



# What Employers Want, Musicians Have

Students can learn 21st-century job skills in the music classroom.



**JENNIFER S. WALTER** is an associate professor of instrumental music education in the School of Music at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. A NAfME member, she can be contacted at [jlstewa7@uncg.edu](mailto:jlstewa7@uncg.edu).

**EMPLOYERS IN THE U.S.** in the 21st century have many expectations when it comes to their employees. According to Alan Hall, an investment and entrepreneurial growth contributor for *Forbes* online, “Leaders view new employees as an investment and anticipate an excellent financial return over time.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even a cursory internet search produces myriad articles that describe the traits of ideal employees, as well as how to find and hire them. These traits range from passion and content knowledge, to people skills and leadership experience.

## Life Skills from Music Study

How are students in schools prepared to meet these workforce demands? What do school music classrooms have to do

with teaching future job skills? What follows is a list of seven valuable, lifelong skills that students learn in music classrooms—skills that can apply to jobs beyond those related to music.

**Musicians learn how to be responsible and dependable.** Today’s employers place a premium on showing up, being on time, and “doing the thing” [as they should]. Musicians do this well.<sup>2</sup> They are systematically taught to be responsible and dependable—two skills that are taught early and reinforced often, mainly because school music environments necessitate structure to avoid chaos and function efficiently. Music students are required to keep up with items such as instruments, music, and rehearsal and performance dates and times. Thus, there are many opportunities to practice and become adept at being consistently responsible and dependable in school music environments. Children who are taught to be respon-

sible and dependable often become adults who are the same, because they know others are counting on them.

## Musicians learn how to be persistent.

Employers regularly seek out employees who display the ability to persist at a task. Musicians learn this ability in their studies. Indeed, the very nature of playing a musical instrument or singing well embodies persistence. Musicians generally have the ability to work both independently, in small or large groups, and for long periods of time toward a common, group-oriented goal. For example, the arc of music student preparing for a performance begins with sight-reading new music, learning it systematically, and then performing the polished music at a concert. This process often takes place across many weeks or months, and involves daily effort to learn music well enough to perform it for others. Because student

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musicians learn how to work toward short- and long-term goals in this manner, they make ideal—and very persistent—employees.

### **Musicians learn how to be problem-solvers.**

Musicians learn how to think creatively in order to solve problems in music and everyday life. Over time, they can become very adept at breaking down musical and nonmusical problems into smaller pieces in order to find solutions to the larger issues. In addition, musicians are often able to separate conceptual problems from practical ones and proceed accordingly. They know how to exercise patience to solve problems independently, and in consultation with teachers and peers. Musicians are systematically taught skills that include carefully attending to detail, having a willing spirit, being reflective learners, and taking risks. These skills are highly desired by 21st-century employers

because they contribute to an employee's overall ability to take a problem, examine it analytically and creatively, and come up with a plan to implement a possible solution.

### **Musicians learn how to be receptive to feedback.**

Job-seekers who were school

musicians were taught how to take feedback, whether positive or negative in nature, in stride. For musicians, feedback is commonplace, and most have grown used to receiving information in the form of directives (e.g., “do this,” “fix that”) or feedback (e.g., “that sounded great” versus “that could use some work”). Student musicians are taught what to do with that information and how not to be offended by it. Musicians are taught how to take in feedback, apply their problem-solving skills, and try again—which are skills and dispositions that 21st-century employers want to see in their employees.

### **Musicians learn how to be collaborative.**

Collaboration can be complex, frustrating, and even costly at times, but it is critical to today's work environment. Musicians are taught how to collaborate within their school music environments each and every day, regardless of their musical ability. They can practice collaboration as each person plays his or her individual part in order to create desired large-ensemble results. One emphasis in music is that one should be a good individual musician while also having a strong sense of the goals of the group and contributing positively to

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group outcomes. For employers, this skill can translate into having the ability to work well both as team members and group leaders. In turn, these same skills mean that employees can likely work well with others by fostering both independence and interdependence in the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

**Musicians learn coping skills.** Music is a universal form of self-expression that is enjoyable and can be experienced in many ways, including through playing instruments, singing, listening, and moving. Music provides 21st-century employees with a therapeutic outlet that can help them deal with the ups and downs of daily life.<sup>4</sup> Student musicians develop ways to cope with the joys and pitfalls of life by participating in music. This can foster a sense of well-being in

happy times, and create a lifelong, positive habit of using music to self-soothe when problems or concerns arise.

**Musicians learn how to overcome failure, recognize achievement, and strive for success.** Student musicians fail regularly. Playing an instrument, singing, and other musical skills can be difficult to learn, and they nearly always involve some amount of failure on the part of students. Dealing with failure and overcoming it to achieve success are systematic themes in typical school music classrooms. Employers today are looking for employees who can cope with failure, problem-solve, and eventually achieve success. Musicians learn how to break down tasks into smaller parts to obtain mastery, work together toward a common goal, and

help those around them to achieve success; this can result in an inclusive community. The journey from failure to accomplishment involves overcoming adversity to achieve success.

## Fostering Significant Skills

Music educators work hard to teach their students how to become good musicians. In doing so, these educators foster a number of significant life skills, such as overcoming failure, developing persistence, and problem-solving. Students in school music classrooms are taught how to become responsible and dependable, receptive to feedback, and collaborative. These skill sets and dispositions taught to students in school music classrooms are valued by 21st-century employers, can contribute positively to an employee's overall success, and are lifelong skills that can apply to jobs in any industry. Music study promotes qualities that can help young people become more competent, reliable, and, ultimately, successful adults in a challenging world. ■

### Notes

1. Alan E. Hall, (June 19, 2012), "The Seven C's: How to Find and Hire Great Employees." Retrieved from [forbes.com/sites/alanhall/2012/06/19/the-7-cs-how-to-find-and-hire-great-employees/](http://forbes.com/sites/alanhall/2012/06/19/the-7-cs-how-to-find-and-hire-great-employees/).
2. Simon Tam (March 5, 2015), "5 Powerful Leadership Lessons from Musicians." Retrieved from [huffingtonpost.com/simon-young/5-powerful-leadership-lessons-from-musicians\\_b\\_6810216.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/simon-young/5-powerful-leadership-lessons-from-musicians_b_6810216.html).
3. Ilya Pozin (September 20, 2012), "How to Find the Best Employees." Retrieved from [inc.com/ilya-pozin/recruiting-hiring-how-to-find-the-best-employees.html](http://inc.com/ilya-pozin/recruiting-hiring-how-to-find-the-best-employees.html).
4. Sharon C. Mathew (2013), *Perceived Stress, Executive Functions, and Coping in Musicians*. (Master of Science thesis, Christ University, Bangalore, India). Retrieved from [academia.edu/6445608/Perceived\\_stress\\_Executive\\_Functions\\_and\\_Coping\\_in\\_Musicians](http://academia.edu/6445608/Perceived_stress_Executive_Functions_and_Coping_in_Musicians).