

## **The Benefits and Challenges of Playing the Piano**

By Anita Burgermeister, piano player & teacher

Studying music is not easy. It's a full body and brain workout. It requires an enormous amount of focus, self-discipline, patience and hard work. Piano players read two lines of music in two different clefs at the same time and must respond instantly to the notes on the page by mathematically dividing the notes into beats and fractions of beats. With coordinated use of eyes on the music, ears to listen, feet on pedals, and two hands - all 10 fingers play independent and intricate rhythms. While this is happening, the musician must also pay attention to tempo, dynamics, melody and harmony. That is some major multi-tasking. This split concentration connects the left and right sides of the brain and activates areas used in spatial reasoning, math, science and engineering. It improves concentration, pattern recognition, memory and reading comprehension. Scientists studying the brains of musicians have found that multiple areas of the brain light up when playing music. Playing and reading music makes you smarter!

Studying music builds good skills and has many benefits. Each lesson involves learning something new. This teaches dedication and patience and prepares students to accept criticism in a positive way. A regular practice routine also encourages responsibility and good time management. Students learn to break down a big project (a song) into smaller goals; one note, one measure and one phrase at a time. Musicians are bi-lingual. Musical notation is a foreign language. It is a highly developed shorthand to represent musical ideas and is the most complete universal language we have. The terminology is mostly in Italian but can also be German or French. Some of the many other benefits that musicians experience are less stress and anxiety, lower blood pressure, improved coordination, dexterity, and muscle strength. It also helps battle the effects of aging and depression and is commonly used in ADHD therapy.

Playing an instrument promotes open minds and diversity. It expands cultural knowledge with exposure to different sounds, styles and types of music. Mastering a piece of music is not only fun, it is a powerful confidence booster. Cooperation, active listening and teamwork are required when playing in an ensemble. Highly skilled orchestra musicians must all perform perfectly at the same time on the first try. Unlike sports, there is no time out in a concert hall. Most of all, playing music is an ART - using melody, harmony, tempo, dynamics and rhythm to convey emotion.

The biggest side effect of playing piano may be perseverance. To play well you must practice, practice, practice. The longer you work at it the more you will grow to enjoy the process. Everyone learns at their own pace. It is not a contest. You can spend a lifetime practicing and I guarantee someone will still be better than you. The goal is to strive to keep improving your own skills. Most of us will not be concert pianists. Playing music for your own enjoyment or with friends can be its own reward. If you practice well, you will bring beauty and happiness to those around you and the joy of playing music will stay with you for the rest of your life.