

WHAT WE LEARN FROM MUSIC

How Early Music Training Can Lead to Success

BY CHERIE YURCO

Proponents of recreational music and music education have long hailed the benefits of music in unleashing and retaining the brain's power and vitality in young and old alike. However, Businessman and Author Craig M. Cortello says that music can also lead to success in the business world.



The musical training/success link made Cortello, an outspoken proponent of music education, ponder why music programs are often the first to feel budget cuts in public schools. This disparity led to his book, *Everything We Needed to Know About Business, We Learned Playing Music* (La Dolce Vita Publishing, 2009).

“There are scores of ex-athletes who give speeches regarding the parallels between playing sports and business success, and there doesn’t seem to be a shortage of funding for sports programs,” he says. “I felt it was time to tell the music education/business success correlation story.”

According to Cortello, the benefits that successful businesspeople got from music, in childhood as well as in adulthood, include building self-esteem and confidence; learning how to collaborate; leadership, salesmanship, and branding skills; creativity and innovation; willingness to take a risk; discipline; and realizing the value of fundamentals, individuality, and passion.

Confidence and Self-Esteem

Genevieve Thiers, 31, is a Chicago opera singer who has also founded two companies—in 2001, the highly successful online babysitting referral service Sittercity.com, plus her own nonprofit opera company, OperaModa, in 2004. She thanks her business success in large part to her opera training, explaining that once you learn to channel energy and direct power when you’re in front of people singing, it’s not something you forget.

“Entrepreneur was essentially a musical term [centuries ago],” adds Thiers. “It was the name that was applied to a musical producer. The two of them are very linked. I wouldn’t be anything like the way I am if I wasn’t singing.” Being a performer, she says, also toughens your skin, making you open to risk-taking.

“You’ll just go up to anyone or start anything or make any phone call or go in front of anybody because you’ve got that strength behind you,” she says, adding that the ability to dismiss rejection translates into salesmanship. “The only way to exercise creativity is to have so many challenges thrown at you that you have to work your way around them.”

Discipline of Practice

The discipline of regular practice regimens also served Thiers well in her other endeavors. “The rigorous discipline that you come up with in any kind of musician atmosphere translates very, very well into the real world,” she says.

Jimmy A. Palmer, former regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency Region 4: Southeast, agrees: “There is discipline that comes with anybody who is serious about playing an instrument. You have to just work at it.”

Palmer, now in his 60s, grew up in rural east central Mississippi, surrounded by music. His father played guitar, fiddle, and French harp (harmonica), and his grandmother played piano. He began playing ukulele at age four, and when he was 10, he received his first guitar. Palmer also helped fill out the marching band and stage band during high school, playing saxophone and clarinet.

“I can say, without any hesitation or doubt, that my own personal musical odyssey has been a huge part of my personal and career development,” he says. “Every time you play, you build your own confidence knowing that you can do certain things and do them well.”

Music in the Workplace

As Palmer moved up the ladder in his career, he feels his ability to foster relationships through music only enhanced his reputation as a leader. When he was in the Mississippi Governor’s office, he suggested a musical program for a holiday observance. “I said, ‘Governor, I’d bet we could find people here in the capital building that can sing,’” explains Palmer. When Palmer sent out a general invitation the huge response surprised him.

Later at the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, he formed a band as an outreach initiative. “I wanted people to see environmental regulators in a different light; that we are human,” he explains. Not only did the band far exceed his expectations in terms of talent and outreach, but it was a great escape from the environmental world as well.

For Dr. H. Steven Sims, director of the Chicago Institute for Voice Care, his chosen profession is a seamless extension of his passion for singing. Now 43 years old,

Sims began singing at age five and also plays piano, trombone, and bassoon.

When Sims was a high school senior he had to decide between attending West Virginia University on a band scholarship or a career in medicine. “That was when Annie Lennox had vocal cord surgery, and I became aware of that,” he says. “I said, ‘Oh there’s surgery where you can operate on a singer.’ That was my epiphany.”

He says that the structured approach to practice served him well in achieving long-term goals like his medical degree. “Putting time in to get a result, having a vision, deciding what you want to do in life, and laying out a plan—the practice really helped long term,” he says.

Playing in a band also led him to work well with a team. “It teaches you to learn how your part has to fit into other peoples’ parts,” he says. “You have to be completely sensitive to everything going on around you so that the outcome can be its best. Mastering that makes you better in whatever you do in life.”

Performance Under Pressure

Sims says that overcoming stage fright helped him later to handle the emotional pressure of working as a surgeon. “Courage is not the absence of fear,” he explains. “Courage is realizing your fear and going ahead and doing what you should do. That experience helped me in terms of training me, when I got a little nervous, to use that energy to perfect my performance rather than fall apart.”

Regardless of all the career benefits, the professionals featured in Cortello’s book can’t imagine not having music in their lives. “Even now, sitting down at the piano, playing something, and singing something is complete catharsis,” says Sims. “It’s a way of making an emotional connection to the self. It’s integral.”

“Music in its own right is important culturally,” he adds. “Having that background in music helps you to present yourself as someone who understands lots of things about the world.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO ORDER THE BOOK *EVERYTHING WE NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT BUSINESS WE LEARNED PLAYING MUSIC* (LA DOLCE VITA PUBLISHING, 2009), BY CRAIG CORTELO, VISIT THE WEBSITE WWW.LDV-ENTERPRISES.COM.