

10 Guidelines to Musical Success at Any Age

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Guidelines to Musical Success at Any Age

Being able to play an instrument and create music can be one of the greatest joys in life. For someone beginning on the music learning path just watching a competent player can be both awe inspiring and pretty intimidating at the same time. I remember thinking "how could my hands ever move that fast or how will I know what notes to play?"

Actually, the process of playing and enjoying music making is not that mysterious. In summary, one simple tried and true method amounts to: 1) find a patient teacher, 2) practice regularly, and 3) don't stop until you get it. It may be simple, but it's not necessarily easy. The following are guidelines that will surely get you to the place of making great music with one ingredient to be added.....your personal effort.

1. Choose a Great Teacher

A talented and skilled teacher is not absolutely mandatory as some people might think. There are many great rock stars we all know that probably never took a lesson in their life. I, in fact, learned a lot by watching others, from books, videos and audio courses, and by just trying out lots of different things until I found out what works. I can tell you from experience that a good teacher can save you a lot of time and frustration.

Choosing a great teacher can be tricky for a beginner. It's difficult for a beginning student to know what to look for. I know when I started taking lessons I would choose a teacher that played a style of music I liked. I had several experiences that went like this:

I would take a lesson and go home and practice diligently what the teacher told me to practice. I'd come back in a week or so and the teacher would impress me with some new lick or song and have me practice that. The next lesson we would do something different and unrelated. The teacher didn't even seem to remember what we did the week before. Or maybe he just didn't care. After awhile I would feel like I wasn't making progress but would continue anyway hoping the teacher had some big ultimate plan and it would all come together eventually. It didn't. After months I'd stop and look for another teacher. The problem was I didn't really know what made for a good teacher and I was easily impressed by performance skills.

After more than 25 years of teaching and 20 years of hiring and training teachers I have learned to determine the traits that make a great teacher. Being able to play the instrument is a given, but I would say that I would choose only about one out of ten competent performers to teach at our school. I can divide great teaching characteristics into two areas. The first I'll call a "teaching personality" and the second is an organized, well thought-out system.

A teaching personality consists of some fairly obvious personality traits like patience, good communication skills, a sincere desire to help people learn and grow and a pleasant demeanor. A more subtle trait that I have come to discern over years is what I call a "teaching temperament". This is a natural tendency to see a concept, mentally break it

down to smaller parts, explain these parts to another and help them put it all back together. People have different natural abilities to do this and it is not related to how well they play their instrument, much in the same way that every great football player would not make a great coach. It is something that can be learned but I've found that people that have more of this ability naturally tend to enjoy teaching more and make better teachers.

An organized well thought-out teaching system gives you a lot more bang for the buck in terms of time and money, as well as a much better chance of becoming competent, confident and really enjoying making music.

A well thought-out system makes more efficient use of lesson time. Materials are mostly prepared ahead of time so valuable lesson time is not used to write out exercises. It's easier to stay motivated when you can see where you're going and where you've come from. It's like looking at a three story building and being told to get to the top. Most of us would feel more motivated if we knew there was a staircase or at least a ladder we could climb. Everyone knows, that if you just put one foot after the other most anyone could get to the top.

In addition, a good system will include exercises that prepare the student for more difficult techniques to come.

Finding a teacher with both the teaching personality traits that I've described and an organized well thought-out system, along with consistent and regular practice, are the most proven and predictable ways to assure musical success and a lifetime of musical enjoyment at any age.

2. Don't do only what your teacher assigns.

Practicing your assignment will keep you moving forward and help you be prepared for your next lesson. That's important! If you only practice your assignment, over time you will feel incompetent. It's your teacher's job to give you new challenges as you become comfortable with earlier assignments. However, this can lead to the feeling of never quite getting "there".

Here's my solution. Practice your assignment for an agreed amount of time. Then, when you're done play something just for fun. Play songs you learned awhile ago and like to play. Try something new from either your lesson book or a song book. Get creative. Make up your own songs or exercises. My favorite thing to do is make up songs and record them on a small tape recorder. Don't judge them. It's just for fun. No one has to hear them unless you want to share.

Doing things like this at the end of your practice session will give you something to look forward to and makes the overall process more fun. You also end up practicing longer. The more you practice the better you get. In my case making up little songs was also the beginning of becoming a songwriter and recording artist. You never know where this thing might lead you.

3. Make the most of your practice time.

Everyone is short on time these days. Children have a multitude of activities and adults have what seems like a never-ending list of work and family responsibilities. At the same time when I talk to both teachers and students all of them agree that practice is a key element to musical success. This isn't the place for a course in time management, but I can give some ideas to get the most of your practice time.

· **Organize your practice sessions.** Start with a warm-up. Then move into the assignment. Spend a proportioned amount of time on exercises, a new song, and sight reading. End on a positive note with something that you can do to feel a sense of accomplishment. Like a song you've been playing for awhile. A half hour session could be divided into something like this:

- 5 minutes- Warm-up
- 5 minutes- Scales/Exercises
- 10 minutes- New Song
- 6 minutes- Sight Reading
- 4 minutes- Wrap-up

· **Practice at the same time each day.** In fact, practice in the same place if you can. Humans are creatures of habit. When you associate a time with practice through repetition it makes it easier to feel like practicing at that time. In addition, when you practice in the same space it becomes easier to focus on your music in that space. It's like brushing your teeth in the morning. Most people have done it so long that they could be half asleep and the hand just goes to the mouth and starts brushing.

I realize it's not easy for everyone to practice at the same time each day and any practice is better than no practice. For those who can work it out, it's worth the effort.

· **Don't let too much time pass between practice sessions.** Studies have shown that beginners retain more if they practice a little each day rather than long periods of time and then skipping several days. Experts recommend reviewing or practicing new material at least within 24 hours. When learning a new skill the mind tends to regress when too much time lapses between practice sessions. The most advantageous time to practice is shortly after your lesson. You are more likely to remember and practice correctly what you learned the rest of the week. It can even be beneficial for beginners to have a practice session in the morning and another in the evening. This allows you to spend more of your practice time improving and less time spent on just remembering what you did last time. Of course, all practice time is good. If you can practice for an occasional long session you can make some leaps in progress which is very motivating. If you're practicing for hours take a short break every 45 minutes and stretch, walk around and breathe. An alert mind absorbs more.

4. Learn to love practice.

At first you are likely to be excited with the process of learning. New songs and exercises are challenging but the promise of expressing yourself musically gives you unbounded energy and enthusiasm. Inevitably the routine of playing something over and over begins to wear on you. At about the same time the newness begins to wear off. To make matters worse small doubts begin to creep into your mind like "maybe I'll never really get this" or "I must not be musically talented".

Here is where the rubber meets the road. This is the opportunity to really love practicing for the sake of practicing. Be fully present to each of the notes in a scale and let go of whether it's better than it was yesterday. This might sound kind of ethereal but anyone who plays well knows what I'm talking about. You can't depend on either the newness or the feeling of progress to keep you motivated to practice. Both are transitory. One thing is for sure. Over time you will get better if you practice. So learn to just love the process. Find for yourself what to love about it. Maybe it's just the break away from your cares and worries of everyday life for this short period of time. I find peace in the repetition of my series of scales and exercises that I do each day. It didn't start out that way. It's something I learned over time.

When you learn to love your practice time you'll stop struggling with "I have to practice" or "I should practice". You'll practice without expectations of some big breakthrough or improvement. And then one day you'll look at your hands on your instrument like I did and be amazed of how they seem to just move by themselves without you having to think about every movement.

5. Get with the Groove.

I'm talking about rhythm here. It's helpful from the beginning to practice playing in time. Rhythm is important though sometimes a neglected element of music. I recommend using a metronome starting early in your musical adventure.

It's common, especially for beginners, to slow down on difficult passages of a song or exercise and speed up on the easier ones. Unfortunately, this gets to be a habit. After a while you may not realize that your rhythm is fluctuating.

Your teacher can help you with using the metronome but here are some ideas to get the most out of this device.

- Start slow. As slow as you need to play the song or exercise correctly.
- Pick up speed little by little.
- Keep a log. Write down the setting for each song and exercise and track your progress.
- Relax and enjoy the process. It's only boring or tedious if you think it is.
- Finally, don't always use the metronome. Use it as part of your practice session to work on timing and to measure your progress. Over time you will develop an internal sense of groove and the ability to slow down and speed up when you want to.

6. How do I get my child to practice?

As a music educator I have had the question posed many times by desperate, well intentioned parents "how do I get my child to practice"? This subject is worthy of an entire article, or maybe a book. Let me at least offer some tips that I have picked up over the years as a parent and educator.

I guess you already know that nagging your child to practice is not likely to produce the long term benefit of a self motivated child and puts a strain on the parent-child relationship. On the other hand, leaving it up to your child to practice without some guidance or "parenting" is not fair to the child. Few children would be good at anything without some help. We don't expect our children to always want to brush their teeth or do their math homework. There is a balanced, positive approach that can encourage your child while helping build self-esteem, self discipline and enjoy the rewards of musical accomplishment.

- Help your child set up a regular time to practice and make it easy. Something like just before dinner, first thing after school, etc.
- Notice and praise even small improvements. Criticism really doesn't help.
- Ask your child's instructor what they're working on regularly and show interest.
- Offer (not to be confused with demand) to listen to something your child can play from time to time. This is a subset of showing interest.
- Praise the act of practicing. Behavior that is noticed and praised tends to get repeated.
- Don't expect perfection. It can be very discouraging for a child to feel they cannot live up to your expectations.
- Be patient but firm and persistent about practicing.
- Read articles about the value of music education. Parents that are clear of the value of learning music tend to express that value to their children.
- Keep a practice chart. Just writing in the amount of practice each day can be motivational.
- Reward a good practice week. I wouldn't get carried away with this but setting a goal with a tangible reward at the end can be helpful along the way to learning self-reliance.
- Help your child choose a reasonable number of activities. It's better for building self-esteem to have a select number of activities that your child can practice and be good at than to be mediocre at many things and constantly running from one activity to another.

Finally, I think as parents we have to accept that we cannot ever really control another person, even our children, all though we might like to at times. We can and should influence them to grow into happy, well-adjusted adults with a healthy self-image and enough discipline to get full enjoyment out of life.

7. Persistence pays off.

Everyone knows the story of the race between the tortoise and the hare. The talented hare took off in a burst of speed. Down the road he sloughed off and lost the race to the poky but persistent tortoise. From my experience, with something like learning an instrument, the tortoise always wins. Patience and persistence pay off. Just keep at it. The thing is you don't even have to be better than anyone else. Sure there are some people that are more naturally talented than others, but nothing takes the place of just keeping at it even when it doesn't seem like you're getting anywhere.

Have you ever looked at some of the incredible artwork at the beach that the waves have created with the rocky shore over time? It's hard to imagine that water could cut into solid rock, yet little by little the water can dissolve even the hardest granite. My point here is that little actions over time add up to big results. Powerful mental and physical habits are created by small, persistent actions.

I remember watching musicians when I was younger and having a hard time imagining that one day I would be able to do what I can do now. I would describe my talent as average. I have had several childhood friends that were clearly more naturally talented musically than me. Some didn't stick with it. Guess who is getting the most enjoyment from performing and creating music today. I also remember having an incredible experience after I'd been playing for about a year. Up to that time strumming the guitar always seemed a conscious and somewhat awkward process. Then one day I was playing a song with some friends by a campfire and I looked down and realized that I was strumming smoothly without even thinking about it. I was elated, but more importantly I realized that all those little moments of practicing paid off. Over time smooth strumming turned into an automatic habit.

You can do it too. Just stick with it. Little by little it's working even when you don't realize it. You can't look at a rock on the beach and see the results on a daily basis but it's happening. The rock is actually wearing away. One day you'll look at your hands and hear the music and impress yourself.

8. Just accept that you won't get it right at first.

I once read some great advice that really stuck with me: "Anything that is worth doing well is worth doing poorly at first." It's hard to feel incompetent. One thing children have going for them is that everyday they learn new things and new skills. They are accustomed to being incompetent. Learning music is just another new thing.

For adults it's a little different. Once we get out of school and get into the working world we pretty much get used to being competent most of the time. After all our jobs and livelihoods depend on us being reasonably good at what we do. Unfortunately, we get hesitant and uncomfortable with learning new things. It's human nature. We have to remind ourselves that everything we do well now, at one time, we did poorly. We just kept at it until we got better, maybe even great.

It's really much easier to learn a new skill like playing music if you adopt somewhat the attitude of a child. Accept that you won't be able to do things right at first, or maybe even for awhile. The reward is worth it. Not only will you eventually experience the joy of playing music but you will be reinforcing an attitude and way of being in the world that keeps things fresh, alive and makes life a worthy adventure.

9. Start slow and play it correctly

It's a common mistake people make when learning to play an instrument to try to practice a song or exercise faster than they can do it correctly. Think of the mind as a recording device that is recording each movement you make. When you play a passage over and over incorrectly the mind is recording it that way. It is better and actually more efficient in the long run to play it slowly and correctly at first. Next, pick up the speed little by little, still playing it correctly.

I often tell this to students and they seem to believe me. Yet in spite of knowing this I constantly see them trying to play faster than they should. I think it comes down to a very basic struggle. It's just difficult for people, especially in this instant gratification age, to be patient. The irony is that trying to get it too quickly by playing too fast actually causes the process to take more time. When you practice something with incorrect motions you eventually have to undo the programming that you've created. This is more time consuming.

With this said, I want to mention that there are times to push for speed, even beyond what you're capable of doing correctly. This works if it's in addition to playing slow and correctly, not in place of it. It's also good to play the whole exercise through even if you can't play it correctly to get an idea of what it's going to sound like. As with many things in life, balance is the key with the emphasis on correct movements.

10. Break it down to bite sized pieces.

Every large goal or project can be broken down to smaller pieces. Learning a complex skill like music is no different. In my guitar system I deliberately break things down into small steps that the student can accomplish in a reasonable period of time. I originally did this as a way of teaching young people (my oldest daughter being the first) a way of thinking. I'm talking about a process of breaking a goal that you want to accomplish into "bite size" achievable steps. After breaking it down in this way you work on the steps one at a time until you achieve your goal. In the process you make adjustments as you get new information. Also, you acknowledge and celebrate landmarks along the way to help stay motivated and enjoy the process.

There are three levels of working on developing the ability to play an instrument. First you must have the vision of and inspiration, second have manageable steps to get there and finally break down the steps and work on them until you develop mastery.

- **The Big Picture** Have a vision of what you want. Imagine yourself playing your instrument the way you'd like to. Even imagine people telling you how much they enjoy your music or how well you play. Hold on to this vision. It's especially useful when you feel discouraged.

- **Set Medium Size Goals** - These are the basic building blocks or steps to reaching your outcome. I heard someone say that you create your goal in the sky then build a staircase under it to get there. You can do this for yourself. An example would be to set a goal to play a certain song by a designated time, and then look backwards at what you will have to be able to do play that song. A good teacher can be a real help here. They have a better understanding of what you would need to work on. Good books and videos or DVDs can provide logical steps as well.

· **Micro Practice** Within your practice sessions break things down. Sometimes, when you are having a hard time, it's best to just break down a song or exercise to smaller pieces. For example, when you're having a hard time playing a phrase correctly, isolate the measures that are hard and practice those separately. Next, when you feel comfortable with the individual measures, play them all together. This works with chord progressions. Try changing from one difficult chord to another slowly. Next, try three chords in a row. Then play the whole phrase slowly and pick up speed little by little. You can even break a measure in half, or just practice a couple of difficult notes with a metronome at a slow speed, pick up the speed, then play the entire measure.

It's also important to play whole phrases, passages, and even the entire piece to get the feel and flow. Use the concept of "breaking down" as a tool to get you through problem areas.

Bonus - Don't take yourself too seriously.

Adults in particular sometimes put too much pressure on themselves to "get it". This can have the effect of trying really hard to open a door by pushing when you should be pulling. Lighten up and have fun. Don't try too hard to figure things out. Don't even think too hard. A lot of times you'll understand the "why" after you've practiced it for awhile. I've often thought that it's a good thing that children don't have to understand the mechanics of walking before they learn how to walk.

About Columbia School of Music

Learning and playing music at Columbia School of Music is fun and enjoyable for the whole family! We provide the tools and guidance you need to bring music into your life. We offer a large selection of student instruments for sale. Our helpful staff consists of knowledgeable, trained professional that take the time to help you find what you need or make suggestions if you like. You can always stop by and check out our selection of sheet music, educational materials for students, and instructional videos and CDs for self-learners.

If you like a little more guidance join in the fun with lessons for Adults & Children (4 and up) by experienced and carefully qualified instructors in one of the most modern and well-established schools in Maryland. Our current enrollment consists of over 150 motivated students and parents, who through learning and practice are creating happier people and more beautiful music in the world.

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Tomas Michaud is a music educator, New World Flamenco Jazz recording artist and founder of Starland Music Center and the Starland Guitar system. For free music samples and more information visit his website at www.WorldMelodies.com