sovronsky. "It translates to other stuff in my life as well, being a little bit less scared of being uncomfortable."

"I don't remember being bad at the piano, because I was so young," said Shen. "I think that is something that as I move farther into being an actor, process is really exciting to me, the prospect of being bad, but becoming better."

The group also noted that as actors who are proficient at certain instruments, they are more likely to pick up new instruments than in the classical music world, which also feeds into that excitement.

"When I'm doing shows just as an actor, when you're playing a scene with someone, what they bring to it can obviously inform you," said Sovronsky. "As an actor-musician... suddenly I can go, 'Hey, you play an instrument I don't play – can I try that?' As an actor, I never can go, 'I really like what you're doing. Can I try that character on for size?' There's a skill-share, bonding, curiosity thing that happens on actor-musician shows that I don't experience on other pieces of the arts."

"I've learned so much from the other actor-instrumentalists that I've been in cast with," said Shen. "I'm listening to my peers and watching them be amazing, and also watching them fall on their face... It's pretty rock-and-roll!"

The group agreed that work combining acting and playing instruments is increasing, but that there have been growing pains along the way. For one, having a unique set of skills has a downside: coverage.

"Sometimes you don't even have the understudies," said Sovronsky, "Someone like us can come to the table and say, 'Hey, I'm really valuable for a production because I play all these instruments' – that makes you very exciting and desirable. But it also means, what happens if you're sick?... I think the fact that there's more people coming into this industry that can do what we do, it means that our jobs are now safer because there's more likelihood that there might be people that can do the stuff that I can do that could actually cover me."

The group also discussed how Equity's collective bargaining agreements could do more to support them. For example, most union contracts do not have a formal category for actor-instrumentalists. Equity has an Actor-Instrumentalist Working Group (on which Sovronsky currently serves), brainstorming ways to address common issues. Some problems could be resolved long before the first day of rehearsal.

"I think very often when they're creating a set design, they kind of forget that these instruments can't just lie on the prop table," said Sovronsky.

While the group had a lot to share about the work they do on an artistic level, when it came to improvements in their workplace they would like to see, their concerns were deeply practical. Should it be the responsibility of the performers to tune their own instruments? Can employers provide personnel to replace broken strings mid-show? Where do you stash picks for guitars?

"I work on a production and the theatre says, 'Hey, we really love that jacket that you have that you brought to rehearsal one day. We'd love you to use that in the show,'" said Sovronsky. "There's language in our contracts that say, 'Great, you get X amount of money every week to donate your own personal clothing.' And then the theatre is responsible for dry cleaning it, washing it so that when you show up at rehearsal, it is ready to be worn. As an actor-musician, it is our responsibility... to get there... before everyone else to get your instrument out, tune it up, wet those reeds, warm up that trumpet, whatever you got to do... It can take 20, 30 minutes before everyone else shows up."



*Alexander Sovronsky and Leenya Rideout.*

The group also reflected on the toll that their work can have on their bodies, how unlike with conventional dance work, employers may not realize the physical risks that come from playing instruments onstage. Actor-musicians may carry heavy instruments for long periods of time, for example, or experience the repetitive stress of moving in certain ways night after night. Physical therapy is only provided on some contracts.

"Is eight shows a week feasible?" wondered Shen, "Putting your body as an instrument, too, through all of that, the PT that needs to happen."

"A lot of people who play in pits will sub out at least once a week," agreed Rideout, "So they only play seven shows week, and eight is just one too many... When I was in *Cabaret* I had a lot of injuries from doing eight shows a week."

For all the work the industry still needs to do to support them, the actor-instrumentalists are thrilled that audiences seem to have an appreciation for their work and recognize the skill that it takes to incorporate music into the story in the ways that they do.

"There's a bit of danger to it," said Shen. "There's a tightrope walking element to it."

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