What Can You Do With a Music Degree?

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It is not unusual for parents to encourage their children to take up a musical instrument—to become a member of the church choir, the school band, or a youth orchestra. The benefits are many—individual growth and discipline, learning to work with others, general familiarity with musical arts and cultures. Often, when a youngster starts showing talent, the family responds by investing a significant amount of time, energy, and money in lessons, transportation, music, and instruments. There can be strong family pride in the results.

Then, somewhere along the line, the young musician begins to realize that music performance has become the primary focus of his or her life. The subject of going to a music school comes up, and one of two things happens: Either the family is immediately supportive, or there is a period of adjustment while the parents figure out what such a choice might mean for their children's future (and for their own). After all, what is going to happen if their young musician graduates, and can't make a living as a performer?

Parents (and students too) worry about these things. So, in this essay, we are going to dig into the issue of the practicality of a Bachelor of Music degree. There are two perspectives to consider. The first is an explanation of the nature of the degree, and how it compares with other types of undergraduate degrees in the job market. The second is a deeper look at the issue, highlighting the elements which give students pursuing a music degree a head start along life's journey.

Part 1: Jobs, and The Degree

Peabody students receive a bachelor's degree. Each year, thousands of young people graduate from colleges with bachelor's degrees. The assumption is that those holding such a degree are now educated enough to qualify for a better job, or to enter further academic training at the master's level. This is true, even if they majored in art history, philosophy, or 18th century British Literature. The same parents who might be concerned about their kids getting a job with a music degree seem less worried about the number of available jobs for art historians. And, as we all know, the newspapers hardly ever list a job opening for a philosopher.

Still, these are worthy areas of study—if not for the daily practicality of the body of knowledge one gains, but for the maturity, dedication and focus required in the process of doing so.

A Bachelor of Music degree is no different. Those who have earned the degree are able to apply for any job (music or otherwise) requiring a bachelor's degree. They are also qualified to apply for entrance to a master's program (in music or in another field). The difference is this: Those holding music degrees have the best background to work in the field—be it performance, teaching, or anything related to the industry. In other words, for a young musician looking to the future, a bachelor of music degree does not close doors. It opens them.
Part 2: The Quest for Perfection, The Joy of Expression

Engineers and accountants do not have to worry about developing exceptionally fine muscle control in order to succeed.

Musicians do.

It takes years.

Parents of budding young musicians recognize the hazards of appearing in public before these skills are adequately honed (even if "the public" is only a few relatives). Squeaky clarinets, screechy violins, and pianos that somehow produce sounds from between the keys are the result. Combined with learning to read music, there are a lot of things to think about, and everyone is watching you. No wonder one of the first lessons learned by young musicians preparing to walk out on stage is: Don't screw up!

The quest for perfection […] should not be a surprise for most adults. We all mature by first doing what our parents tell us. Then one day we discover that there are elements of finesse and style associated with every choice we make. And sometimes how we do something is equally as important as what we do. Same with music.

With this as background, it is time to return to the initial question: In the larger sense, is a conservatory-based education a wise choice for...well...for life?

As we said earlier, the value of a college education is more than simply the sum of the information learned. This is especially true for conservatory students. Those with the drive, sensitivity, and dedication to succeed in a world-class music conservatory develop associated skills and attributes along the way which serve them well in the work world.

- Musicians tend to be creative people, in tune with their minds, bodies, and emotions.
- Producing performances based on planned growth (time to learn the music) makes musicians good project managers, able to plan ahead toward individual or group goals.
- Private study (and the practice required to master the material each week) makes those with musical training comfortable with taking responsibility for accomplishing tasks.
- Musicians come to understand that it is only through working effectively with others (accompanists, conductors, and/or other performers) that a performance will be successful.
- Anyone able to participate in life while at the same time doing the daily work required to excel in music is bound to be a good "time manager."
- Much of musical training has to do with identifying and mastering patterns in everything from compositional structure to technical passages. Musicians have been known to apply that ability in other working environments—everything from code breaking to computer programming. I was discussing this with a computer guru at a major U.S. government agency. He recalled a study done in the early days of mainframe programming—trying to...
identify personality and skill characteristics associated with successful programmers. The study identified those with musical aptitude as the closest match.

**Translated into the language of business, an employer might describe someone with the above attributes as being:**

- Creative, and comfortable with themselves
- Having good planning and project management skills
- Having the ability to take the lead on a project, and to take responsibility for the outcome.
- Able to manage time wisely; able to handle several projects at once.
- Able to identify patterns in behaviors and processes which may or may not work to the benefit of the company.
- Able to work closely with others to meet group goals.

**By this time the truth should be obvious: Most music school graduates do just fine in the world, thank you. When music schools track their recent graduates, the following paths are typical.**

1. Many actually do make a living in music—sometimes entirely as performers. More often, we see a combination of performance and other musical endeavors. Some do quite well with their own private teaching studios, and/or teaching in more formal settings.
2. Some continue their musical studies in advanced degree programs. Others seek jobs in music-related businesses, and industries.
3. Some use their Bachelor's degree to get the same kind of job any other college graduate would seek.
4. Some use their Bachelor's degree to gain admission into a non-musical graduate program. That's right. There are doctors, lawyers, and psychologists out there who did their undergraduate work in music.

**In Summary**

In years past, it was typical for college graduates to take a job in a good company, and stay there for their entire working careers. However, the rapid development of technology and the resulting changes in the skill sets needed for success has made that scenario less and less likely. In a world where an ever increasing percentage of the population experiences several career changes in a lifetime, no college education can supply enough specific knowledge to cover all the possibilities. Thus, an earned bachelor's degree—music or otherwise—is only a first step in the world. Those with a high-level, "musically flavored" college degree, not only have what it takes to make a good first step, they also have the creativity and drive to ensure that each succeeding step brings them closer to the happiness and fulfillment we all seek in life.

The "highest truth" here is actually very simple. Music conservatories have been around for hundreds of years. They would not still be thriving if any significant portion of their graduates
later concluded that they were not prepared to face life—that somehow, they would have been happier had they majored in art history, philosophy, or 18th century British literature.