

## How to Become a Musician

Over the years I have met hundreds of students who came to college to study music. Some were there because they thought it was fun but didn't appreciate the hard work involved. Some had a real love for music and wanted to do it on an amateur or semi-professional level that would fit with the other things they wanted in life (usually a well paid job and family life). And some (like me) just never imagined doing anything else and were prepared to keep working at it, trusting that if they worked hard enough, then one way or another it would take care of their material needs, give them a career and some fulfilment in life (I've been at it for twenty years and it hasn't disappointed so far). If you're considering becoming a musician here are some things I can tell you about the process that's involved.

Let's start at the very beginning. If you don't build your musicianship on strong foundations you are going to find it very difficult to get anywhere. There are several elements to this. "Talent" is a thorny issue. There is undoubtedly variation in peoples' natural ability to process pitch and rhythm. But there are many other factors to consider as well. Take a child who has a great natural ear. That in itself doesn't count as talent. If they score low for manual dexterity or self discipline then it is unlikely they will ever be thought of as talented. I believe there is natural genetic variation in all these qualities. But that's only the beginning of the story. From the moment of conception environmental factors start interacting with the genetic raw material. As a child grows they have 'developmental windows' where the brain needs adequate stimulation to develop to its full potential. Babies kept in the dark will be blind forever because the neural connections for processing vision are never made. Likewise with language. A child kept in silence for the first few years of life will never learn to talk beyond a few simple words. In the same way, learning to make music from an early age will allow the brain to develop an architecture for processing music that is extremely difficult to develop in later years.

But...I know some fantastic musicians who didn't start playing until their late teen years. So what's going on? Well "learning to make music" doesn't mean having lessons or even having an instrument to play. I believe that when you scratch the surface, high achieving late learners had music in their environment from an early age. Singing or dancing as a child, in a totally unstructured play context. Having parents with a good record collection. All of this counts. If you are predisposed to like music as a young child you will listen to a lot, and you will listen to the detail of the music in a more focussed way than someone who finds it less interesting. That can be enough to prime your brain with the necessary equipment to process music at an advanced level when you eventually start serious study.

Everyone has a total 'musicality score' made up from these different factors. So if you score low for early learning experiences but you have good genes and good scores for self discipline and creativity, then your overall score could still be high.

In his book "Outliers: the story of success", Malcolm Gladwell puts forward the idea of "ten thousand hours practice". As a general rule in many disciplines including music this seems to be the amount of practice required to reach a serious level. His research was with classical musicians, and I have heard it suggested that some other types of music are easier to master. Let me dispel that myth. Whilst it is true that some players have been lucky enough to find a job with band that requires a relatively low level of skill, becoming a well rounded practitioner of contemporary music with a skill set that will enable you to survive all the challenges a career can throw at you takes as long as becoming an orchestral player. For instance a rock guitarist may not read music as well as an orchestral violinist (though some do), but he will be able to improvise fluently, and may be a good singer too. A pop keyboard player may not have the two handed dexterity of a concert pianist, but is probably a great programmer and arranger, and has a deep knowledge of harmony and applying arranging techniques to the huge palette of sounds possible with samplers and synths.

I believe that a musical environment in early childhood counts towards those hours. So the less you have, the more there is to make up later. And maybe too little exposure below a certain age means that crucial windows for brain development are missed. But if your genetic profile and your early environment are at least adequate to put the necessary brain architecture in place then there is no reason why you can't start learning an instrument at a relatively late age and reach a professional level. However it might mean you have some catching up to do. Lets look at some scenarios. No1; You start lessons at the age of seven, practicing for about two hours every week, gradually building up to two to three hours a day at age 17 (quite demanding if you want to have a normal healthy teenage social life and get good grades in your A levels). In this scenario you could start music college at 18 with half of your ten thousand hours already clocked up. No2; You start at 14, practice for an hour a day the first year. Then 2 hours a day from age 15-18. If you start music college at 18 you will have clocked up 2500 hours max. If you wanted to get 10,000 hours under your belt by the time you graduate you would have to do 10 hours a day five days a week (how many teenagers have the self discipline to do that?). Scenario 3; You start at 16, practice intensively and manage to get into music college at 18. You are one of the weaker students, but the fact you are there at all is a major achievement. 3 years later you graduate with an unremarkable score for your final recital. Some of your peers started very young, have clocked up most of their 10,000 hours and are starting to get offers of work. You're on the right track but you're not there yet. You need another 3000 hours before you'll be ready to take on the world. But you're not a student any more. If you practice 6 hours a day for 6 days week with 4 weeks off a year – that's another two years before you've caught up. At four hours a day five days a week it would be over three years. How do you do it? Doing a full time job is not practical. A part time job cuts down the hours available to you, possibly adding years to the time it will take to get there. If you sign on the dole you're actually breaking the law, claiming benefits whilst deliberately not looking for a job. In the case of classical and jazz soloists, musical directors and any multi-skilled creative musicians such as

singer/songwriters and producers you have a lot of extra skills to develop, so 15,000 hours may be a more realistic estimate. So even with a good start in life you may find yourself needing a few more years to reach the necessary level. Other highly trained professions such as law and medicine have extended courses to cover the time needed, and the guarantee of a good income in these professions makes it easier for students to take on the debts that come with these long years of training. The legendary jazz trumpet player and writer Ian Carr once told me that “to be a jazz musician is to be a criminal”, because all the young musicians he knew had to claim benefits illegally in order to buy them those extra years of focussed practice until the work built up.

These scenarios are over simplifications. It is also true that you don't have to be a fully formed musician to start getting some work experience at a semi-pro level. But they do demonstrate the point that for many people the real challenge to becoming a musician is one of logistics, life management, and finding a way to clock up those vital hours whilst taking care of the other necessities in life.

So, going back to the question, what is talent? Well, one of the essential elements is the ability to plunge headlong into an alternative lifestyle with no money, no structured career path, ducking and diving, possibly disapproval from your parents, and... oh yes, one for the boys – over the age of 21 sensible girls tend to find you really unappealing for long term relationships if you don't have a decent job and a regular income. Many of my promising peers at music college signed up for teacher training as soon as they graduated. I was never quite sure whether they wanted to be school teachers all along, or didn't believe in themselves enough, or had realized that life as a professional musician wasn't for them, or were just too scared of taking that step into the unknown and wanted some structure in their lives. I'm not knocking those people at all. I think what school teachers do is amazing. And maybe one reason I never considered that path is I'm not sure if I have the considerable range of talents needed to do that job well. But one thing is for sure. When you take that decision to throw yourself into any demanding full time job like school teaching you just don't have the time or energy to seriously develop as a musician.

So, if you were lucky enough to get music lessons from an early age, and you're a resilient, self disciplined character who banked many practice hours in your childhood, then maybe you will get into a good college and then make a seamless transition into a professional career upon graduating. If you didn't get a good early start to your musical development but you really believe you have enough natural ability, the discipline to practice intensively and cram those hours in, and the ability to tough it out for a few years while your career slowly takes shape, then things will probably work out for you. I have seen adults over 21 make amazing progress if they are motivated and can structure their life to allow for some serious practice.

So...let's say you're committed to the ten thousand hours practice. That's great, but you have to use those hours wisely. If you waste time in poor practice ten thousand hours won't

get you where you need to be. This is why good teaching is so important. I certainly had periods of my own development where I lacked guidance from a good teacher and it cost me valuable time. In classical music there is a well trodden path to follow. Orchestral instruments have venerable conservatoires, well defined technical conventions and finely honed method books to work with that have been tried and tested for over two hundred years. Technique in classical music is extremely standardized. This is essential when you consider that everyone in an orchestral section has to (as much as humanly possible) sound the same as each other. Just watch those rows of bows moving with identical articulation next time you see an orchestra.

In contemporary music things are not so clearly defined. My main instrument is bass guitar. Both the teachers I had when I was at college were of the first generation to pick up the bass guitar. There was no standard technique. They made it up as they went along. Many of the greatest practitioners in contemporary music have developed their own idiosyncratic technique which allows them to achieve a unique sound. The stylistic palette of contemporary music is also so wide that it can be difficult to know where to focus yourself as a young musician. Getting really good at all styles of contemporary music from funk to metal, straight ahead jazz to Brazilian and Cuban - involves a very wide skill set. Most players have to set some boundaries for what they want to take on in their studies. Some young musicians are extremely focussed on a particular genre of music. This is an advantage in the short term - you know exactly what skills you need and who you need to get to know to advance your career in that particular genre. It can also prove limiting to your long term career prospects if you're not prepared to evolve and learn new skills. I was one of those who had very eclectic tastes and didn't really know what I wanted to focus on. It made me a relatively late developer, but being a jack of all trades is not necessarily a bad thing. Of course there's a limit to how wide you can make your skill set. It's almost impossible to be really excellent at many styles of music (how many people get to play jazz *and* classical music as well as Keith Jarrett, or jazz *and* Indian music like John McLaughlin?) Being a jack of all trades can help you survive the early years of your career, and if you continue learning and developing over the years you can eventually become a master of some of those trades (by this stage you will probably be into your thirties, and the 'practice clock' will have gone a long way past ten thousand hours).

So you need to work out your personal goals. Where to set your boundaries and where to focus your efforts. This is where a good teacher can be enormously helpful. The right teacher will discuss these issues with you, assess your strengths and weaknesses, and give you a structure. Not just what to practice that week, but what your priorities should be over the next year, or the next five years. Having someone to help you manage your progress through the ten thousand hours and beyond will make the process quicker and the end result better. One of the big mistakes young musicians make is to decide not to take lessons. They will happily spend the price of a year of regular lessons on a new instrument or amplifier in the hope that it will make them sound better (the lessons would do that much

more effectively). The lure of shiny new toys is hard to resist (I should know! Check out my bass collection). And these days there is so much great free info out there, so it's not surprising that some students believe they can make good progress by themselves. YouTube alone is a treasure trove of fantastic information for music students and I wish it had been around when I was studying twenty years ago. But, to quote Frank Zappa "information is not knowledge.....knowledge is not wisdom". A good teacher can give you real in depth knowledge that is targeted to your personal needs. And as for wisdom – well some of my teachers told me things years ago that made no impression at the time. But then years later the words came back to me in a 'eureka moment' and I finally understood what they meant. I hope I can do the same for my students from time to time.

I hope this little essay has shed some light on the process of becoming a musician. If you are a bass player and interested in having lessons I would be very happy to hear from you. If you play any other instrument I would also be very happy to recommend someone good for you.

You can find me at [www.mikenichols.co.uk](http://www.mikenichols.co.uk)

Happy practicing!