

Connect the Dots: Practice Strategies for Young Musicians

WVMEA 2019

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This handout aims to give music students suggestions on how to organize themselves in order to pursue their goals and effectively improve their learning skills by linking the different aspects of the music curriculum together. Ultimately, the student will examine and work with his/her musical experiences to achieve better results in the practice room. The goal is to understand music as one art form with many integrated fields, rather than various unrelated subjects.

Before entering the practice room, three steps will help organize one's path to achieve their goals: (1) make a list of long term and short-term goals from general to specific; (2) Figure out what kind of training, experiences, and skills you will have to acquire to achieve your goals. (3) Connect the dots between goals and abilities you have and the ones you want to achieve. You will notice that your various musical skills are often interconnected from many different angles.

Note of caution: your goals may change during your life, and things might not go as you planned, therefore reevaluation of goals should occur often.

Plan ahead

Set goals for 10 years, 5 years, one year, a semester, a month, a week, a day and an hour. For the purpose of this presentation I will only display a few examples.

ULTIMATE GOAL

Have a career in music

This can mean different things for different people. One may want to have a performing career as an orchestral player, jazz artist, soloist, studio musician and etc. Another person may want to have a career as a college professor, a composer, musicologist, historian and so forth. However, all of them will require understanding music to the best of one's potential.

TEN YEARS

Goals	What is necessary?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have professional career as performing artist• Be a college professor• Orchestral Musician• Chamber Music career• Public School Band Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highly competent musical proficiency in instrument of choice• Graduate School• Orchestral training and experience (university ensembles, youth orchestras, festivals and more)• Conducting experience

ONE YEAR

Goals			
Musical	Technique	Idiomatic	Career/ School
<i>Develop:</i> Musicianship (musical awareness) Musicality (musical tastefulness) Rhythm Listening skills	<i>Improve:</i> Tone quality Intonation Range Accuracy Agility Endurance Clarity /Articulation Conducting Gestures	<i>Learn:</i> Repertoire Etudes/Studies To play by ear To improvise <i>Master:</i> Scales and arpeggios <i>Improve:</i> Sight Reading	<i>Do well in:</i> Music classes Ensembles (move up chair) Do chamber music Enter music festivals Win an audition

What is necessary?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice a fair amount (2-4 hours a day): Fundamentals, Solo Repertoire, Etudes, Ensemble parts, excerpts, and Chamber music parts • Organization: time management • Commitment • Patience • Perseverance

The list above states only some of the possible goals one may have in a given year or semester. As you can see, the list of goals can be quite overwhelming; that is why “connecting the dots” can help one make it much more digestible and doable. For instance, practice scales and arpeggios every day will help you hear them better, which can be helpful in your aural skills classes and your theory classes.

The chart below (next page) shows how certain abilities are connected to others, as well as some groups of skills. Once one links the ideas the list becomes much less overwhelming. The chart is only an example, only a few possible ties are shown. I strongly encourage students to figure out linkages on their own.

SEMESTER

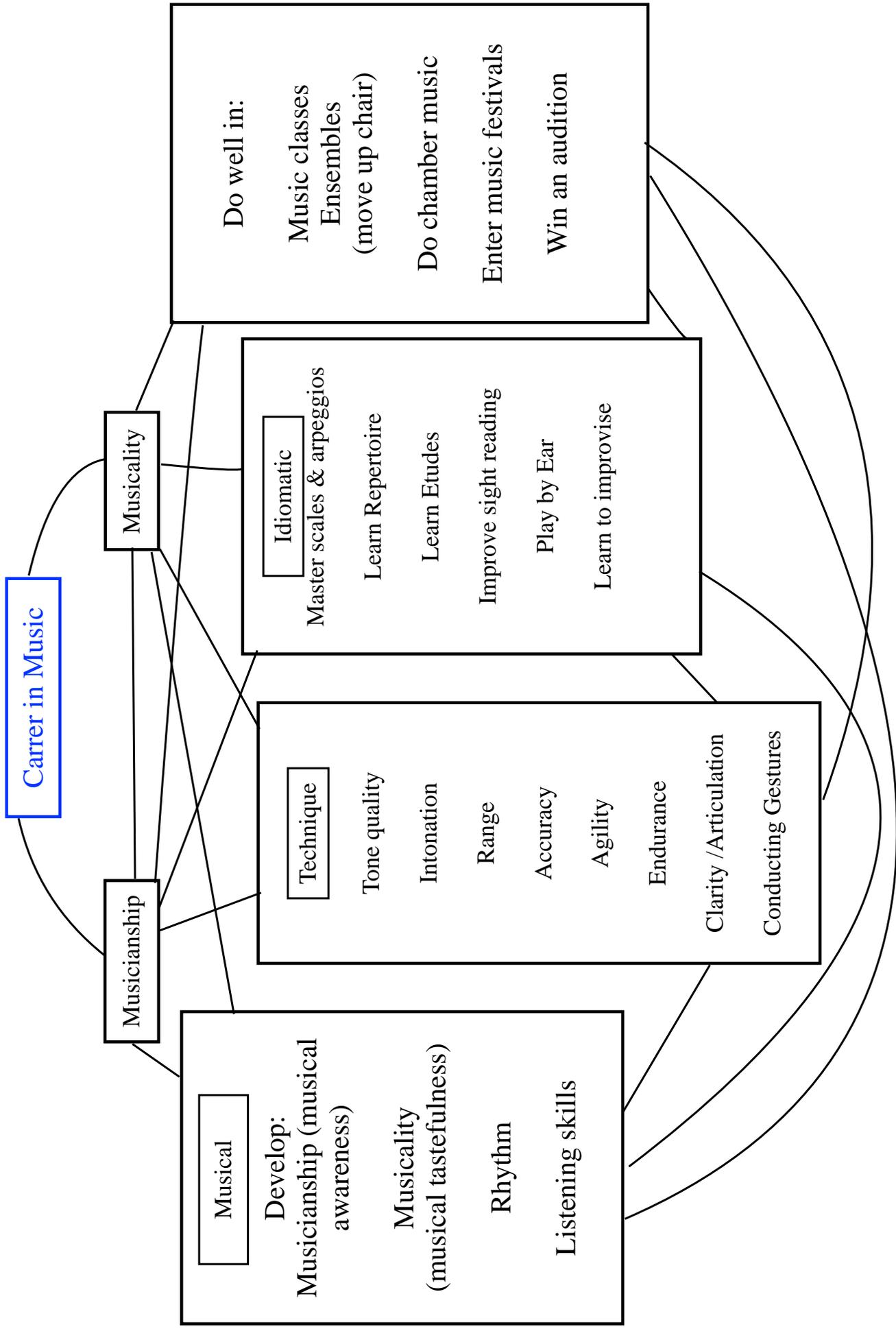
Organize your schedule for the semester:

- Make a calendar that you can adjust quickly (Ex.: iPhone calendar, Android Calendar, Google Calendar, paper calendar or planner).
- Make a note of important dates that you cannot change for the semester (concerts, recitals, tests, due dates, ensemble rehearsal times, classes, etc)
- **SCHEDULE YOUR PRACTICE TIMES! Make a commitment to yourself!**
- Keep yourself busy but not overloaded
- Be realistic (do not schedule more than you can handle)
- Resting and relaxing time is also extremely important

Set priorities by importance and urgency. Something may be important and urgent, which may trump something that is very important but not urgent.

Connect the (more) dots:

Feel free to add more categories to it.



WEEK

Build a weekly schedule with your priorities in mind and stick to it as much as you can. Remember, your practicing time is a commitment with yourself and it is just as important as a commitment with other people.

Sample weekly schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8am	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice
9am	Homework	Class	Homework	Class	Homework
10am	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class
11am	Class	Practice	Class	Practice	Class
12pm	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH
1pm	Practice		Practice		Practice
2pm	Band	Homework	Band	Homework	Chamber
3pm	Band	Practice	Band	Practice	Chamber
4pm	Class	Orchestra	Class	Orchestra	
5pm	DINNER	Orchestra	DINNER	Orchestra	Practice
6pm	Practice	Tbn choir	Practice	DINNER	Practice
7pm	Practice	DINNER	Practice		
8pm			Quintet	CONCERT	GIGS
9pm		Practice	Quintet	CONCERT	GIGS

DAY

First Session (45min to 1hr)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warm up • Fundamentals: Tone Production, Scales, Range, Articulation and Etudes
Second session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scales and arpeggios (10 min) • Etudes • Solo Repertoire
Third session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scales and arpeggios • Solo, Chamber, Band and Orchestra Repertoire

EACH HOUR

Connect the dots in the practice room! Work in your daily fundamentals but adapt them to your necessities. Use excerpts from your repertoire as the basis of your routine of fundamentals. Make it all as musical as you can.

- Play short melodic passages from your solos at a comfortable tempo, in a comfortable range as part of your work on tone production.
- Transpose to different keys and expand your range gradually.
- Play in different styles: play all legato, use different articulations, etc.
- Memorize the scale patterns and arpeggios of your solo and play them in your daily fundamentals.
- Play patterns in different keys (all of them)
- Make yourself familiar with pitch organization of the piece you playing and make yourself comfortable with it. For example, the piece may be based on sequences of tonal or atonal intervals. Learn them and transpose to other key areas.