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Arkansas Democrat Gazette

BY JACK W. HILL
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Music hath more than charms

Studies show folks do better in life after music education as kids.

The man that hath no music in himself
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music ...

Here's a no-brainer: Music lessons will enhance your ability to appreciate and play music.

But here's another benefit of music lessons, perhaps one you haven't considered: Learning music, especially at an early age, boosts comprehension in other areas of life, such as mathematics and science.

Researchers at the University of California-Irvine have discovered that students who took piano lessons scored an average of 34 percent higher on tests of spatial-temporal ability — an important component of understanding math and science.

A San Francisco neurologist, Dr. Frank R. Wilson, has found a correlation between music study and muscular development, physical coordination, sense of timing, mental concentration, the ability to hold up under stress, memory skills, and vocal, visual and aural development.

The brain's design, Wilson learned, contributes to the connection. A major part of the human control system — the cerebellum — largely regulates the types of movements used by musicians in playing instruments. More of the brain is used in controlling small muscles of the body than large muscles. About 90 percent of the cerebellum works exclusively on improving control of the precise hand-arm movements necessary for playing a musical instrument.

In Greenwood, Miss., a 1992 study

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Music teacher, student should be good match

What should you look for in a music teacher?

Before you sign up your child — or yourself — look beyond the cost of the lessons, suggests one teacher of piano and guitar.

"If someone calls me and the first thing they ask me is how much will it cost, I'm not sure I want to take that person on," says Suzanne Michell, who teaches piano and guitar. "I much prefer it if they ask me if I'm interested in jazz or folk or whatever, and if I play music as well as teach it.

"You should also ask a teacher where they went to school, what they like musically, find out about their experiences. A teacher will teach better if the student is really engaged and you've got a good match going.

"Hopefully, you're setting up a relationship that will last several years."

Music

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showed that a group of students who studied piano all scored at least 10 points higher on the Stanford Achievement Test in computation and language, word study skills and reading comprehension. In the south Bronx in New York, one of the nation's poorest neighborhoods, a small Catholic school named St. Augustine discovered that its students with four years of music and the arts were scoring 34 points higher on verbal SATs and 18 points better on math SATs than those who took music for less than one year.

Closer to home, a recent survey by Little Rock's Colaianni Piano & Organ Co. of 500 private piano students in central Arkansas found more than 95 percent to be A or B students. Frank Tompkins, Colaianni's customer service manager, naturally is a proponent of music education, but worries that it has become less an emphasis in public schools. Music teachers continue to disappear, due to budget cuts, low pay or overwork, he says.

Arkansas has 1,200 public schools, but only 900 public music teachers, according to the 1995-96 Arkansas Education Directory issued by the state Department of Education.

"The state has a mandate to provide a musical education to students from kindergarten through grade 12," Tompkins says. "But the spirit of that is being violated when you realize that some school districts provide a music teacher to travel between several schools, who then only has time to maybe lead a sing-along at each school.

"There are exceptions, but the money doesn't appear to be there. The Little Rock School District has asked us to submit a bid for a music lab, but the focus would be on the junior- and senior-high kids rather than the elementary level, where we think we should be concentrating."

Bob Bethurem, field services/music specialist for the state education department, sees music education in the state's 311 school districts making progress, especially since the standards of accreditation were adopted in 1993.

"The state standards require a half-unit of music or fine arts on the secondary level in order to graduate," Bethurem says. "That's not a lot, but it's more than maybe half the states. I'm a firm believer in the latest research about the benefits of music education."

Apparently none of the state's school districts are having problems meeting the standards, says Bob Maddox, coordinator of standards assurance in the state education department.

"We have not found any out of compliance," Maddox says. "We know it's sometimes difficult for the small rural schools to have someone certified in vocal *and* instrumental music, and they usually try to get a teacher to go back and [become] certified so he can teach both."

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grades one and two that have tended to have their music and arts programs eliminated or not considered."

Three days a week, White visits kindergarten and grades one through five at North Little Rock's Boone Park Elementary School. "The fifth-graders get music twice a week, and the younger ones get it once a week, but at least it's a beginning."

The best time to add music to the life of a child is between ages 2 and 10, as reported on ABC's Peter Jennings Report.

"Your Child's Brain: How Kids Are Wired for Music, Math & Emotions," a cover story in the Feb. 19, 1996, *Newsweek*, says, "Few concert-level performers begin playing later than the age of 10. It is much harder to learn an instrument as an adult," and recommends "sing songs with children. Play structured, melodic music. If a child shows any musical aptitude or interest, get an instrument into [his] hand early."

MUSIC ACROSS THE BOARD

Researchers believe the beneficial aspects of music training extend to playing all instruments. Dave Rogers agrees. Rogers, a local drummer and educator who teaches at Hendrix College in Conway and at Fletcher Music in Benton, finds training in percussion to be as worthwhile as learning other instruments.

you figure out how to break them."

Teachers in the public school system, Rogers says, don't have the time to take such an approach. Rogers figures he's fortunate to have found employment outside the academic establishment.

"One thing my students learn quickly is that to be a good musician, you must practice," Rogers says. "The old saying has it, 'Practice makes perfect,' but that's not exactly it. I tell them that only perfect practice makes perfect. I talk a lot about how to practice."

But before they can practice, they have to be taught. Tompkins cites a study that considers music as just an activity in American schools, instead of an integral part of education. "The Case for Sequential Music Education in the Core Curriculum of the Public Schools," by Grant Venerable, a University of California at Santa Cruz chemistry and humanities teacher, says music education in the United States is on the periphery of the curriculum, while in Hungary, Japan and the Nether-

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One North Little Rock music teacher thinks things are improving. "I'm encouraged that the new information on brain research is getting people to pay attention," says Mike White, choral director at North Little Rock High School-West campus. "It's easy to get very negative about some of what we see and I get frustrated because many of the schools and patrons like to see results at the top end of the scale, rather than at the foundations. Unfortunately, it's with preschool and kindergarten and

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"Learning music teaches you a type of discipline that is beneficial in other ways. You can take that and apply it to learning almost anything else," Rogers says. "It's a well-known fact that kids in band or choir, which are both electives in school, have higher grades. In my exposure at Arkansas Tech University, I had an instructor from Berklee College in Boston, where the approach to teaching music is as a language.

"They feel that you learn to read English by learning to write it, and so that's the way they teach music. I do the same thing, where with beginners I start them out on a set of exercises on following the rules. You learn them and then

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The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement examined science achievements of eighth- and ninth-graders, and learned that Hungary, Japan and the Netherlands ranked first, second and third, respectively, while the United States ranked 14th of the 17 countries studied.

Japan is the best-studied example of a country that has risen from war-time defeat to superpower status, at least in an economic sense. And when it comes to music in the schools, rather than cutting back to save money, the Japanese have taken a different approach.

In Japan, students in grades one through six have two class periods a week each in music and art and handicrafts. Music includes singing, instrumental performance and appreciation of Western and Japanese music. Two more courses a week are required in music and fine arts in grades seven and eight, and one course per week in grade nine. In the courses, students learn to sing in a chorus and play musical instruments in an ensemble, and acquire a broad understanding and (in theory, at least) appreciation of classical Japanese music, world folk songs, and Western and popular Japanese music.

Japanese secondary schools have course requirements in music or calligraphy in grades 10 and 11.

Just in the past 40 years, the United States and Japan have traded places in several aspects, including piano priorities. In 1957, more than half of all American homes contained pianos and the nation was No. 1 in academic achievement. Now, less than 20 percent of all American families own a piano, and the United States' academic position is significant only in its slippage.

"The Japanese consider it a social disgrace to reach adulthood without learning piano," Tompkins says. "In the last 40-50 years, most Japanese have mastered the instrument by the third grade."

NEVER TOO LATE

In Silicon Valley, Calif., where the nation's computer and high-tech industry is based, most engineers and technical designers are practicing musicians. And of the nation's 42 presidents, only two (presidents George Bush and Gerald Ford) have not played the piano.

For Suzanne Michell, who teaches guitar and piano in her Pulaski Heights home, the cutback in public school financing of music programs has bolstered her vocation.

"I specialize in beginner students, and I am just taking up where the schools are letting kids down," she says. "It's never too late to pick up music in your life, if you want it, and the earlier it enters, the longer it can enrich a life. It's nice when it happens at age 6 or 7, and parents see that the child is not going to *not* play music. That's when a parent should start the child.

"When you work with people without a lot of real experience, it's important to have them playing real music, not just strumming chords. I encourage the students to play classical music. I want to hear them playing a Bach minuet, rather than 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.' "

Michell says she is interested in producing a well-rounded musician, so she frequently gives her students listening assignments, not just hands-on work. She may suggest they attend a recital or concert, and always asks the students what they have heard since their last lesson.

"Some of the younger ones will mention that they heard the birds singing or even a doorbell that was musical."

The whole process of learning music is good for both sides of the brain, Michell says, encompassing left (mathematical) and right (holistic and conceptual) capabilities.

"When you learn music, it's so emotional. It's the highest form of math there is. They're inseparable in many ways. Kids who take music usually do better in math."

One of Tompkins' studies says that Western education has traditionally trained students in "the three Rs": reading, writing and arithmetic — all of which are considered left-brain activities. Those students who have been thought creative or artistic — right-brain skills — have not always been that well-served in the school system.

"Athletics seem to be our focus," Tompkins says. "Our superintendents in many districts have come up from sports programs; they started as coaches and went back and got advanced degrees and then later on, their focus has been on money, their budgets and football."

But even athletes can benefit from music training, he says.

"There's something about a piano that is different in that it's the only instrument that requires students to exercise all their fingers and limbs, the brain, the eyes and to count time, read two lines of music and reduce fractions while they're playing. In piano players, the left side of the brain actually enlarges, and they can actually process sound and information faster."

LAKEWOOD 8
Lakewood Village 758-5354
*SWITCHBACK (R)
DTS
1:40-4:20-7:00-9:25
*A LIFE LESS ORDINARY (R)
DTS

PARK PLAZA 7
Markham at University 661-9300
*BOOGIE NIGHTS (R)
1:00-4:00-7:00-10:00
*RED CORNER (R)

CINEMA CITY
Breckenridge Village 224-0990
*RED CORNER (R)
1:30-4:20-7:30-10:10
*FAIRY TALE (PG)