

Music Education

Better Education

Playing an instrument can help your child get higher grades. No, really. By Erin Brereton

As a middle school student, Scott Somers was what many teachers would call "troubled." He had problems concentrating; he wasn't working up to his potential.

Now, at 17, Scott is a B+/A- student at Calabasas High School in Calabasas, Calif. He recently scored over 700 (out of 800) on an SAT II biology test.

Scott's surprising academic turnaround didn't come courtesy of medication, excessive grounding or tutoring. It came from learning music, a pastime he became engrossed in at 11.

"He had a strong attention problem," his mother, Bonnie Somers, says. "As his music [skills] developed, his ability to focus just really grew exponentially."

Currently, Scott is a trumpet player in three groups at Calabasas High: the Jazz A, Wind Ensemble and Jazz Combo. He also formed his own combo that's played two local gigs. In addition to a band that plays monthly at his synagogue, Scott belongs to a

local ska group called the Scuba Kids. And he was admitted to the LA Youth Orchestra.

"I'm excited about his enthusiasm with music," Bonnie Somers says. "He's learned really how to persevere with things. He practices three to five hours a day. We have to make him stop practicing at 9:30 at night—not only because of the neighbors, but because he has to do other things."

Playing to Learn

Scott's scholastic rebirth may seem miraculous, but many studies show there is a strong link between learning music and improved academic performance.

In 2001, the College Board released a report showing that music performance and appreciation students scored higher on the SAT than students with no music training. Music performance students scored 57 points higher on the verbal section and 41 points higher on the math section; music appreciation students landed 64 points higher on verbal and 43 points higher on math.

Not only do students studying the arts get higher SAT scores than students not studying the arts, studies done in 1998 and 1999 by MENC: The National Association for Music Education, show that of all the arts,

Music participants received more academic honors and awards than non-music students, and the percentage of music participants receiving A's and B's was higher than the percentage of non-participants receiving those grades.



To Play ... or Not to Play?

By Emmet Rosenfeld

Every child who learns to play music invests countless hours in lessons, practice and rehearsal. While the rewards last a lifetime, learning an instrument takes hard work and dedication. Take the quiz below to see if your child is ready to join the band.

1. How many extracurricular activities does your child currently engage in for two hours a week or more?

- a) One to three
- b) I can count them on one hand ... almost.
- c) I lost track after dropping my daughter off in her tutu at hockey practice.

2. How would you describe your child's stress level?

- a) A happy, healthy kid with balanced interests
- b) Busy, but with strong study skills and good time management
- c) The kid took up coffee in elementary school.

3. Do you feel your child is musically inclined?

- a) He drums on his desk with pencils during English class.
- b) My child will rake leaves to earn enough for the latest CD.
- c) You didn't see her make the outtakes for American Idol?

3. Is your home a musical environment?

- a) Mom's a concert bassoonist.
- b) My spouse and I met at a Beatles concert.
- c) We communicate by hand signals when Dad's reading the paper.

4. Has your child expressed an interest in taking up an instrument?

- a) She sleeps with a guitar and plasters her bedroom walls with pictures of musicians.

- b) He played recorder in first grade.
- c) He'll agree to consider it if you'll extend TV time by an hour a night.

5. Does your child have the temperament to learn an instrument?

- a) He maintains a high-interest level when playing independently and enjoys hands-on activities.
- b) She breaks into tears if her stuffed animal collection is rearranged.
- c) He calls three friends before deciding what to wear to the mall.

6. Are you prepared to invest in an instrument?

- a) The Steinway is being delivered on Monday.
- b) We'll rent for six months and see how it goes.
- c) Don't thrift stores sell violins?

7. Are you prepared to invest time and energy?

- a) I was voted soccer mom of the year.
- b) We've researched the requirements and discussed how to meet them as a family.
- c) Isn't this supposed to keep the kid out of my hair?

8. Is learning an instrument something your child wants to do?

- a) More than getting a puppy
- b) She's ready to give it a try.
- c) I had to take piano lessons for years, and she sure as heck isn't getting out of it.

KEY

• **Mostly "a"s:** Go for it! Your child is ready to make beautiful music. "a"s and "b"s: Good chance for success. Start the process and see your child grow.

• **Mostly "b"s:** This could work. Try it now and reassess in three months. "b"s and "c"s: Something's out of tune. More research and discussion needed.

• **Mostly "c"s:** In some cases, silence is golden. Ever consider basket weaving?

students studying music appreciation received the highest math scores.

Data also shows that music participants received more academic honors and awards than non-music students, and that the percentage of music participants receiving A's and B's was higher than the percentage of non-participants receiving those grades, according to the 1998 follow-up to the National Educational Longitudinal 1990 Study done by the National Center for Education Statistics, Washington.

That doesn't mean that every child who picks up an instrument is headed for Harvard. But it does mean that learning music gives a child more than just an appreciation for the arts.

Dr. Suzanne Hanser, president of the World Federation of Music Therapy and chair of the music therapy department of Berklee College of Music in Boston, says that she can't promise parents that their children will do better on tests, "but I would promise them that through learning music, children are forming an endless number of pathways in the brain that may be used in any number of activities—perhaps math, perhaps the analytical ability we need to do well on the SATs.

"Musical abilities are linked to an endless number of neuropathways, which means that learning music offer tremendous possibility," she says.

There may not be hard facts on why music and education have such a strong connection, but the evidence is difficult to ignore.

"The correlations between SAT scores and musical skills suggest there's an interaction between music and academic excellence. It appears that music performance and reading skills can enhance this process," says Larry Scripp, chair, Music-in-Education; director, Research Center for Learning Through Music, New England Conservatory. "We don't entirely understand what the bases for the correlation are, but they're there."

The correlation between music and other subjects is not a direct cause and effect, according to Scripp, but the two do enhance each other. "When you combine music instruction with math," he says, "you have an enhanced understanding of math."

That's no surprise to Dr. Jan Berry, a part-time music lecturer at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and saxophone instructor at

Chicago's Roosevelt University, who began taking piano lessons at 4 and saxophone lessons at 12. At the time, she also had a strong interest in arithmetic, thanks to her father, a high school and university-level math and science teacher.

"They specifically do these studies in terms of math and music—and music really does rely on math," Berry says. "I can see why there's a direct correlation.

"In math, you have an exact set of rules, and it's the same in music—two eighth notes always fit inside a quarter note; in math two times two is always four."

When you play music, that computation is instantaneous. "You're doing it in time in your head when you're playing," she says. "It's like doing complex division in your head without a calculator."

No More Shy Guy

The academic results are impressive, but better grades and test scores aren't music's only payoff. For many introverted kids, learning music can offer a social outlet and a much-needed confidence boost.

Berry, who also gives private lessons, has seen a transformation in several students after she moved them into quartet groups.

"You see a social change in the way they're interacting with kids their own age," Berry says. "Not always with speaking, but with playing, they learn to interact. There are a lot of things with music that are

embarrassing—people make you sing out loud or play on the spot in front of people you know. It teaches people to deal with situations. It's exposing a part of yourself that you may not otherwise do. They gain a lot of confidence in themselves from the social aspect."

Renee Westlake, northwest division president for the National Association of Music Education and supervisor for the Bozeman Public Schools in Bozeman, Mont., says music's confidence-building effect is beneficial long after a child has finished school.

Learning music "is good for self-esteem," Westlake says. "You look at a CEO of a corporation looking to hire someone and he is looking for people who have been in highly focused areas, such as music."

An Organized Orchestra

For the already-involved student, music lessons may seem like one more extracurricular activity to be squeezed into a tight schedule. However, music doesn't have to be a drain on a busy student's time.

"Students do better when they are involved more in school," says Mark Lortz, director of bands and orchestra at Westminster High School in Westminster, Md. "Academically, [our music students] are always more focused. Most of the time they are honor roll students—and usually, when students get out of the program or stop doing activities, their grades will go down or flip."

According to Lortz, whose school won the Exemplary Music Program Award for 2003-2004, given by the Music Educators National Association and the Maryland Band Directors Association, adding music as an extra activity isn't a problem.

"In fall, when we're performing one or two times a week, most of my kids do better than in the spring [when we have a lighter schedule]," Lortz says. "I attribute it to the fact they are doing so much, they learn organizational skills."

And for students like Scott Somers, who carefully organize other activities to make more time for practicing, music can be the driving force behind a major life restructuring.

"He's learned to sacrifice things to achieve his goals," Bonnie Somers says. "He's willing to stay home on a Friday or Saturday night if he has to learn some music. That's a major plus for a parent of a teenager: knowing that your kid is willing to do something really serious with long-term value and to maybe sacrifice some of the short-term fun."

No one knows yet whether Scott will be a professional musician someday. Music will not, however, be just a high school hobby—of that they are all sure.

"Music is something you can do for a lifetime," Bonnie says. His older brother played football and always knew that his days as a football player were numbered. "Hopefully, Scott will be playing into his 90s." ♪

Practice Early, Practice Often

Although many experts suggest a child's interest level is the best indicator for when to start lessons, studies show that early music education can have big payoffs.

- A University of California, Irvine, study showed that after eight months of keyboard lessons, preschoolers had a 46 percent boost in their spatial reasoning IQ.

- A study on the effects of the Yamaha Instruction program in the Downey, Calif., Unified School District showed that the reading level of first graders with a single year of music was nearly one grade higher than that of their peers; some students scored almost as high as fourth- or fifth-grade levels.

- Research done in Australia showed that music instruction at an early age can increase reading comprehension, spelling, mathematics and learning ability; listening ability; primary mental abilities (verbal, perceptual, number and spatial) and motor proficiency.

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