When the opportunity came up to have more artistic freedom, I welcomed it.”

— Daniel Gilbert

Daniel Gilbert, clarinet, a native of New York, grew up in the city with lots of freedom to explore many avenues, both parents busy physicians who encouraged Daniel and his two older siblings not so much to succeed as to expand as human beings. When he enrolled at Yale for his bachelor’s, his major was undeclared. “I thought I was going to be a basketball player,” he laughs. Though he had been playing clarinet from the age of eight, he was not sure music was the path for him. His talent was evident, but so was his love of the liberal arts. At Yale, he performed in the orchestra and jazz band, but carried a full load in other disciplines — and spent hours and hours on the basketball court. Sophomore year, he began private lessons with David Weber, who would become his teacher at Juilliard and whom Daniel credits with his decision to become a musician. He took jazz lessons from Sal Mosca, a pianist from the post-bebop era who fit students
into his heavy touring schedule where he could, Dan at midnight on Fridays.

The siren call to jazz was strong, but his teachers encouraged him to go the classical route. All those midnight sessions, though, were not lost; he counts his training as a jazz musician as a vital part of his education. Daniel has played clarinet with the Cleveland Orchestra for twelve years, with teaching gigs at Oberlin, Temple, and SUNY-Stony Brook, before coming to Ann Arbor.

While Dan Gilbert was taking midnight jazz lessons in the city, three hours later on the other side of the continent, Joe Gramley was growing up in a small farm town in Oregon. He started piano lessons at the age of eight until the bug to play drums bit hard. At nine, he took snare drum lessons at the University of Oregon so he could audition for The Eugene Youth Symphony. To prepare, he introduced himself to the whole battery of percussion instruments: xylophone, bells, timpani, cymbals, tambourine, discovering in the process that “percussion” meant more than drums. He would go on to spend summers at the Interlochen arts camp and enroll at Michigan to work with percussion faculty member Michael Udow and Salvatore Rabbio, then principal timpanist with the DSO, before enrolling at Juilliard for graduate studies.

His career path, while always focused on percussion, took him in many directions, freelancing with orchestras and chamber groups like Orpheus, playing at the Metropolitan Opera and with prominent new music groups, doing solo work and gigs on Broadway including Miss Saigon, Phantom of the Opera, and The Color Purple. Nine years ago, he was invited to join Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Ensemble; he continues to record and tour internationally with the group. Most recently, he joined forces with British organist Clive Driskill-Smith to form the duo Organized Rhythm. Their first CD, Beaming Music, was just released.

“This was a chance to work intensively with students, to be involved in their development.”

—Joe Gramley

Meanwhile, in Potsdam, NY, Adam Unsworth was coming of age in a home filled with music. His father was a jazz pianist and professor at the Crane School of Music. A self-described “music school rat,” he spent much of his time hanging around Crane, working with their horn professor. His father taught theory, but played jazz when he could. “If anything was on the stereo,” Adam says, “it seems it was either Shostakovich, Benjamin Britten, or jazz.” Adam studied classical French horn starting at ten with a seriousness of purpose, but the pull to jazz—he just recorded his second jazz CD—was a constant.

Jazz? French horn? There are reasons why it’s not common in the jazz idiom. “It’s easy to miss notes,” Adam says, “and when you do, everybody in the room knows it.” But his passion for the genre persisted. He has assembled his own group, intentionally sidestepping the typical jazz horn combo—piano, bass, drums, tenor saxophone—choosing instrumentation that combines classical chamber music elements with improvisation, creating a unique texture.

The constant mainstay has been Les Thimmig, his professor at the University of Wisconsin who can play just about any wind instrument, “from the piccolo all the way down to a concert bass saxophone.” The group’s first effort, Except This!, was released in 2006 and warmly received by the critical press, including All About Jazz, who wrote, “Unsworth’s debut recording does what the best jazz should do by asking questions, shunning orthodoxy and predictability, and having a few laughs along the way. His virtuosity is undeniable.”

Unsworth admits that it wasn’t easy to leave a performing situation with one of the best symphonies in the world. “The idea of a college teaching job was intriguing,” he says, “but there were only a few schools that would interest me. I wasn’t particularly interested in conservatory teaching because I wanted students who had a broader background in the liberal arts, who had good work ethics, were intelligent, and had a broad spectrum of interests. And Michigan was at the top of that list.”

The artistic freedom to pursue his love of jazz was also a major factor. “Being in the orchestra is very defined,” he says. “You are part of a machine — a very well-oiled machine, but you know your role.”

And Daniel Gilbert enjoyed his twelve years at Cleveland, but said, “At a certain point, you ask yourself, what are you really doing? What are your passions, what are your goals? For a while, my passion, my goal, was to be in a top-rated orchestra. And I was. But when the opportunity came up to have more artistic freedom, I welcomed it.”

For Gramley, the move to the studio offered “quality versus quantity.” He had taught at Queens College as an adjunct and for seven years directed Juilliard’s Summer Percussion Seminar. But the U-M appointment is a different order of
The idea of a college teaching job was intriguing, but there were only a few schools that would interest me. ... And Michigan was at the top of that list.”

—Adam Unsworth

magnitude. “In coming to Ann Arbor, I became reaffiliated with the great university that made me a musician, and welcomed a chance to work intensively with students, to be involved in their development. I gave up a fair amount of work this year to focus on the job and get settled, but I continue to tour and can now be more selective, choosing engagements that are most important to me.”

As performing professionals, all three know the demands of that life. And all advise their students on the path to get there.

Versatility, says Gramley. “You need a broad base of great technique and musicality on all the percussion instruments. You need to be able to walk into an orchestra rehearsal one day and play a Mahler symphony, and then the next be ready to play a matinee on Broadway.”

Adam Unsworth says, “Often it’s not just talent. There’s luck involved. But mostly it’s a lot of hard work and drive.”

Dan Gilbert recommends that players get serious at a young age, the earlier the better. “But I would say what is equally important is playing as you are as a human being. The more multi-faceted you are, the more you understand politics and the world, philosophy and psychology, the way the mind works and the way people learn, the better you’re going to be as a musician.”

At the School of Music, Theatre & Dance, faculty are allowed — nay, encouraged — to have an active performing life. Commitment to their studio is a given. But, “Here at Michigan, performing is part of your development,” Adam says. “They want you to be out there making a name for yourself.”

Since joining the faculty last September, Unsworth has toured with his jazz ensemble. Gilbert has presented master classes and solo recitals and performed at two major chamber music festivals. Gramley recorded *Beaming Music* and continues his work with the Silk Road Ensemble.

Most of their students, naturally, are curious about the auditioning process. All acknowledge that it can take many auditions before the job offer comes. “And as much as I played in student groups, playing as a professional is a whole other level,” Unsworth says. “You can’t bat .500 one night and be okay. You’re batting .950 and more, every night.”

“What I’m looking for in an audition,” Unsworth says, “is someone who takes chances in making music, rather than someone who comes in and plays all the notes very safely.” But audition committees don’t always agree; players may have lost out because they did show musicality and personality, but were not precise enough in their playing. “There are obviously differences of opinion and a tightrope you have to walk in finding the right combination.”

“In some ways,” Unsworth adds, “it’s not wanting the job so badly that is the key.” When he auditioned for the Philadelphia Orchestra, it was, in part, to try out a new horn. Still, he treated it like the audition of a lifetime.

Gilbert thinks audition committees are looking for “liberated musicianship.” He tries to teach his students to rigorously train the left brain, pure technical skill, honed to perfection. Then the right brain comes in. “The left brain is doing all of the technical things that are required in our discipline, freeing up the right side of the brain to come in for musical expression.”

“Some people believe the audition is a non-musical experience,” he says. “I believe it’s just the opposite. It’s a hyper-musical experience. If you’re making music correctly, if you’re playing stylistically, when you sit down for an audition, you can enter into that mode and do very well.”

After years of freelancing in New York, Gramley knows what a competitive world it is and how resourcefulness comes into play. “In the 1970s, music programs in the New York public schools and elsewhere were decimated; many of them have not been fully reinstated. So younger people are not being exposed to music; audiences are getting older.”

“Yet I’ve seen some great things recently, energetic performers who are starting to bring in new audiences, groups like eighth blackbird, Alarm Will Sound; and Bang on a Can, who all present music in a way that’s exciting and vibrant and alive.”