



The power of combinatory skills

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Last Monday night, if you happened to be one of the 2,000+ people at Carnegie Hall, you were lucky enough to hear a powerful, [arresting performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony](#) played, perhaps for the first and last time in history, with images of victims of Pakistan's floods illuminating the hall. The concert was a benefit for [Acumen Fund](#), but more than that, it was a powerful statement of the role we all have in rebuilding in the face of tragedy and destruction, and of how different worlds (classical music and Acumen Fund; an Indian conductor putting on a concert for Pakistan; Carnegie Hall and the Punjab) can come together.

[George Mathew](#) conducted that beautiful music and made the concert happen. It's the "making the concert happen" part that represents the future. What makes George unique is the combinatory skills he possesses – he's not *just* a trained classical musician capable of leading one of the most outstanding collections of musicians to grace the Carnegie Hall stage (though that's a great start). George had the vision, the gumption, the persuasive capacity, and the sheer doggedness to make this vision happen. No one asked George to do it. No one gave him permission. No one asked if he was qualified.

In the old days, the way forward for a classical musician (or a writer, or someone playing in a band, or starting a nonprofit or even writing cartoons) was: get as good as you possibly could at your craft and hope to win the ticket to the big time, conferred by some arbiter of taste and access. If you're a classical musician, you'd win the Tchaikovsky competition. If you're a writer, Random House would pick up your book AND decide to promote it. In cartooning, you'd make the funny pages and be syndicated nationally.

What's changed?

Two things:

1. The industries into which you're selling have transformed radically, so the power of the gatekeepers has plummeted. Book publishing is gasping for air, the funny pages are disappearing, classical music (I hate to say) was never all that popular to begin with, and nonprofits still typically underperform, undergrow, underdream.

2. It's easier than ever for one committed person to pull people together, build a loyal following, to make their voice heard and sell direct.

But though the old way of doing things is on the way out, we manage to persuade ourselves that the folks who have crossed this chasm are individually exceptional – which is another way of saying “I’m not them, I don’t possess their talents, so their lessons don’t apply to me.”

So we pretend that:

- [Scott Harrison](#), the founder and CEO of charity:water, has such a unique story (party animal turns do-gooder) that we could never learn the lessons he has to teach.
- No one could ever be as self-promotional as Tim Ferris, or assemble such an outrageous collection of goodies to make his book sell ([\\$4,000,000 in prize giveaways to sell advance copies of the 4-Hour Body](#)), so there’s little to be learned from the fact that *The Four Hour Body* rocketed its way to the top of the NY Times best-seller list.
- Classical musicians are supposed to stick to the music, they don’t create magical experiences like the one George Mathew put together last week.
- Most cartoonists don’t have MBA’s from Harvard Business School, so they’ll never have the unique collection of talents that Tom Fishburne does over at the [Marketoologist](#).
- And of course no other authors can really build audience like Seth Godin can...never mind what Chris Guillebeau has done over at the [Art of Non-Conformity](#)
- And, for that matter, fundraisers are just fundraisers – they don’t have anything worth saying about emerging sectors and the role of philanthropy and markets in solving intractable problems....[but of course we do](#).

How many more examples do we need before we understand that this is what the future looks like, and that it’s here NOW? How long until we recognize that the heyday of getting picked out of the pile and being catapulted to the cover of Time magazine isn’t coming back – and by the way the chances of that happening were so infinitesimally small that it was a bad deal anyway. How long until we see that the people defending the old way of doing things are probably those who benefited from it the most, and that while we’re listening to that siren song, someone is out there doing the hard work of building audience, connecting people, sharing their art, and not shying away from the *whole* craft that the world is demanding of them.

(And, by the way, as [Jeff](#) reminded me, you don’t have to DO this all by yourself – teams work too, often better than a solo rockstar.)

Pretending now hasn’t arrived is just burying your head in the sand. Saying the only thing you know how to do is to work on your craft (narrowly defined), and then bemoaning that you haven’t been discovered...that’s just hiding.

There’s nothing keeping you from embracing today today, from jumping in now, because so many people are still going to want to hide, and if you start building now, I promise you’ll get there.