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## Does Music Make Children Smarter?

During Music In Our Schools Month, musicians raise awareness of impact of music education on lives of students.



Students in the St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School orchestra perform at their winter concert in Alexandria. Experts say music activities can enhance social development. Photo courtesy of St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School

By Marilyn Campbell  
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Can playing the piano strengthen a child's reading and math skills? Can joining a school band be a catalyst for building self-confidence? Does one develop strong analytical abilities by taking violin lessons? Some music experts say yes.

"Every minute that you're engaged in music, you're applying more than one concept or one knowledge," said Dr. Kevin Strother, Head of Music at The Heights School in Potomac, Md. "Music develops analytical thinking because it requires students to be creative. They don't just regurgitate memorized facts. They have to apply those facts."

March is Music in Our Schools Month and some music aficionados are trying to raise awareness about impact of music education on the lives of students. The National Association of Music Education in Reston cites a strong body of evidence which shows that participation in musical activities can enhance a student's education. "For today's students to succeed tomorrow, they need a comprehensive education that includes music taught by exemplary music educators," said Elizabeth Lasko, assistant executive director. "Music In Our Schools Month gives music teachers the chance to ... let everyone know how learning music benefits kids, and how it contributes to their growth and development both as students and as future adult citizens."

Instructors say playing music can boost brain power. "Music helps build and develop cognitive skills because you have to do three or four things at the same time to perform music," said Holly Vesilind, music instructor at Westgate Elementary School in Falls Church and a private flute instructor in Fairfax. "It builds math skills because it involves counting and fractions."

Experts say music activities can affect social development. "Music ensembles work much like team sports, students learn the necessity of teamwork and collaboration," said Dr. James Criswell, director of the Middle School advanced band and Upper School wind ensemble and orchestra at St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School in Alexandria.

Strother dispels the notion that the discipline attracts social misfits. "It is not just the choir geeks or the band nerds," he said. "When [The Heights Men's Chorus] was performing in Austria recently, we had the [school's] best lacrosse player with us, we had baseball players, basketball players. In fact, most of our top athletes are also in the music program. It is actually a cool thing to be in music."

So, what do students think? "Music allows people from different social groups to bond

### Considering Private Music Lessons?

#### When should students start taking music lessons?

Between the ages of 5 and 6 for piano. Between the ages of nine and ten for wind instruments or band instruments because students have to have the lung capacity and the finger stretch to perform on the instrument.

#### What is a good first step?

The piano is a great instrument to start on because it plays in every key and gives students a deep understanding of musical harmony and how music works in terms of cords, melody and harmony.

— Holly Vesilind, music instructor at Westgate Elementary School

and come together over a common interest," said Connor Ortman, a sophomore at St. Stephen's & St. Agnes.

"Regardless of a student's level, participation in music education teaches the importance of teamwork and collaboration as a group as well as individual discipline and preparation, much like athletics," added St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School sophomore Kathryn Cavallo.

**EXPERTS SAY** early musical experiences benefit even the youngest musicians. "We focus on experiences, the process and overall music making through movement, singing and instrument playing," said Julie Mueller, a music teacher at Arlington's Jamestown Elementary School.

Earlier this month, the Jamestown Elementary School chorus joined other student choral groups from around the world for the "Concert for Music in Our School's Month," an annual musical experience sponsored by The National Association of Music Education. "Events like these are wonderful opportunities to encourage the students to develop their musical abilities and to be part of activities with musicians from all over," said Dr. Maritza Sadowsky, a music teacher at Jamestown.

Music educators want musical interest to extend beyond a month-long effort. "We hope that because of advocacy efforts such as [Music in Our School's Month] ... that parents will encourage their children to get and stay involved in music," said Lasko.

One means of involvement say educators is exposure to professional musicians through educational programs sponsored by local symphony orchestras. "Having been a school strings and band teacher, myself, I understand how the voices of professional musicians who come into the classroom can reinforce the instruction the teachers give," said Helen Fall, a Fairfax Symphony Orchestra violist.

Hall and other FSO members mentor students as part of programs like Symphony Creating Outreach Resources for Educators (SCORE) and Overture to Orchestra. Overture to Orchestra is designed to introduce elementary school students to the instruments and

### Fairfax Symphony

Students may join the FSO Passport Club at the orchestra's next performance on Saturday, May 12, 2012, 8 p.m. (Students are encouraged to arrive by 7:30). George Mason University's Center for the Arts in Fairfax. The concert will feature pianist Adam Golka. Visit [www.fairfaxsympho...](http://www.fairfaxsympho...)

The Fairfax Symphony is also participating in the 2012 statewide initiative MINDS WIDE OPEN: Virginia Celebrates Children and the Arts. As a part of this celebration, students from the Woodburn Elementary School for the Fine and Communicative Arts in Falls Church will join the Student Passport Club and create artwork and poetry through arts integration projects in their school classrooms. The projects will be displayed at the FSO's performance on Saturday, May 12 at 8 p.m. at GMU's Center for the Arts.

sounds of a symphony orchestra through in-school concerts performed by chamber ensembles from the FSO. The SCORE program offers extensive master classes, individual sectional instruction, and "side-by-side" rehearsals to middle and high school bands and orchestras.

"The students are always excited to have us come. They feel they are getting extra special attention, and having a pro on every instrument makes them all feel important," said Fall who teaches violin and viola in her home studio in Fairfax.

The FSO allows students ages 6-18 to join the Student Passport Club where members get \$5 tickets to symphony performances. Young music enthusiasts also have an opportunity to play symphonic instruments and meet members of the orchestra.

"The FSO concentrates on providing its programs to areas where students have limited access to private music instruction or consistent support for their music studies in the home," said Elizabeth Murphy, FSO president and CEO. "These are the students who will benefit most from one-on-one exposure to the instruments and professional musicians."

#### **OFFICIALS FROM THE MCLEAN ORCHESTRA**

created the McLean Youth Orchestra (MYO) to cultivate the talent of musically advanced middle and high school students. "MYO students not only learn to read and play music better, but working with our conductors and section coaches, they also learn the discipline, team work, self-reliance and confidence required to be an effective ensemble member," said Aileen Pisciotta, president-elect of the McLean Orchestra.

#### **McLean Youth Orchestra**

The McLean Youth Orchestra presents MYO Rocks! Sunday, March 25 at 3 p.m. at Oakcrest School, 850 Balls Hill Road in McLean. Admission is \$10 (free admission for children under 13).

Visit

<http://mcleanyouth.org>

On Sunday, March 25, MYO musicians will present MYO Rocks! "This is [the orchestra's] first-ever 'fusion' concert," said Pisciotta. "The students will perform a couple of classical selections as well as accompany accomplished rock musicians on some current as well as classic rock favorites. This is an MYO outreach effort intended to be a really fun exposure to symphony music for teens who don't normally go to classical concerts."

MYO oboist and Vienna resident Elise Favia, believes the concert will be a hit with her peers. "I am really big on modern songs," said Favia, who is a 10th grade student at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria. "I actually don't like classical music as much as I do the others, but classical music on the oboe is fun because the oboe is used a lot."