



Hitting the Right Notes

Introducing your kids to music
has a bevy of benefits

BY SARA SCHWARTZ

A slew of instruments spread on a table in front of him, then fourth-grader Anthony McGill quickly gravitated toward the saxophone, picking it up and testing the keys. There was just one problem. “It was too big,” he says, laughing. “So I picked the clarinet.”

McGill's older brother was already learning the flute, and both boys had taken piano lessons. Their parents, Demarre and Ira Carol McGill, actively encouraged their sons to experiment with music. “They wanted to support our passions, and they didn't have any restrictions as far as what those could be,” he says.

Today, McGill, 39, serves as principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic — and is the orchestra's first African-American principal player. He regularly appears as a soloist for many of North America's top orchestras and serves on the faculty of the Juilliard School. He has also performed with Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma and Gabriela Montero at the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009. McGill's brother, Demarre McGill, is also an accomplished musician, playing principal flute for the Seattle Symphony.

McGill says education — of all kinds — emphasized by his parents played a critical role in the brothers' success. >





Clarinetist Anthony McGill, right, instructs the next generation of musicians as artistic adviser with Juilliard School's Music Advancement Program.

"They both understood the value of education because their lives were changed because of being able to graduate from college and to pursue art as a major," he says. "They didn't have any concept that you couldn't do something because it was artistic. That actually helped them become who they were in every single way."

It helped their sons, too. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago, where a great income disparity exists, McGill says his parents' encouragement, life experiences and positive influence helped them look beyond their environment. "We needed to be surrounded by that," he says. "We were very lucky to have that."

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

For Julia Jones, 15, picking up the violin at age 5 was directly tied to her mother's own musical past. Teresa Jones earned her master's degree in music from The National

Tchaikovsky Music Academy of Ukraine in Kiev, and worked at the National Radio Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine. "She always wanted me to play some kind of instrument," Julia says of her mother. "She really wanted me to try to play the violin so we could bond."

Julia continued musical instruction at the Lucy Moses School at Kaufman Music Center in New York City. The performing arts complex also houses the Special Music School, Merkin Concert Hall and the Face the Music youth program. Being consistently surrounded by incredible musical talent and instruction can propel students — but practice still makes perfect.

"On a school day, I practice about four hours. I come home, and I start right away, then I do homework later on," Julia says. "And then during the weekends or any free day, I practice about five hours-plus, just because I really want to use my time in a good way."

Julia's dedication has propelled her success. The



Julia Jones, 15, practices the violin about 30 hours each week.

teen has already performed in Germany, Italy, Greece and France. She's won multiple awards at competitions, performed Bach's *Double Concerto* with Grammy-winning violinist Joshua Bell in 2017, and in 2018 joined the Perlman Music Program, which offers musical training to "young string players of rare and special talent."

"My ultimate goal is to become a soloist and share my understanding and interpretation of music," she says. "After becoming a part of The Perlman Music Program, I really fell in love with chamber music, especially string quartets. So if being a soloist doesn't really work out, or I change my mind, I would definitely want to be part of a string quartet."

Aside from professional benefits, Julia notes that musical study has given her social and intellectual prowess, as well.

"Making sure that I am on track with practicing has really made me more responsible as a person and has surprisingly really increased my memory," Julia says. "It's (also) made me a lot more efficient with working, especially for things like homework. So I really appreciate that."

AHEAD OF THE CLASS

Listening to and playing music offers a multitude of physical benefits. Studies have shown it can induce relaxation and provide comfort. It has been found to lower blood pressure, reduce stress and ease muscle tension. For children, it can serve as an emotional outlet and encourage positive ways of dealing with challenges, helping them become mentally and physically healthy adults.

"It's very therapeutic," notes Julia. "I get to let out my emotions in a different way."

As Julia experienced with her improved memory, there can also be cognitive benefits.

Musical instruction accelerates brain development in areas related to language, speech perception, reading and processing sound, according to a five-year study conducted by researchers at the University of Southern California. The results, published in 2016 in the *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience* journal, explained how learning to play a musical instrument affects a child's social, emotional and cognitive development.

A group of 6- and 7-year-olds taking music lessons was compared with two other groups — one in a community soccer program, and others who were not involved in any after-school program. After two years, scientists found that the auditory systems of the musical children matured faster than their counterparts.

Daniel Levitin, rocker-turned-neuroscientist, is not surprised by these results. He previously worked as a session musician, sound engineer and record producer. In 2007, he published *This Is Your Brain* >

PLAYING IT FORWARD

SHEILA E. BOOSTS MUSIC AND ARTS FOUNDATION FOR KIDS

Sharing the gift of music comes easily for singer, songwriter and musician Sheila E. As a young girl, her family would often grab instruments and head to a foster care or inner-city facility to perform impromptu jam sessions.

"It started out with my parents taking us when we were really young," she says. "We'd say, 'We just want to play for the kids and bring a little joy.' And so we did that often — most of our lives growing up."

Today, the accomplished percussionist, also known as Sheila Escovedo, along with vocalist Lynn Mabry, is co-founder of Elevate Oakland, a nonprofit that uses music and art to serve the needs of youth in Oakland, Calif., public schools. Hailing from the Bay Area, the women know firsthand the struggles that many kids there face.

"A lot of the schools we noticed really didn't have a music program," Sheila E. says. "So we would ask if there's just one room that we could take and transform into the music room. We would donate drums, violins, saxophones." The duo would set up music stations at desks, with a keyboard, computer, headphones and audio software programs such as Pro Tools and Garageband, so the kids could learn to make and record music.

Slowly, they'd see transformations in the kids. One young man wanted to share a rap song that he had produced. "We listened to the story, and then, like a couple of lines later, we realize he was talking about himself," she says. "In the rap, he's talking about when he wrote it he was sleeping in a friend's car in front of the school because he had nowhere to live."

The program has been as beneficial for Mabry and Sheila E. as it has for the children in the program. Both women experienced childhood trauma and turned to music to find solace.

"We know how much music has saved our lives, and we're able to share how we feel through music," Sheila E. says. "We thought it was important to share, 'Hey, we know where you are. We've been there. We've been abused. We understand it. We went through being angry as well. We know what that's like and you know, this music helped us.'"

What began in 2001 as a small endeavor has now helped more than 3,000 kids. The two plan to expand to other cities as well: "Music is so powerful," says Sheila E. "It is healing."

To learn more or to donate, visit elevateoakland.org.

— Sara Schwartz



Experts believe starting music lessons as a child has long-term emotional, physical and cognitive benefits.

on *Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, which examines why we become emotionally attached to music in our teen years and how music is fundamental to our species. He believes that children who take music lessons experience other advantages over those who don't.

They tend to do better in school, learn to read at a more rapid rate and have fewer behavioral problems, says Levitin, who is also the founding dean of arts and humanities at the Minerva Schools at Keck Graduate Institute in California. "To play an instrument with other people in, say, a fourth-grade band, you have to think about what other people are doing. You have to be a little more selfless in order to make your contribution fit with theirs. You can't play too loud. You have to play at the right time. You have to anticipate when they're going to do what they're gonna do."

It also promotes hand-eye coordination: "That kind of motor control refinement that happens at an early age helps to expand the repertoire of things your brain can do," he says.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

If there are pitfalls to learning a musical instrument, it's that, for most, it requires a lot of work

— during those childhood and adolescent years when attention spans are generally short.

"Instruments are hard. When you look at somebody who plays, and plays an instrument well, it seems effortless. So it can be easy to become discouraged because what you're playing in the first couple of years on any instrument doesn't really sound very good," Levitin says. "But if you go into it with the expectation that it's going to take some work and the work will be rewarded, that's a helpful attitude."

He adds that practice — not talent — is what primarily propels musical expertise. "Consistent daily practice is what causes you to improve," he says. "If you were to practice seven hours a week, all on Sunday, versus seven hours a week, an hour a day, the hour a day is far more effective. You just can't cram."

Clarinetist McGill, who is also the artistic adviser for Juilliard's Music Advancement Program (MAP) advises musicians to have a goal. "Professionals don't practice without goals," he says. "Because that's just play, that's not really practice."

MAP serves students ages 8 to 17 from New York City's five boroughs and the tri-state area. It includes a comprehensive

curriculum, summer study partnerships and opportunities for performances. Founded in 1991, it actively seeks students from diverse backgrounds underrepresented in the classical music field. Every candidate must go through an extensive auditioning process to join MAP.

"We talk to parents to see if they are going to be able to bring their kids to this school. It takes not just the kids' involvement, but it really does take parents' attention," McGill says.

Students can get the best musical training, but if they aren't monitored by their parents or guardians to practice, progress likely will lag. However, overwork is just as disruptive: "On the other extreme, too much work without proper goals and encouragement is probably equally bad," McGill adds.

LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT

It's important for parents to understand that they can provide the musical equipment, pay for the best instruction and carve out the time for their kids to practice — but ultimately, the child has to be interested.

"If kids are totally not interested in music at all, that's going to be harder for them to do it consistently. They have to like the thing. I didn't start off loving music. I just had it consistently, and I fell in love with it because it was around, and it's amazing and wonderful and can change your life," notes McGill. "Without that consistency, I'm not sure it would have."

Julia, too, is content with the path she's taken. "I'm just really happy with my choices with music, and I think it's really important that all kids try out music," she says. "I know that a lot of other people have ideas that they would want to share with the world, and I think it's cool that I get to express them through the music." ■

CHIME IN

FIND THE BEST MUSICAL INSTRUMENT FOR YOUR CHILD

Knowing which instruments are best for your children will help make the selection process smoother. Regardless of age, there's an appropriate musical instrument for any child to discover a love of music. Katherine Palmer, the curator of education at the Musical Instrument Museum (mim.org) in Phoenix, lists some of the best for kids:



FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:

Instruments that kids can play independently with or without other musical sounds are a good option for toddlers and other young musicians. Drums, egg shakers, single jingle bells and glockenspiels all make great choices for exploration. Avoid musical instruments that require batteries, are made of plastic and light up because these qualities can overload the senses. Prioritize instruments made of natural materials that can be played acoustically.



FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN:

Bigger isn't always better when carrying a violoncello or tuba becomes a consideration. Choose musical instruments that are size-appropriate and will promote fine motor skill development and listening skills. Piano and violin are ideal beginning instruments because there are instructors who incorporate play-based approaches to make learning fun. As they get older, utilize school music programs or local music stores and rent instruments before making a purchase.



FOR OLDER CHILDREN:

There are plenty of entry-level apps to introduce teens to digital music-making. As they start layering beats on phones and tablets and become more engaged, other hardware and software will allow them to record themselves, develop a sound and sample from sound libraries. Digital music is a great entry point for youth who would like to explore instrumental music-making outside of a formalized band or orchestra.