



Making connections:

The benefits of music learning

Learning to play a musical instrument or to sing brings extraordinary, lifelong benefits. Why? Because when you're working on your instrument or voice you're also working on yourself, as John Holmes explains.

It's one thing to be involved in music passively, by listening, but it's another thing entirely to make music by playing an instrument or by singing. Through active, progressive involvement in music making, the benefits really multiply.

So, what happens when you play an instrument or sing? You're doing a number of very different things, simultaneously. On the one hand you draw on a group of cognitive skills: thinking, controlling, analysing and reading. In musical terms this is about measuring pulse and rhythm, reading and recognising pitch, and controlling physical co-ordination and fine motor skills. On the other hand, you call on more instinctive and emotional abilities relating to imagination, perception, creative understanding and musical meaning.

Rarely is such a wide range of skills and abilities present in one activity, but when you play an instrument, including your singing voice, they are all brought together at the same time. The amazing thing about making music – the unique lifelong benefit – is that it forges vital connections between all these different types of skill and activity. Creating these connections is especially valuable during the childhood and teenage years of growth, education and personal development. The benefits will then be there whatever a young person's ambitions are – musical or otherwise.

DEVELOPING PHYSICAL CO-ORDINATION AND FINE MOTOR CONTROL

Depending on the instrument, musicians might need delicate finger movements or refined breath control or unusual degrees of co-ordination, perhaps between feet, hands, eyes and breath. All these call for highly developed motor control. In addition, when playing from notation, musicians use a unique kind of brain to body co-ordination, which allows them to transform notes on the page into music. These are valuable skills, which are transferable to many other areas of activity, throughout life.

INTEGRATING MENTAL AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

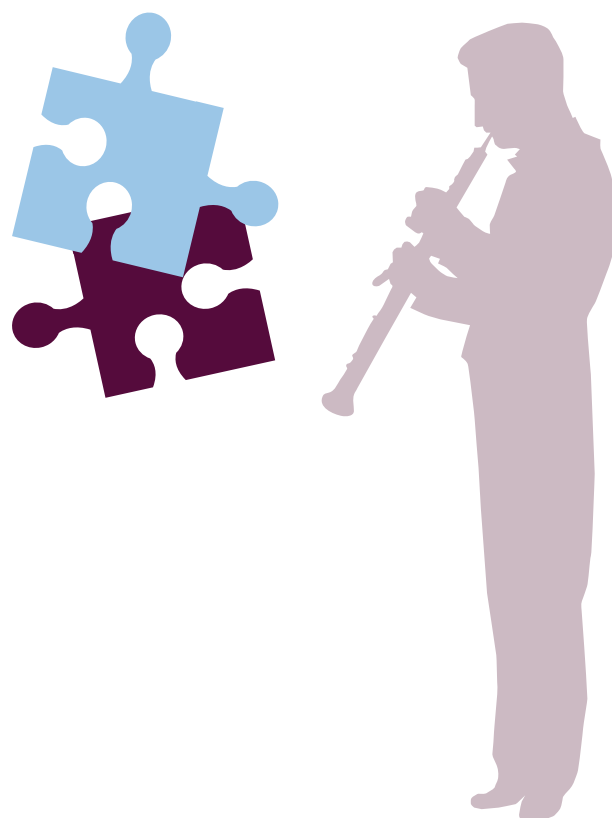
When you play an instrument you combine many different kinds of mental activity with a physical activity; music making combines doing with thinking, knowing and understanding.

DEMONSTRATING KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

One special aspect of music making is the way a musician has to show their understanding through physical actions. In a performance, musicians are drawing on their inner knowledge and understanding, and using it to inform their music making and focus their musical communication.

BEING EXPRESSIVE

Making music, rather than just listening to it, provides opportunities for outward expression of feelings and emotions. Having this outlet can be important for everyone, but can become particularly valuable for those who feel uneasy about expressing themselves in other ways. This might be children, teenagers, those with specific needs, or anyone for whom verbal communication does not come naturally.



USING CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

Making music fosters creativity and imagination and provides ways to turn original ideas into reality. Young people can use these experiences and tools for the rest of their life, whatever they go on to do.

BUILDING SELF-BELIEF AND CONFIDENCE

Learning how to give a musical performance has a positive effect on personal confidence. Many of the skills you need when playing or singing to others are the same ones you use when presenting yourself and communicating in other situations, such as school plays, interviews, discussions and meetings, and speaking in public. Self-belief, and the inner confidence that can bring, is a fundamental benefit of making progress on a musical instrument.

NURTURING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

An essential part of being a musician, especially when making music with others, is the ability to listen, to assess situations and respond, and to be sensitive to what other people are doing. So, as students develop their musical and ensemble skills they are also building skills in perception, personal awareness and emotional intelligence.

LEARNING TO LEARN

By working at playing or singing, you find out important things about learning itself – especially independent learning. Through regular lessons and practice, students gain skills in reflection and self-evaluation. They discover how to work independently and, eventually, how to take control of their learning and progress.

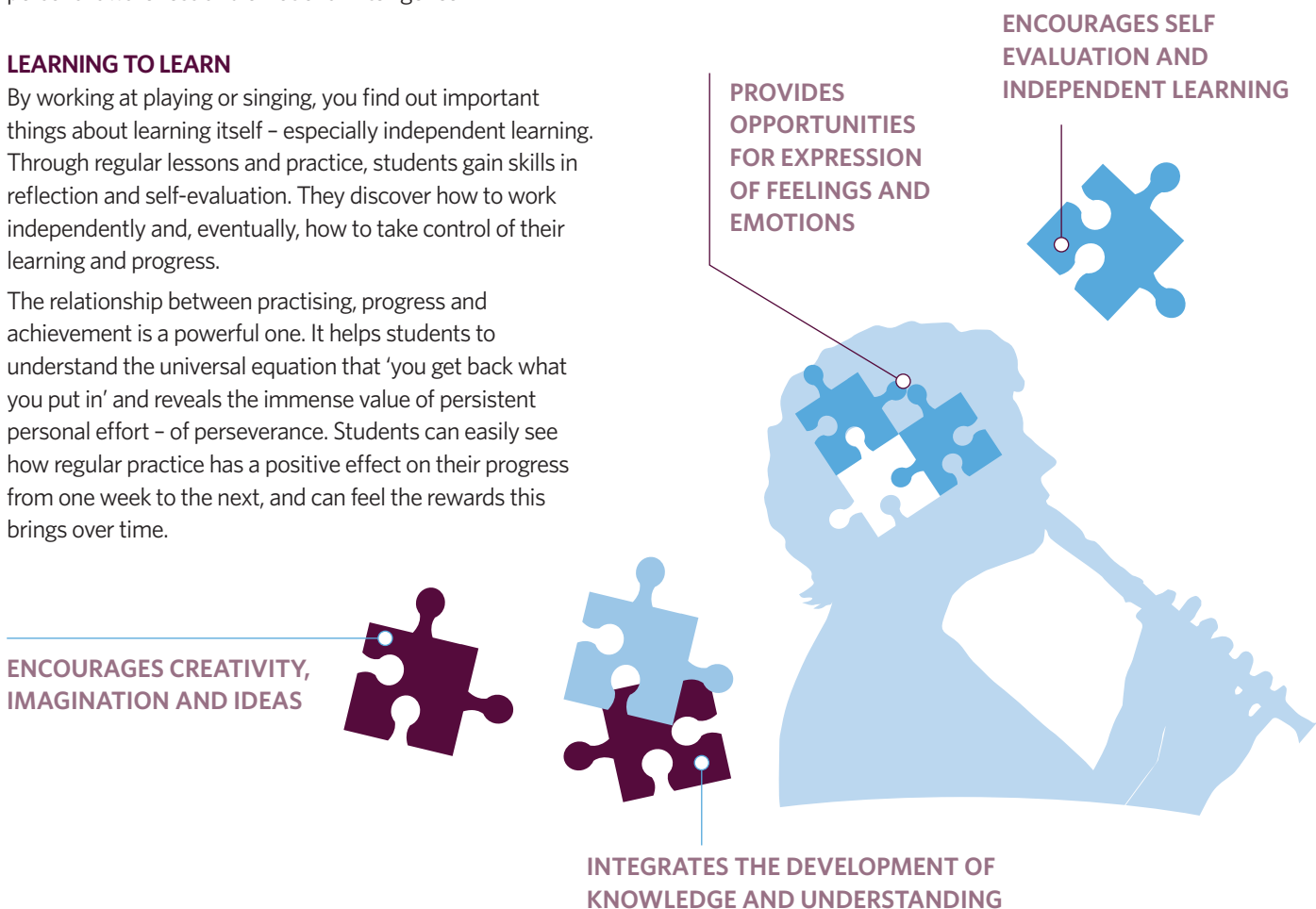
The relationship between practising, progress and achievement is a powerful one. It helps students to understand the universal equation that ‘you get back what you put in’ and reveals the immense value of persistent personal effort – of perseverance. Students can easily see how regular practice has a positive effect on their progress from one week to the next, and can feel the rewards this brings over time.

THE ROLE OF PROGRESSION

The key to unlocking these benefits is progression. Simply taking part in musical activity – just ‘having a go’ – is perfectly worthwhile, but it does not have the same powerful effects. There are many activities which support and inspire musical progression. These could be curriculum music lessons at school as well as instrumental tuition; listening to music and attending live performances; improvising or composing; or being part of a choir, group, band or orchestra.

Progression is also more likely if learning follows well-structured steps, supported by carefully graded repertoire and recognised through helpful, reliable assessments. This is something which ABRSM's graded music exams can provide, by connecting progress, achievement, assessment and motivation into a virtuous circle.

Together, a range of activities like these combine to form an informal ‘curriculum’. They create a rich and varied environment where students can learn in an enjoyable, progressive and sustainable way, and gain valuable inter-related skills – not just for music making, but for life.



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