

Why you should learn a musical instrument

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Whether it's rocking out on a drum kit or joining a choir, everyone can benefit from learning music. But the benefits of learning music at any age are not necessarily what first comes to mind, says Dr. Paul Evans from UNSW Arts & Social Sciences.

"A lot of people talk about the value of learning an instrument or learning [music](#) for the other things it could be useful for," says the senior lecturer in the School of Education. "I prefer to look inside the activity, and the reasons why music itself is useful."

Myths vs merits of music

The true benefits of music are not external to music. In fact, despite popular belief, many of the purported external benefits are not well supported, Dr. Evans says.

"One of the popular things to say is that music helps you at school and helps you with other subjects. The evidence for that is unclear. Another idea is that it makes you more creative, but there's not very strong evidence to support that either. Even the most optimistic studies find students who enroll in music, do better at school overall with a reasonably small, but not negligible effect, but usually don't control for the fact that [music education](#) quality varies considerably."

Claims about music improving wellbeing in general, he says, might be more credible.

"For example, [we] find with adult choir groups, people who join discover it to be great therapy. They report an improvement in their wellbeing, their connection with people, their expression, and that is just a natural part of what music does. What you really get out of music is the joy of music," he says. "It has its own internal consequences that make music a great activity and [a] pleasant experience in and of itself."

The right motivation

Dr. Evans says it's important to have the right motivation to learn music.

"If your motivation is because you want to improve your maths scores by half a percent, which is all you could hope, then the reason you're doing it has got nothing to do with the music itself. It's not a very good quality motivation, it's not going to sustain your involvement in learning, it's not going to help you to practice regularly, and you're not likely to get the real benefits out of it," he says.

You should learn a [musical instrument](#) simply because it is so incredibly rewarding to do so, he says.

"Inevitably, you're learning a new skill, and that in itself is enjoyable. Learning an instrument proficiently, or becoming a vocalist can be hard work. But singing, for example, is a bit more intuitive. You can do without reading notation, and you can experience the immediate benefits in terms of enjoyment and happiness. There's also the social connection, and you tend to become very close with the people you develop those skills with."

Music education is vital

Dr. Evans believes basic music education is essential for everybody. It's important to understand how music impacts you in particular ways and places every day, he says.

"Music is used effectively in films to move us emotionally. But it's also used to attract us to election campaigns, and in shops to encourage us to spend more. So, it's important to understand how music affects you."

Music education—despite being an established part of primary and early high school curriculums in Australia—is under threat.

"At present, curriculum reforms propose even less of a role for music, and the arts more broadly as well. That has not only music educators, but

educators of all kinds very worried about what those changes would mean," he says. "It's vital for kids to have access to a good quality music education that helps them to understand themselves."

He says there is no reason why we shouldn't have good quality music education that's enjoyable.

"As kids, we all want a good music education; as parents, we all want our kids to have the benefits of good music [education](#)," he says.

"The enjoyment that is intrinsic in playing music...it's something we should all be able to experience."

Provided by University of New South Wales

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