

Sax Noir Studio

Excelling on a Musical Instrument

Contrary to popular belief there is very little “talent” involved in excelling on a musical instrument. The keys are ***desire*** and ***hard work***. There is plenty of research demonstrating that outstanding performance is the product of years of deliberate practice and coaching, not of any innate talent or skill.

Back in 1985, Benjamin Bloom, a professor of education at the University of Chicago, published a landmark book, *Developing Talent in Young People*, which examined the critical factors that contribute to talent. He took a deep retrospective look at the childhoods of 120 elite performers who had won international competitions or awards in fields ranging from music and the arts to mathematics and neurology. Surprisingly, Bloom’s work found no early indicators that could have predicted the virtuosos’ success. Subsequent research indicating that there is no correlation between IQ and expert performance in fields such as chess, music, sports, and medicine has borne out his findings. The only innate differences that turn out to be significant—and they matter primarily in sports—are height and body size. So what *does* correlate with success? One thing emerges very clearly from Bloom’s work: all the superb performers he investigated had practiced intensively, had studied with devoted teachers, and had been supported enthusiastically by their families throughout their developing years. Later research building on Bloom’s pioneering study revealed that the amount and quality of practice were key factors in the level of expertise people achieved.

I have students that have competed successfully provincially, nationally and internationally, and the only thing they have in common is that they have done their work. If a student wants to be a top high school musician equal to the best in Vancouver, a fine amateur musician, a semi-professional musician, or gain entrance to a University School of Music, it takes an hour a day of the *right kind of practice* for 4 to 5 years. If the student wants to be a professional musician, it takes 10,000 hours of practice....3 hours a day for 10 years, preferably starting young.

It has to be the right ***kind*** of practice: deliberate, disciplined practice working on things the student finds difficult. It takes great mental focus and the student has to listen very hard and teach him or herself by working on the smallest glitches that show up in tone, dynamics, articulation, technique and phrasing.

That is not to say it is not fun...it is great fun to those who are drawn to the instrument and like to play with others. It is even more fun when you get good at it. If there were a sport whose development could compare to music, it would be golf (except that in music you play as part of a team.) Music is a team sport where no one loses...except the audience if the team is not prepared!

The specific nature of the home support environment is crucial. Bloom interviewed good performers extensively and found their home environments shared a number of traits. Despite wide variations in parents' backgrounds, professions and incomes, the homes tended to be child oriented. Kids were important and the parents were willing to do a lot—almost anything—to help them. The parents believed in and modeled a strong work ethic. Work came before play, obligations had to be met, and goals were to be pursued. The field the child became excellent in was frequently chosen by chance or arbitrarily. A child might end up studying the piano simply because one was available or become a swimmer because the swimming team needed one more member. The children were not irresistibly drawn to specific fields, nor did the parents force them.

The parents did choose teachers, which was one of their most important roles as their children progressed and needed to be challenged at higher levels. In addition, the parents monitored their children's practice, made sure there was time for it, and made sure they did it. Practice is centrally important to achievement, and most people do not enjoy it. However, if the home, teaching and playing environment all support and praise good results, the student can eventually become "hooked" by practice. I remember in my early days my parents threatening to give my clarinet to my sister...by late high school, I practiced during lunch hours and spares at school to relieve my parents of the incessant sound of scales, arpeggios and endless time spent reviewing "one little lick" for a performance...over and over again.

"I remember when my late wife, a passionate and enthusiastic gardener had been listening to me practice through an open window repeating endlessly certain passages of a piece for a concert. She said, "Don't you ever get tired of going over and over and over the same phrase?" I said, "It's funny you should ask me that. I have been watching you working in the boiling sun for hours on end, weeding, digging, planting, pruning, covered with dirt and I've been thinking the same about you!"

So perhaps one thing is common to gardening and music: good results depend on the work one is willing to put into it, and in the work itself you find your true enjoyment."

--Benny Goodman

We are all united by the simple but rather unusual fact that we are devoting our lives to sound—vibration in the air, initiated by our instruments—vibration that hits the ear and mysteriously creates a sensation for our spirit and body. We are willing to step ahead based not on what society tells us is real and necessary, but rather on what we feel, we trust—and believe in.

The important gifts in music aren't wrapped in perfection, and they aren't reserved for the world of professional musicians. Music is for everyone. It is a bond among all people and all cultures of this earth.

--Maria Schneider

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