

# The Top 17 Ways Learning a Musical Instrument Gives You The Edge

By Chris Ellis

Music is a powerful weapon and in the right hands it can be a great force for good. It has the power to bring people to their feet, bring them together, separate them, enrage them, or fill them with fervor for a just cause. It can be calming, bring one to tears, and even make one fall in love. It is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. I have been a musician from the day I was born and have been performing since I was a young child. Currently I teach music and play several different instruments. Every day I get to see the changes in the people I teach and it is like watching a young peacock open his tail feathers for the first time. We have all heard various opinions and studies about the correlation of music study and brain function. There is no denying that the study of music increases the general ability to learn in children and there are many theories as to why this is so. Quite aside from these ideas that have been kicking around for some time, there are many other benefits of playing a musical instrument. Some may surprise you!

## 1. Music is a direct expression from soul to soul.

There are no words that can say what music can. It is no secret that when we hear someone play or sing, we feel as though we really know that person. And we do, much more intimately than if we had a conversation with them. People inherently love and respect musicians who can move them and make them feel. Many people have become numbed by the ups and down in life. Sometimes it takes the perfect piece of music, communicated by a wonderful musician, to allow someone who has been emotionally injured to heal.

## 2. Music study exposes one to a rich history and puts it in context.

Music is a mirror and an expression of what was happening when the music was created. Many people do not know that the great Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1902), for example, despite being a brilliant composer, had to tip toe around the political censors while writing his famous operas. Ludwig van Beethoven, (1770–1827), wrote his masterpieces under extreme personal hardship, and once you have read and understand the context of his music, it takes on a new richness and creates a new depth of admiration for the composer himself. For an in-depth look at and to listen to the greatest orchestral works and the history surrounding the creation of these works, listen to this lecture series given by Dr. Robert Greenberg through [The Great Courses](#). I have listened to these lectures over and over again. I look forward to each one with happy anticipation. Dr. Greenberg is brilliant!

## 3. Studying music sharpens concentration and teaches perseverance.

As one develops as a musician, one realizes the importance of keeping one's mind on the task at hand. As you are playing through a piece, whether it be a classical Allegro piece (happy and fast), or a swampy blues ballad, you cannot take your mind off what you are doing for one second or you will end up in a musical ditch. I have told my students over and over that they cannot be thinking about what they will make for lunch while playing music. It is a recipe for disaster. Additionally, you cannot play a passage quickly and well unless you have slowed it way down and gotten each little part perfect. This takes time, patience and drill and it is the

secret that differentiates a brilliant musician from a poseur. This little tip can be applied in many areas of life. The true professional in any field takes care to make every little part of what they are working on perfect.

#### **4. Learning music makes you an expert in reading non-verbal communication.**

As you play music with another person or a group, you realize that there is a method of communication that transcends words. It is actually more like ESP than anything else. As a rock bassist in my youth, I was fortunate enough to play with a magnificent drummer. Every time I was going to take a detour rhythmically, he was right there with me. It was as though we were in two separate race cars and everywhere I went, even at super high speeds, he was there grinning at me. The best musicians I have ever played with understood that communication is more than talk or words. It is soul to soul contact and it works!

#### **5. Learning music increases responsibility.**

As a songwriter, I have seen how music affects people. It is almost unlimited in its ability to rouse to action. That said, with power comes great responsibility. The one thing I do know about music—or any art, really—is that whatever message travels on an aesthetic or artful line must be truth as far as you can see because music goes into people. It communicates faster and more effectively than any words ever can. As such, it can be used for good or evil. Thus musicians and everyone else working in the area of the arts have a great responsibility to ensure that their message is one of benevolence.

#### **6. Studying music teaches one how to listen.**

A good musician must be very in tune to how things sound. He or she must know how to listen. A musician playing with others will soon be playing alone if he or she doesn't know how to listen. A musical group or band situation demands give and take musically. There are unspoken cues and musical cues as well as the overall sound of the group that one must be aware of. If someone is forever playing over the vocalist or taking a solo when they should not be, they are likely to find a microphone embedded in the back of their head! Music is communication and is subject to the same laws of communication as everything else, even though the cues may be subtle. These skills must be learned by a musician and are generally enforced by the other group members.

#### **7. Studying music increases coordination.**

A person learning how to sing or play an instrument automatically becomes more aware of their body. The body can also be considered an instrument as it works very closely with the actual instrument (or in the case of a singer, it *is* the instrument) to create the sounds. There are instruments like the violin, for example, that are extremely precise. One must place one's fingers exactly or it sounds wrong. This takes drill and isolation of the different parts of the body, as well as learning to allow the body parts to work in harmony with each other. When things go wrong, the musician must be able to spot where the change occurred and get back on track. This is a valuable skill in life. Being able to spot where errors occurred and correct them is vital in any life situation.

### **8. Studying music relieves stress.**

There is nothing like a great practice session or performance to put you in a great mood. Music is pure communication. Pure communication makes everything better. Also the act of focusing your attention, such as is required when mastering a difficult passage or learning a song to play with your band, does not allow for the intrusion of stressful thoughts. Music can rejuvenate you even after the worst day.

### **9. Learning music fosters creativity.**

Once one understands the basics of music, it is not difficult to start taking the components and reconfiguring them to come up with entirely new songs or pieces. Even my youngest students have brought in songs that they have written and want to try out.

### **10. Learning music helps you remember.**

Not only does learning to memorize pieces of music exercise your brain and allow you to remember more easily, for whatever reason you can remember things better when they are set to music. For example, you may not be able to memorize algebraic equations, but if you make them into a song, you automatically remember them more easily.

### **11. Learning music helps you become better at managing your time.**

Practice is a big part of learning music and practice takes time. Time must be factored in to your already busy day. Your practice time must then become efficient. Musicians who become great know that efficiency is the key component of music. Your movements must be extremely efficient in order to play fast passages. Your valuable practice time must be efficient so that you don't waste it.

### **12. Learning music teaches you to persevere until you get it right.**

You have seen brilliant players on just about any instrument and in any genre. Brilliant playing doesn't just occur. There is a lot of repetitive drill that goes on to create something that seems effortless. Learning to keep at something until it is perfect is a vital skill in life. Learning to take the time to go beyond 'good enough' and go for perfect is the first step toward proficiency in any subject.

### **13. Learning music and performing forces you to develop composure in front of people.**

So many people I know have a mortal fear of speaking in front of an audience. Musicians have to develop the skill not only to speak before an audience, but to perform demanding pieces under pressure as well. Most of my students have had performances where they were convinced that they were terrible on stage. I remind them that performing is itself a skill and unfortunately you cannot develop this skill alone in your room or studio. You have no choice but to develop it right there in front of *everybody*. Every musician I know has had bad nights. They learn from them and become stronger as a result. The really great ones have performed so many times that they know how to deal with the nerves (yes, we still get nervous), the uncertainties of a new venue and the unexpected things that always pop up in any performance.

#### **14. Learning music is just *really* interesting!**

OK, I am a self-professed Music Theory Nerd. I *love* to know what all the symbols are and how they all relate and coordinate with each other. In fact, I wrote a book on it! I love to understand all of the rules of music and to listen to the works of great composers. Music is richly imbued with ancient stories and symbols that most people never know about. There is no history richer than the history of music.

#### **15. Learning music gives you access to a creative social network.**

While music can be played by one person, it is when you start playing in groups that the fun really begins. Most musicians love to play with other people as the interaction aides creativity in oneself. Music builds life-long relationships.

#### **16. If you know music, you always have a marketable skill that you can take with you anywhere.**

Music is always needed and wanted by people of all cultures. You can go anywhere and be assured that you have a skill that can put food on the table no matter where you are. From the various playing opportunities to teaching, to even busking on the street (it's really fun, you should try it!), you are never without a way to make money.

#### **17. Learning music lets you call yourself a musician and that is the coolest thing *ever!***

Who here has not, at least once, fallen in love with a musician after seeing him or her perform? The Beatles had more female fans than any group in history. Face it, being a musician is cool! So, now that we have decided that you are going to take up a musical instrument, which will it be? Get your instrument and meet me in the studio. We have work to do!