

Chef de Musique

by Mike Bankhead

The following is a small outtake from a lecture presented at ABC in 2008.

The chef is the master of a kitchen. There may be sous-chefs (assistants), but the chef is always the master of the domain, a domain for which he has great passion.

PASSION: My dear friends, if you do anything in your life for which you are not passionate, you are WASTING YOUR TIME!

The only things you will be successful doing are things about which you are passionate. You are passionate about music. You are passionate about teaching. You are passionate about things that drive you forward.

TALENT: A great chef is talented, but talent alone is not enough. Have you ever tried to take a skillet containing a large omelette and tried to flip it without, as in my case, having it end up on the ceiling?! You may have the talent, but you have to develop the skill to do that.

ADVENTURE: The adventuresome spirit is critical to your success. When chefs walk into a kitchen, they have fire around them... You've got 7th graders! They've got sharp, pointy things... You've got administrators!

To be a great chef you have to be willing to try new things. And you do that because you are adventurous.

CONFIDENCE: A great chef has faith and confidence; but, there is a thin line between confidence and arrogance. You are the only one who needs to know the difference. Supreme confidence is important; arrogance is evil. (Ask any lead trumpet player.)

WISDOM: Great chefs get to be great chefs by knowing and working with great chefs. You want to learn great secrets, you go to people who have been where you want to go. Go to the masters. Seek wisdom from those who have it.

SIMPLICITY: Simplicity is so cool. The great chefs boil things down . . . oh, sorry . . . they reduce . . . Great chefs have ways of making things that are apparently complex, really simple.

REASON: So, what does a chef do? Before there is a meal, there has to be an event, a reason. A dinner, a breakfast, an event at the White House. But there has to be a reason.

CLEANLINESS: The chef has to have a good, clean, well-equipped kitchen. And wear a cool, little hat; but if you go into that kitchen and there are cockroaches and trash everywhere, you are not going to turn out a great meal.

PRESENTATION: You need to know recipes. You need to know what it takes. By supervising everything, the chef can work on presentation. [If the chef takes that wonderful creation and just slaps it as a big blob in the middle of a plate, it doesn't matter about its nutritional value, how wonderful it is, what your eyes see.] Audiences hear with their eyes and you eat food with your eyes first. If you have a pretty plate prepared, but you're in a funky environment, nothing works. Everything about it has to be great. It's all in the presentation so that all the tangential things don't get in the way of enjoying the meal.

EVALUATION: Then you have to evaluate it. What went well? What didn't? The service wasn't very good; the lighting wasn't great. We over-cooked the rack of lamb. That way you learn as you move on to the next thing.

YOU are the Chef de Musique. Your kitchen is your rehearsal room and concert hall. That's where you mix up the magic we call music. The last thing a chef would do is to use prepared food to create a great meal. As the Chef de Musique, the worst thing in the world you can do is walk around conducting while wearing earphones, listening to someone's performance. You must go back to the score. Hear it in your mind. Study it. Conduct through it. If you conduct to a recording, you are following something already prepared. Hearing it in your head, you are leading, not following.

You must think about correct rhythms, the right tempos, proper style, tone, blend, articulation, pitch, intonation, volume and balance.

What does a Chef de Music need to do?

You have to come up with event names. Get rid of boring names like "The Spring Concert." Put a tag on it.

Plan the publicity and all other non-musical aspects of the concert. Get the word out. Make sure that people know about your event.

Work on logistics: Parking, ticket sales, seating, lighting and adequate women's bathrooms. If it doesn't work, the public will blame you and they won't return to your events.

In rehearsal, start and end on time. Don't talk so much. When you stop, don't give a lecture. Teach quickly. Higher/lower, faster/slower, louder/softer. And, in EVERY rehearsal, deal with tone quality.

Select quality music. If you start with bad music, even if you rehearse the heck out of it and play it perfectly, it's still a piece of junk.

All of this and a lot more is your responsibility. And it's the only way you'll become a real Chef de Musique.

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