

Is Music the Key to Success?

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CONDOLEEZZA RICE trained to be a concert pianist. Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, was a professional clarinet and saxophone player. The hedge fund billionaire Bruce Kovner is a pianist who took classes at Juilliard.

Multiple studies link music study to academic achievement. But what is it about serious music training that seems to correlate with outsize success in other fields?

The connection isn't a coincidence. I know because I asked. I put the question to top-flight professionals in industries from tech to finance to media, all of whom had serious (if often little-known) past lives as musicians. Almost all made a connection between their music training and their professional achievements.

The phenomenon extends beyond the math-music association. Strikingly, many high achievers told me music opened up the pathways to creative thinking. And their experiences suggest that music training sharpens other qualities: Collaboration. The ability to listen. A way of thinking that weaves together disparate ideas. The power to focus on the present and the future simultaneously.

Will your school music program turn your kid into a Paul Allen, the billionaire co-founder of Microsoft (guitar)? Or a Woody Allen (clarinet)? Probably not. These are singular achievers. But the way these and other visionaries I spoke to process music is intriguing. As is the way many of them apply music's lessons of focus and discipline into new ways of thinking and communicating — even problem solving.

Look carefully and you'll find musicians at the top of almost any industry. Woody Allen performs weekly with a jazz band. The television broadcaster Paula Zahn (cello) and the NBC chief White House correspondent Chuck Todd (French horn) attended college on music scholarships; NBC's Andrea Mitchell trained to become a professional violinist. Both Microsoft's Mr. Allen and the venture capitalist Roger McNamee have rock bands. Larry Page, a co-founder of Google, played saxophone in high school. Steven Spielberg is a clarinetist and son of a pianist. The former World Bank president James D. Wolfensohn has played cello at Carnegie Hall.

"It's not a coincidence," says Mr. Greenspan, who gave up jazz clarinet but still dabbles at the baby grand in his living room. "I can tell you as a statistician, the probability that that is mere chance is extremely small." The cautious former Fed chief adds, "That's all that you can judge about the facts. The crucial question is: why does that connection exist?"

Paul Allen offers an answer. He says music “reinforces your confidence in the ability to create.” Mr. Allen began playing the violin at age 7 and switched to the guitar as a teenager. Even in the early days of Microsoft, he would pick up his guitar at the end of marathon days of programming. The music was the emotional analog to his day job, with each channeling a different type of creative impulse. In both, he says, “something is pushing you to look beyond what currently exists and express yourself in a new way.”

Mr. Todd says there is a connection between years of practice and competition and what he calls the “drive for perfection.” The veteran advertising executive Steve Hayden credits his background as a cellist for his most famous work, the Apple “1984” commercial depicting rebellion against a dictator. “I was thinking of Stravinsky when I came up with that idea,” he says. He adds that his cello performance background helps him work collaboratively: “Ensemble playing trains you, quite literally, to play well with others, to know when to solo and when to follow.”

For many of the high achievers I spoke with, music functions as a “hidden language,” as Mr. Wolfensohn calls it, one that enhances the ability to connect disparate or even contradictory ideas. When he ran the World Bank, Mr. Wolfensohn traveled to more than 100 countries, often taking in local performances (and occasionally joining in on a borrowed cello), which helped him understand “the culture of people, as distinct from their balance sheet.”