

# Sound Off

What should musicians look for in professional headshots?

BY BRIAN WISE

## Micah Gleason

*Photographer, Conducting Student*

→ As a conductor, Micah Gleason is accustomed to giving cues that elicit specific responses. But behind the camera—she began photographing colleagues a decade ago as a side hustle—Ms. Gleason minimizes her direction. “I try to avoid that as much as possible because when you start to do that, people’s bodies get tense,” she says.

“When I shoot headshots, I usually ask people to think about what they’re wearing. Is it a color that you think looks good on you? How is the neckline? Maybe solids are better than patterns? Is the material reflective, or does it collect a lot of lint? We’re always dealing with things like glasses and glare. That can sometimes be tricky. Some people want to look really kind of natural, and some people want to do a full glam look.

“It’s nice to have a variety of photos in terms of angles and orientation but also something that looks personal—like smiling or laughing—or implies that this person is a good colleague. You look at the photo, and you’re like, ‘Wow, what a great person that looks like.’ For some people, they come out swinging, and they’re voguing, or they’re doing a serious face. For other people, that feels super unnatural.

“I also love to use the instrument as a part of the photo. A harp, for example, is a beautiful instrument that you can use in an artistic way. The more that photographers can creatively use instruments in photos, the better.”

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## Julia Faulkner

*Voice and Opera Faculty Member  
Director of Vocal Studies at the Ryan  
Opera Center of Lyric Opera of Chicago*

→ Voice teacher Julia Faulkner believes that the eyes are the most noticeable element of an artist's headshot, even more than an out-of-place hair or blemish. "Are the eyes alive?" she asks. "Do they have warmth and energy in them?" Ms. Faulkner, who recently had her own photos retaken, says that she prefers approachable, classic looks.

"It's tough when you're starting out because the urge to go cheap is huge. Everybody has digital cameras now and can do a lot of things. But I think

it's especially important to find the best-quality photographer you can. If you get a great photo right at the beginning of your career, it can see you through the first crucial years when you may not be making a lot of money. The best place to start is by looking at other people's headshots and seeing which appeal to you.

"A lot of times, singers want to look very serious or sultry. But choosing a photo that makes you look approachable, with warmth and energy, really matters. If you are a working professional singer, you should [get photos taken] ev-

ery couple of years. But you need to be honest with yourself and say, 'I don't really look like this anymore.'

"If a photographer offers hair and makeup, you should take advantage of it and spend the extra money. And you want to have a variety of photos. I find it useful to have a photo that's offset in the frame to use for banners and things like that, where you can print something in the empty space. Changes of wardrobe are fine, but that's really the smallest part of the whole thing. With accessories, simple is better. But really, what we are looking at is the face." →



TODD ROSENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY

Brandon Patrick George

*Flutist, Imani Winds*

*Wind Quintet/Chamber Music*

*Faculty Member*

→ Brandon Patrick George recently traveled to Los Angeles for a session with Lauren Desberg, a photographer (and jazz singer) with numerous musician clients. Mr. George, who was preparing for the release of his solo album *Twofold*, wanted photos that could “capture the interest of a wide variety of audiences, and not just people who go to classical music concerts.”

“I look for a photographer who is incredibly authentic and is someone who I feel can capture a side of my personality that someone else couldn’t. If you’re going to travel to meet a photographer, you must plan ahead and know what you have coming up so you can knock all those photos out in one session. I told Lauren I had a few concepts: I had to have photos for an album, and I told her about the concept of the album. I told her that I needed a more straight-ahead headshot that would be used for concerto programs. And then I just gave her creative freedom to do what she wanted.

“I picked out the clothes I wanted to wear with help from a stylist. But I’m very particular about my hair. I’ve been seeing the same barber in Harlem for about 15 years now. So, I made sure I had him cut my hair just before I flew to L.A. [Ms. Desberg] picked the set and the backdrop based on the wardrobe that I brought with me.

“I’ve never done a photo shoot with a photographer who plays the flute. No one really understands it, and it’s an awkward instrument, anyway, being held to the side. There are weird angle and lighting issues that come up. So, I found that it never looks super natural for me to play in front of the camera.”





## Viano String Quartet

*Nina von Maltzahn String Quartet Program (2021–23)*

→ As the members of the Viano Quartet prepared to graduate last spring, they decided that their group photos, last taken in 2018, needed a refresh. “The guys are in tuxes, and [violinist] Aiden Kane (’23) and I are in big dresses,” notes violinist Lucy Wang (’23). “It was super-formal and traditional.” The quartet met with Kevin W. Condon, who photographed the ensemble against bold and moody backdrops, including a street in Brooklyn. Ms. Wang and fellow violinist Hao Zhou (’23) feel the preparation paid off. They are using the images to promote *Portraits*, their new recording on Curtis’s record label.

**Hao:** “What I learned during the process was if you don’t trust the photographer, then he can’t really do his thing. Kevin just kind of directed the process. If he felt inspired by a particular lighting or a framing, then he took a couple more photos of that. He was basically the director.”

**Lucy:** “You should go in prepared with the angles you like. Some people know which side of their face they like more, or they have certain poses. You don’t need to know 50. You just need to know one or two poses that you can strike immediately without having to think. Then, you can be comfortable with any shots that are coming up. It just feels awful to show up to a photo shoot, and people don’t know what to do with their hands.”

**Hao:** “I’ve made this mistake before: you go in, and you’re not sure what to do, so your posture is awkward. That’s no good because then they’ll take awkward photos.”

**Lucy:** “It’s totally okay to tell them that we’re not super-comfortable in front of the camera, so we might need more assistance with poses and stuff. And a helpful thing: Before a photo shoot, get rid of the mutes, get rid of any random hair ties. A lot of girls have them [affixed to their instruments] for emergencies. It’s annoying to edit those out later.”

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.