

Nine Things that Music Taught Me

by Susan Parsons

Making music is a mental, physical, emotional exercise that improves students' ability to perceive, comprehend, relate, self-regulate, and remember. Nothing matches music education in its comprehensiveness. It embraces everything. Like spokes on a wheel intersecting its hub, everything intersects through music. Research shows that when children make music, more parts of their brain light up than in any other intellectual pursuit. That is because music integrates both hemispheres of the brain, activating feelings, fitness, and computation.

Music taught me:

Civic identity and responsibility. John Philip Sousa, holiday parades, concerts in the park and at assisted-living facilities instilled in me a deep sense of community and civic pride. Travel abroad showed me the American band is a uniquely American tradition. Band is as American as apple pie and the Fourth of July. It nurtures cultural unity. A community without a band is missing something essentially American.

Math and science. In band, I learned to count, divide, and multiply, identify patterns, compare and contrast, predict, and gauge vibrations, sound intervals and velocity. Music is computational, physical, and abstract science; Physical fitness. Making music, especially in marching band, is physical exercise. Children in the computer screen age need it more than ever. Research on aging shows that people who stay musically engaged live longer than those who don't.

Personal discipline and self-control. Learning to play an instrument involves a long learning curve. Like math, it is a cumulative subject with no shortcuts. It requires practice and patience. I got out of it what I put into it. This is critically important for today's children, because they are so bombarded with high-speed technology and messages of instant gratification.

Group dynamics. Ensemble music made me work with others, share what I knew, and regulate my tone and emotions. Musicians must cooperate with the conductor while listening to one another, all the while balancing their musical and emotional parts in relation to everyone else's.

Language. Musical notation is a type of representational language, and Italian is music's lettered language. Music is a universal language. It is a cross-cultural experience. Music has connected me to many cultures and people across the United States and the world.

Psychology. Music allows me to channel my emotions. Anger, joy, sadness, pain — all get expressed in constructive ways through music. Children in today's complex, test-driven, and stressful world need this emotional, creative outlet more than ever.

History and geography. I learned to link musical genres, such as jazz, ragtime, and rock 'n' roll to an American timeline, and composers, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Strauss to other countries and time periods.

Public "speaking." Musical performance at solo and ensemble contests takes guts. It taught me to focus. I learned to center myself through breathing and step into performance with courage. Performance is about sharing something you love and have worked hard to attain.

Humility. No matter how good I thought I was getting, musical bloopers always popped up — some worse than others. They kept me humble. Music has enhanced my life beyond all expectation. The music education I received in Streator schools led me to an acclaimed college choir that performed at the National Cathedral, and now, as a children's librarian, I successfully incorporate rhyme and rhythm in all my literacy programs. Every "Bounce and Tickle" storytime ends with babies, toddlers and parents marching to Sousa's "Washington Post."

No activity integrates a child's heart, body, and intellect better than music, and nothing links children to community, tradition, and national identity more effectively than music, which is why I urge you to vote to retain the band program for Streator's grade school children.

SUSAN PARSONS, Ph.D., of Crest Hill, is a 1976 graduate of Streator Township High School and a children's librarian.