

10 Guidelines to Musical Success at Any Age

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Playing an instrument and creating music can be one of the greatest joys in life. For someone beginning on the path of learning music, watching a competent player can be both awe inspiring and intimidating. When I was starting out I remember thinking “how could my hands ever move that fast?” and “how will I know what notes to play?”

Actually, learning to play music making is not that mysterious. In summary, one simple tried and true method amounts to: 1) find a good 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 as absolutely necessary as some people might think. There are many great rock stars we all know that probably never took a lesson in their lives. I learned a lot from books, videos, audio courses, by watching others and just trying lots of different things until I discovered 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 diligently practice what the teacher told me to practice. I'd come back in a week and the teacher would impress me with some new lick or song for me to practice. 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 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 some 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 28 years of teaching and 24 years of hiring and training teachers, I have determined the traits that make a great teacher. Being able to play the instrument is a given, but I would choose only about one out of ten competent performers to teach at Starland. A great teacher needs the right kind of personality and an organized, well thought-out system.

Obviously, a good personality for teaching includes 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 the 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 varying amounts of this ability, and it is not related to how well they play their instrument, much in the same way that not every great

football player would make a great coach. It is something that can be learned, but I've found that people who naturally have more of this ability 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 happy making music.

A well thought-out system uses lesson time more efficiently. Materials are mostly prepared, 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 feel more motivated when there is a staircase or a ladder to climb. Everyone knows that if you just put one foot after the other you will get to the top.

A good system also includes exercises that prepare the student for more difficult techniques to come. For example, in my guitar system, I've built in several exercises to prepare for the difficult Barr chord ahead of time. When the student finally tries the Barr chord, most find it easy to pick up because they were prepared weeks ahead.

Finding a teacher with both a good teaching personality and an a good teaching system, along with regular practice, is the most proven way to assure musical success at any age.

2. Make the most of your practice time.

These days everyone is short on time. Children have a multitude of activities, and adults have a never ending list of work and family responsibilities, but teachers and students all agree that practice is essential for musical success, and practicing takes time. This isn't a course in time management, but I can offer some suggestions to get the most out of your practice time.

• **Organize your practice sessions.** Start with a warm-up. Then move on to 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 particular time with practice, through repetition it becomes 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 can be half asleep, and the hand just goes for the brush and starts.

I realize it's not possible for some people to practice at the same time each day. For those who

can work it out, it's worth the effort. Of course, any practice is better than no practice.

• **Don't let too much time pass between practice sessions.** Studies have shown that beginners retain more if they practice a short time each day than if they practice a long time every few days. Experts recommend reviewing or practicing new material within 24 hours. When learning a new skill the mind tends to regress when too much time elapses 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 practice in the morning and again in the evening. This allows you to spend more practice time improving and less remembering what you did last session.

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.

3. Start slow and play it correctly

When learning to play an instrument people commonly make the mistake of trying to practice a song or exercise more quickly 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. In this age of instant gratification it's difficult for people 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. Practicing for speed as a portion of your routine helps to push you beyond your current limits. It also helps to work on the correct phrasing. 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.

4. Break it down to bite sized pieces.

Every large project can be broken down into 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 to teach young people (my oldest daughter being the first) a way of thinking. I'm talking about a process of breaking a goal into "bite size", achievable steps, then working 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 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 just to 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.

5. Do more than your teacher assigns.

Your teacher will give you new challenges as you become comfortable with earlier material. Practicing your assignment will keep you moving forward and prepare you for your next lesson. That's important! If you practice only your assignment, however, over time you may feel incompetent because you feel you never quite get "there".

Here's my solution. Practice your assignment for an agreed amount of time. Afterwards, play something just for fun. Review 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 make 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 might lead you.

6. Learn to love practicing

At first you will likely 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. It's like when you first fall in love. Inevitably, however, 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 motivate you to practice. Both are transitory. One thing is certain. Over time you will improve if you practice. So just learn to love the process. Find for yourself what to love about it. Maybe it’s just the break away from your worries of everyday life for this short period of time. I find peace in the daily repetition of scales and exercises. I 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 the expectation of some big breakthrough. Then, just as I did, one day you’ll look at your hands on the guitar (or piano, or flute) and be amazed at how they seem to move by themselves without you having to think about every detail.

7. Get with the Groove. I’m talking about rhythm here. It’s helpful from the very beginning to practice playing in time. Rhythm is an essential, though sometimes neglected element of music. I recommend using a metronome from the start of your musical adventure.

It’s common, especially for beginners, to slow down on difficult and speed up on the easier ones. Unfortunately, this becomes a habit. After a while you may not realize that your rhythm is fluctuating.

Your teacher can help you with using the metronome, and here are some additional pointers.

- Start slow: slow enough 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 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 rhythm and the ability to slow down and speed up when you want to.

8. Help Kids to Practice

Many desperate, well intentioned parents ask “how do I get my child to practice”? This subject deserves an entire article, or maybe a book. Let me offer a few tips I have picked up over the years as a parent and educator.

You probably already know that nagging your child to practice strains your relationship and doesn’t produce the long term benefit of a self-motivated child. On the other hand, expecting you’re child to practice without some guidance is unfair to the child. We don’t expect our children always to want to brush their teeth or to do their math homework. Few children would be good at anything without some help. Balanced, positive encouragement will help your child enjoy the rewards of musical accomplishment while building self discipline and self-esteem.

- Help your child set up a regular time to practice, and make it easy. Something like just before dinner, first thing after school, etc.
- Be patient but firm and persistent about practicing.
- Praise the act of practicing. Behavior that is noticed and praised tends to get repeated.
- 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.
- Ask your child's instructor what they're working on regularly and show interest.
- From time to time offer (not to be confused with demand) to listen to something your child can play. This is a subset of showing interest.
- Notice and praise even small improvements. Criticism really doesn't help.
- Don't expect perfection. It can discourage a child to feel they cannot live up to your expectations.
- Read articles about the value of music education. Parents who appreciate the value of learning music tend to express that value to their children.
- 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 child, although 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.

9. Accept that you won't get it right at first.

Here's some great advice that really stuck with me: "Anything that is worth doing well is worth doing poorly at first." This points to a universal dilemma and an aspect of human nature that we all have to deal with. Nobody wants to feel incompetent, yet to get good at any skill we have to spend time fumbling before we are competent. Remember when you learned to walk? I don't. It's a good thing because I probably made a lot of mistakes. It's a good thing I didn't get discouraged and quit trying.

One thing children have going for them is that everyday they learn new skills. They are accustomed to being incompetent. Learning music is just another new thing. For most adults little different. Once we get out of school and into the working world, we get used to being competent most of the time. After all, our jobs depend on us being reasonably good at what we do. Unfortunately, we become 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 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. The reward is worth it. Not only will you eventually experience the joy of playing music, but you will reinforce an attitude to the world that keeps things fresh and makes life a worthy adventure.

10. Persistence pays off.

Everyone knows the story of the race between the tortoise and the hare. The swift hare took off in a burst of speed. Down the road he slacked off and lost the race to the poky but persistent tortoise. In my experience, when learning to play an instrument, the tortoise always wins. Patience and persistence pay off. Just keep at it. 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 seems you're getting nowhere.

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

I had an incredible experience after I'd been playing for about a year. Up to that time strumming the guitar was conscious and somewhat awkward process. One day I was playing a song with some friends by a campfire, when I looked down and realized I was strumming smoothly without even thinking about it. I was elated, but more importantly, I realized that all those little moments of practicing had paid off. Over time smooth strumming turned into an automatic habit.

When I was younger and watching musicians I couldn't imagine that one day I would be able to do what I can do now. I would describe my talent as average. I had several childhood friends who were clearly more naturally talented musically than I. Some didn't stick with it. Guess which of us is getting the most enjoyment from performing and creating music today.

You can do it too. Just stick with it. It's working little by little 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.

Bonus - Don't take yourself too seriously.

Adults in particular sometimes put too much pressure on themselves to "get it". This can be like 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 Starland Music Center

Learning and playing music can be fun for the whole family! We provide the tools and guidance you need to bring music into your life with a large selection of instruments for sale or rent with our "try before you buy" plan. Our helpful staff consists of knowledgeable, trained professional that take the time to help you find what you need or make suggestions if you'd 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'd like 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 Northern California. Our current enrollment consists of over 370 motivated students and parents that, through learning and practice, are creating better people and more beautiful music in the world. Call now for a FREE initial consultation for lessons at (510) 523-4797.

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