

TAKING A GREAT HEADSHOT

8 TIPS FROM OUR COMPOSERS



Dale Trumbore's early and current headshots

Elizabeth Alexander's first and current headshots



Written by Dale Trumbore for Graphite Publishing

Given the pressure to capture your artistic aesthetic and shining personality in a single image, it's no wonder that many musicians feel stressed out about taking a good headshot. In Jocelyn Hagen's first professional photo, she says, "I was probably overly concerned with looking serious and beautiful at the same time, and I think that's really hard to do!" Elizabeth Alexander echoes the same sentiment. "As a 'woman composer' in the late 1980s I was constantly afraid I wouldn't look talented and strong and smart and attractive and approachable. No wonder my photo looked tentative and tense, with no trace of personality whatsoever."

Your headshot can influence a future collaborator's first impression of you and your music, but it doesn't have to be overly serious or staged. "People can read our credentials as composers," Ellen Gilson Voth says, "but they really want to get to know us. Our personalities, our tone of voice, the things we enjoy, the realities and setbacks we face—they are more inclined toward our music once they feel that personal connection." If a good photo can foster that connection, how do you prepare for a headshot that will capture your favorite version of yourself?

1. PICK CLOTHING IN WHICH YOU FEEL LIKE YOURSELF

Taking headshots a decade ago, I remember being so concerned with "branding" that I thought I should wear a T-shirt the same color as my logo. Unfortunately, the fit of that shirt was less than flattering, and I still

Timothy C. Takach's early headshot (L), and current headshot (R)



cringe when those photos pop up in Google images. Jeffrey Derus suggests that, above all, you choose an outfit that makes you feel most like yourself. "Wear something that makes you feel alive," he says. "It will come through in the photo as confident but relatable." Before a headshot session, choose three outfits that you think could work, ranging from something you'd wear on an ordinary day to something you'd wear to attend a concert. Practice taking informal photos in those outfits ahead of time to see if they photograph well.

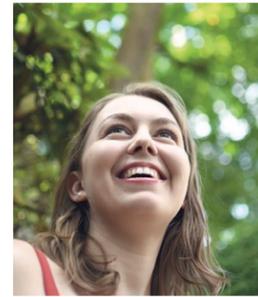
2. CHOOSE A PHOTOGRAPHER YOU'RE COMFORTABLE AROUND

For Mari Esabel Valverde, finding a photographer you trust is worth a trip. "I have lived in Texas for the past 11 years, but I had my photos done by Vero Kherian in San Francisco while I was in town for the premiere of 'Winter Ride,'" she says. To find a great photographer, ask for recommendations from friends whose headshots you love. If you're the kind of person who easily opens up and feels comfortable in front of a camera, you might be okay with any photographer. If you're a self-conscious introvert, you might feel most comfortable working with someone you know: a family friend, your artsy cousin, or even yourself. "Find a photographer who makes you laugh," suggests Alexander.

3. PRACTICE AHEAD OF TIME

You wouldn't expect sight-reading through a new piece to yield perfection, so give yourself time to practice taking a good photo before your official headshot session. "It's a dynamic shot," Tim Takach says, looking back at one of his earliest headshots, "and I love the purple, but that sly, smirking face—who was I trying to be?" Have a partner, friend or family member take photos of you inside and outdoors, and practice capturing natural-looking expressions until you can create them on-demand. Above all, try reviewing photographs of yourself with a neutral attitude. I know I sometimes look at photos of myself and only see flaws, but here, you're looking for glimpses of the best parts of your personality.

If you practice taking and reviewing pictures ahead of time, you'll be ready when the stakes are higher: when you're paying a photographer or have a limited amount of time to capture a great photo. You might still



Katerina Gimon's first and current headshots

Jocelyn Hagen's early and later headshots



feel a little uncomfortable, but just like having prepared for a concert, you'll have a goal in mind and experience behind you. You could even bring along a friend who makes you laugh, as Laura Krider recommends, so the photographer can capture you being your "relaxed, authentic self."

4. CONSIDER THE VIBE

"Don't try to just do what others do, but think: What do I want to do in this picture? What do I want to say? What do I want to show?" suggests Carlos Cordero. Ask yourself these questions ahead of the session, so all of the details—clothes, location/background, and possibly makeup and accessories—correspond to your ideal vision.

One composer I know decided they wanted to look "expensive" in their headshots, and that informed each element of their photos. For other composers, a natural setting is key. "I'm a huge fan of taking headshots in spaces that are an extension of who you are and what you do," says Katerina Gimon, who takes many of her headshots outdoors.

Ask a few trusted friends and colleagues to describe your art. There are plenty of qualities you could choose to channel in your photo, like friendly, approachable, successful, edgy, elevated, outdoorsy, artsy, playful, or thoughtful, but don't put pressure on yourself to be all of these at once. As Voth urges, you could take "some photos that capture you as focused, some imaginative, some light-hearted. Explain to the photographer the different tones you are looking for. You as the artist are steering the headshot session—not the other way around."

5. PREPARE FOR WHAT YOU WANT—AND WHAT YOU DON'T—BEFORE THE SESSION

One great way to find out what you do and don't want in your own photos is to look through the headshots of peers and professionals in your field. Note which poses you love and which decisions turn you off. For Hagen, the latter are headshots that include pets or long hair blowing in the wind. "I got a lot of laughs for having wind in my hair," she says of an early headshot.

Your photographer may place your hands under your chin or prop you up in front of a wind machine—headshot tropes that can look elevated or ridiculous. Don't let anyone talk you into doing anything that doesn't feel like you, but do embrace trying something silly if it leads to you loosening up with a genuine smile.

6. CHANNEL YOUR INNER MODEL AND FIND YOUR LIGHT

On the day of the headshot session, channel your inner Tyra Banks—not to smize, but to find the best lighting. This means literally tilting or turning your head toward the sun, a lamp, or a ring light. A good photographer will suggest you pose in a flattering way, but if you're working with a less experienced friend or taking your own headshots, you'll want to make sure your headshot literally presents you in the best possible light.

For my second round of headshots, I hired an amateur friend-of-a-friend who had just bought a good

camera. We assumed a sunny park would be an ideal spot for photos, but many of them show harsh shadows across my face. If, like Gimon, your love of nature leads you to outdoor headshots, seek a gray day or a shady spot with soft lighting.

When you're considering hiring a photographer, pay attention to their portfolio. Have they shot clients whose hair color, skin tone, and body type resemble yours, and are those photos flattering and natural, with good lighting? If you're having trouble finding a photographer, you can always take matters into your own hands.

7. DON'T BE AFRAID TO TAKE YOUR OWN HEADSHOTS

"There's a lot you can do with smartphone cameras," Valverde says. "If you go that way, experiment with lighting and have a story or statement in mind you would like to express." A great photo taken on your phone will serve you in everything except for more formal printed media like a printed magazine or newspaper article.

Borrow the best camera you can, whether that's your cousin's Canon or your partner's new iPhone. Set up a tripod or ladder and get familiar with the phone's timer function or a shutter remote. Treat this like you would any other headshot session: carve out at least two hours, so you don't feel rushed. Practice being photographed. Pick outfits ahead of time. Scout locations ahead of the session, noting how shade and shadows change throughout the day. Try to get a good night's sleep, and hydrate both the day before and the day of the session.

8. USE YOUR HEADSHOTS WELL

Once you have your headshots in hand, incorporate photographs of yourself into the "about" page of your website and anywhere else that feels relevant, like the landing page and the contact page. Make it easy for collaborators to find your headshots on your site, ideally with a link to a folder offering both portrait and landscape-orientated photos.

Above all, as Cordero recommends, try to have fun. Even professional photos can showcase the playful side of your personality. Cordero crochets headbands and often gives them as gifts; his current headshot shows him wearing one of those headbands. Just like the music you make, these photos offer another medium to show the world your beautiful self. ▶

Carlos Cordero's first and current headshots

