



# 10

# KEYS

To Musical Success  
at Any Age

## Tomas Michaud

Compliments of **STARLAND** Music Center

# **10 Keys**

**To Musical Success At Any Age**

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By Tomas Michaud

Starland Music Center

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# 10 KEYS To Musical Success at Any Age

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. I remember thinking when I started out “how could my hands ever move that fast?” and “how will I know what notes to play?”

Actually, learning to play music is not that mysterious. In summary, one tried and true method is:

1. find a good teacher
2. practice regularly,
3. don't stop until you get it.

It may be simple, but it's not necessarily easy.

The following guidelines will help you get to the place of making great music with one added ingredient: your personal effort.

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## 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 just 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 gave me. 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 good 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 discerned over the years is what I call a "teaching

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temperament”. This is a natural tendency to see a concept, break it down into smaller parts, explain these parts to another, and help them put it all back together. People have varying amounts of this ability, and it does not correlate 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 in advance, so valuable lesson time is not used to write out exercises. It’s easier to stay motivated when you can see where you’ve come from and where you’re going. 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 make it.

A good system also prepares 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 students finally try 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.

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## 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 help you 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 gives you a sense of accomplishment, like a song you've been playing for awhile. A half hour session could be divided 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 there, 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 not everyone can practice at the same time each day. For those who can, 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

A close-up, low-angle shot of a guitar headstock, showing the tuning pegs and the bridge of the strings. The wood is a light, warm tone, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and metallic sheen of the pegs.

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time elapses between practice sessions. The most advantageous time to practice is shortly after your lesson. You will more likely remember and practice correctly what you learned for the rest of the week.

It can even benefit 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.

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## 3. Start Slow and Play It Correctly

**W**hen 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, they constantly try to play faster than they should. I think it comes down to a very basic struggle. In this age of instant gratification, it's hard to be patient. The irony is that trying to get it quickly by playing too fast actually takes more time. When you practice something with incorrect motions you eventually have to undo the programming that you've created. This consumes more time. It is essential to train yourself into the correct movements from the beginning.

With this in mind, there are times to push for speed, even beyond what you're capable of doing correctly. Occasionally 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 in addition to playing slowly and correctly, not in place of it. Sometimes it's good to play a 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.

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## 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-sized," achievable steps, and working on them one at a time until you achieve your goal. Along the way you adjust as you get new information, and celebrate landmarks to stay motivated and enjoy the process.

Developing the ability to play music has three levels: First, you must have the inspiration, second, design manageable steps to get there, and third, 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 fluidly. Imagine people telling you how

much they enjoy your music and how well you play. Hold on to this vision. Having a "Big Picture" helps especially when you feel discouraged.

- **Set Medium Size Goals** - These are the basic steps to reaching your dream. Brian Tracy, renowned author, speaker and success coach, once said, "Create your goal in the sky then build a staircase under it to get there". You can do this for yourself. For example, set a goal to play a certain song by a specific time, and then work backwards to determine what stages will get you there. A good teacher can really help you here. They have a better understanding of what you would need to work on and can help tailor a program for you. Good books, videos, or DVDs can provide logical steps as well.
- **Micro Practice** – Within your practice sessions, break things down. Sometimes when you have a hard time, it's best to break down a song or exercise into smaller pieces. For example, to tackle a difficult phrase, isolate

A close-up, low-angle shot of a guitar headstock, showing the tuning pegs and the bridge of the strings. The wood is a warm, golden-brown color, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the wood and the metallic sheen of the pegs. The background is dark, making the headstock stand out.

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the hardest measures and practice them sep-arately. When you feel comfortable with the individual measures, play them all together. This works with chord progressions, too. Try changing slowly from one difficult chord to another. 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 slowly practice a couple of difficult notes, gradually speed up, then play the entire measure.

Use the concept of “breaking down” as a tool to get you through problem areas. Be sure to play whole phrases, passages, or even the entire piece to get the flow, especially after micro practice, to help the brain connect all the separate pieces.



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## 5. Do More That Your Teacher Assigns

**Y**our 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 before 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 is to 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 led to becoming a songwriter and recording artist. You never know where this might lead you.

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## 6. Learn to Love Practicing

**A**t first learning itself will excite you. New songs and exercises challenge you, but the promise of expressing yourself musically gives you unbounded energy and enthusiasm. It's like first falling 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, doubts may begin to creep into your mind like, "Maybe I'll never really get this," or "I must not be musically talented."

Here the rubber meets the road. This is the opportunity to really love practicing for its own sake. 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 short break away from your worries of everyday life. I find peace in the daily repetition of scales and exercises. I didn't start out that way; I learned over time.

When you learn to love your practice time, you'll stop struggling with "I should practice." You'll practice without the expectation of a 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 almost by themselves.

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## 7. Get With The Grove

I'm talking about rhythm here. It's important to practice playing in time from the very beginning. 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 passages 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: 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.

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## 8. Help Your Kids Practice

**M**any 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 your 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.

1. 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 prepared to sit with your child and assist when

needed. This may be essential for younger students.

2. Be patient but firm and persistent about practicing.
3. Praise the act of practicing. Behavior that is noticed and praised tends to get repeated.
4. Keep a practice chart. Just writing in the amount of practice each day can motivate.
5. 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 help along the way to learning self-reliance.
6. Regularly ask your child's instructor what they're working on and show interest.
7. From time to time, offer (not to be confused with demand) to listen to your child play. This is a subset of showing interest.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a guitar headstock, showing the tuning pegs and the bridge of the strings. The wood is a warm, golden-brown color, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the wood and the metallic sheen of the pegs. The background is dark, making the headstock stand out.

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8. Notice and praise even small improvements. Criticism really doesn't help.
9. Don't expect perfection. It discourages children to feel they cannot live up to your expectations.
10. Read articles about the value of music education. Parents who appreciate the value of learning music tend to express that value to their children.
11. Help your child choose a reasonable number of activities. Your child will build better self-esteem excelling at a few, select activities rather than being mediocre at many 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.

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## 9. Accept That You Won't Get It Right At First

**H**ere'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 master any skill we have to spend time fumbling before we achieve competence. Remember when you learned to walk? I don't. It's a good thing, because I probably made a lot of mistakes. I'm glad I didn't get discouraged and quit trying.

One thing children have going for them is that every day they learn new skills. They are accustomed to being incompetent. Learning music is just another new thing. For most adults it's a 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 toward the world that keeps things fresh and makes life a worthy adventure.

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## 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 it 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 for me. 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 musically talented 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.



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## BONUS - Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

**A**dults 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 a while. I've often thought that it's a good thing children don't have to understand the mechanics of walking before they learn how to do it.

A close-up, vertical photograph of a guitar headstock, showing the tuning pegs and the top of the neck. The wood is a warm, golden-brown color. The background is dark, making the headstock stand out.

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## About Starland Music Center

**L**earning 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 of knowledgeable, trained professionals takes the time to help you find what you need and make suggestions. 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 includes over 500 motivated students and their parents who are becoming better people and creating more beautiful music in the world. Call now for a FREE initial consultation about lessons at (510) 523-4797.

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## About The Author

**T**omas Michaud is a guitarist, recording artist and music educator as well as author of the nationally acclaimed CD “New World Flamenco Jazz” - passionate instrumental music that lifts your spirits and inspires your soul. To learn more about his music and receive FREE music visit his site at: [www.WorldMelodies.com](http://www.WorldMelodies.com).



A close-up, vertical photograph of a guitar headstock, showing the tuning pegs and the top of the neck. The wood is a light, natural color, and the metal parts are polished. The background is dark, making the headstock stand out.

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## So...Why Choose Starland?

- Experienced and qualified teachers will get you playing sooner.
- Alameda's #1 Choice for music lessons since 1979
- Offering the world renowned YAMAHA Educational System for ages 4 to 6.
- Lessons for Adults and Children
- Our efficient and proven techniques maximize educational results.
- Specially designed studios enhance learning.
- Large selection of books, CDs, videos and rental instruments.
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