

There is a broad consensus that music education is a good thing! Music lessons and playing in music ensembles are worthwhile pursuits for young people yielding numerous positive results. But why does music education matter? Why are those music lessons and ensemble performances helpful? What is it in music education that contributes to positive results in life? There was an excellent article in the New York Times on October 12, 2013 by Joanne Lipman entitled "Is Music The Key To Success?". I agree with her observation that successful people frequently share musical training and performance in their backgrounds. I want to share why I think this is the case. Simply stated, there are several core skills or attributes which are developed as a result of music education.

Taking music lessons and playing in music ensembles requires focus. There is no opportunity to daydream during performance. Concentration is essential. Focus increases one's ability to learn more quickly and ignore distractions. With continued repetition (i.e., practice), focus becomes a habit. This essential skill learned early in life can be the basis for effective lifelong learning in any given pursuit and will lead to the successful execution of one's goals.

Music develops a competency in listening. Playing music requires a musician to listen to himself, providing immediate feedback. This begins with an emphasis on playing the notes correctly, but it also encompasses listening to volume, tempo, intonation, and expression, all of which require more refined listening skills. Listening to other musicians is required to be effective within an ensemble. A musician performing in an ensemble has to be focused on his individual playing. He also needs to listen to and be cognizant of all those around him: the section of which he's a part, other sections of instruments and the totality of the ensemble. Effective listening is taught through the demands of playing music. It is an essential element of many desirable personal and professional traits (collaboration, creativity, imagination and flexibility).

Music requires self-discipline. Self-discipline is the training and control of one's self and one's behaviors in pursuit of a goal (such as personal improvement). Practicing is a behavior required in music to learn a new piece of music and to continually improve upon. This quest to improve sets the stage for continuous learning and problem solving, and seeds imagination and creativity. Practicing is often an obstacle for many trying to learn music and is frequently the reason many give for quitting music. But the regimen established by practicing can lead to a lifetime of benefits. When I think about self-discipline, I'm reminded of these thoughts by Calvin Coolidge on the subject of persistence:

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of education derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan "press on" has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

What I found empowering about this thought is that it helps to put our efforts in perspective. There will always be others who may appear to be more competitively advantaged, whether it's through innate talent, better education or more resources, yet it is the drive to keep trying, a simple but embraceable task, which is paramount. The practice regimen which comes from music education demonstrates this idea well.

Music requires self-assessment. After a music task or goal is articulated by a teacher or a conductor, a musician needs to internalize what is required, attempt to achieve that task or goal and judge one's progress. It's incumbent upon the musician to try different approaches and tactics. It's important to learn how to deal with the frustration and failure which comes from trying. It's important to not become overwhelmed. And it's critical to learn how to honestly assess one's progress and adapt accordingly. This behavior of self-assessment is implicit in practice, and is a major determinant of one's future success.

Music performance lays a foundation to develop perspective. Perspective is defined as the faculty of seeing all the relevant data in a meaningful relationship. Initially, musicians develop a perspective of their own playing. But it doesn't end there. Music requires the ability to hear and embrace music both from an ensemble point of view and an individual performer's point of view. It requires simultaneously both a holistic and an extremely individual perspective. Ultimately, a musician must embrace the perspectives of the other musicians, the conductor and the audience. This enables the musician to be more responsive and contribute in a more meaningful way. This ability to develop and embrace different perspectives is a valuable skill in order to navigate life.

The core skills or attributes which I have articulated are not an exhaustive list. But I believe that these five are essential "building blocks" which ultimately result in the development of behaviors and other characteristics of very successful people. Music education matters and it delivers benefits regardless of whether music performance continues to be part of one's life.