MUSICALITY
ACTION GUIDE
About this action guide

Sometimes half the battle is figuring out what you want.

This is especially true of musicality!

So we put together the Musicality Checklist and this Musicality Action Plan to answer this question:

How do we pin down that magical something that our musical heroes have - but we don’t seem to?

Big hint: it's not talent.

Musicality emerges from practicing certain definable, learnable musical skills.

With the Musicality Checklist you took inventory of which of these skills you have or don't, and began to get a sense of which of them best match up with your own personal musical goals.

Now in this Musicality Action Guide, you'll learn the first steps to take to actually acquire these exciting and empowering skills.

You'll learn exactly what each skill is, and what steps you can take to learn it. We're also including helpful links to further resources that can help you take concrete steps forwards.

Enjoy - and take action!

Learn more about Musicality:

- Welcome to the Musicality Podcast!
- What Is Musicality? (Revisited)
- The Truth About Talent, with Professor Anders Ericsson
Contents

Clapping along in time with music 4
Having a good sense of rhythm 5
Singing in tune 6
Playing melodies (tunes) by ear 7
Playing chords by ear 8
Improvising a solo 9
Jamming with other musicians 10
Talking about music with others 11
Performing confidently live 12
Understanding music theory 13
Writing music notation 14
Reading music notation 15
Sight-reading written music 16
Creating my own music 17
Playing from a lead sheet 18
Tuning my instrument by ear 19
Knowing my instrument(s) inside and out 20
What's Next? 22
Clapping along in time with music

Clapping in time with music is the foundation of rhythm. Learning to find "the beat" by ear and clap along is an essential skill for any musician.

"Beat" has several meanings, both musical and non-musical, but here we are referring to the steady pulse that underlies a piece of music. This beat provides the "grid" on which we hang our notes. Producing all the right notes will still sound bad if they all come out at the wrong times in the "grid" of the beat. Since the beat is the repeating pulse of the music, "clap in time with music" means that you clap at the same moment as each beat occurs.

To begin learning to clap in time, start simple. Often people have difficulty clapping along because they choose quite challenging music. While almost all music has a definable beat, this pulse can run the gamut from quite prominent to deeply hidden.

So, to begin with, try clapping along with the simplest of beats. Don't try recorded music. Instead, find a metronome which is a device that simply ticks at a steady pace (you can find apps or online metronomes). Or, you can even just find a clock that ticks and try to clap once each second.

Most people find they can tell if they are clapping in time or not, just by listening. Do your claps happen at the same moment as each beat? If you can't tell, try recording your attempt and then listen back. You should be able to clearly hear whether the claps match up with the ticks of your metronome or clock.

Once you have learned to sync the movement of your body with the beat through clapping, you will have internalized an important part of this skill, and find it much easier to do so with recorded music.

Learn more:
- Musicality Means: Clapping in Time
- How to Clap in Time
Having a good sense of rhythm

Rhythm can seem like a "natural" ability because we talk about someone who's "got a great sense of rhythm" or is "a natural dancer". In reality, only a small part of your sense of rhythm is "nature". The rest is learned.

To have a good sense of rhythm requires two things: understanding how rhythm works, and training your ear to recognise and respond to rhythmic patterns.

You can begin learning about musical rhythm from music theory tutorials online.

Then once you understand concepts like "beat", "tempo", "swing rhythms" and so on, you can train your ear. The best way to get started with this is through active listening. Simply listen to the music you normally enjoy, and start asking yourself questions about the concepts you've learned. Can you find the "beat"? Is the "tempo" fast or slow? Are the musicians using "swing" rhythms and "syncopation"? How does the rhythm vary in the different parts of the song?

The more you practice listening actively for rhythm, the more attuned your ear will become. Then you can begin to introduce dedicated ear training exercises (coupled with technical exercises on your instrument or voice) to sharpen up your sense of rhythm and connect it with your own music making.

Learn more:

- Musical U Roadmap: Get Rhythm
- Musicality Means... Having Good Rhythm
- Speaking of Rhythm: What does “beat” really mean?
Singing in tune

Whether or not you consider yourself “a singer”, being able to reliably, accurately and confidently sing in tune is a core skill for all musicians. It allows you to communicate your musical ideas quickly and fluently, boosts your musical memory, and is a powerful tool for training your musical ear.

While some inexperienced singers are disappointed when they run into difficulty in matching pitch with perfect precision, being able to come close is often all that’s necessary to reap the major rewards of developing this skill.

Learning to sing in tune is possible and practical, if approached the right way. The major mistake most people make is to immediately start trying to sing songs. This seems like the obvious starting point but it is actually skipping past some essential steps!

Our voices are instruments, too. Oftentimes people are perfectly willing to accept that they may require instruction and practice in order to play a song on a musical instrument, but at the same time don’t know why they are not able to sing in tune, even though they haven’t yet launched into that same kind of vocal training and practice.

To learn to sing in tune you must first learn to "match pitch" (meaning you hear a note and then can sing back that same note) and master basic "vocal control" (meaning you can move your voice's pitch from one note to another accurately). Spend some time practicing these two core skills before diving into singing songs, and singing in tune will become easy and natural.

Learn more:
- Musical U Roadmap: Learn to Sing
- About Singing As A Tool
- Singing Is Your Birthright
Playing melodies (tunes) by ear

Playing tunes by ear may seem mysterious but it can actually be a logical process. Learn the process and train your ears for it, and playing by ear will no longer seem like a mystery!

There are two main approaches to playing melodies by ear: using intervals or using solfa.

An "interval" is the distance in pitch between two notes. You can learn to recognise different types of interval, which then lets you "measure" pitch distances by ear. Then when you hear the notes in a melody you understand how far apart they all are, and can play them back by ear.

"Solfa" is a powerful framework for naming the notes of the scale. Solfa works with and enhances the natural way in which our brains hear and process music. You can train your ears to recognise each note by its solfa name, so that when you hear a melody you immediately know where each note belongs in the scale, and so can play it back on your instrument.

Both approaches work well, and can even be combined. To begin learning to play melodies by ear, simply choose one of these two approaches and start training! Don't worry, you can always change your decision later, or mix-and-match.

All the ear training you do will build valuable skills, even if you change approach along the way.

Learn more:
- Musical U Roadmap: Play Melodies By Ear (Intervals)
- Musical U Roadmap: Play Melodies By Ear (Solfa)
Playing chords by ear

To hear a song and then play back the chords, for example strumming on guitar or playing an arrangement on piano, is challenging if you sit down and just try to do it.

However, if you learn the simple principles of how chord progressions are built, it becomes much easier to train your ears and learn to play those progressions by ear.

Did you know that a huge number of songs use the same handful of chords? There's a certain logic to it, and once you understand how it works, you can learn to play a lot of songs by ear with only a small amount of training.

So the best way to start learning to play chords by ear isn't to dive in and start trying it with songs. It's to narrow your choices by learning about how chord progressions work and which chords are the most frequently used - then do some dedicated ear training to recognise just those chords. This approach lets you very quickly develop a very useful ability level with this skill.

Learn more:
- Roadmap: Play Chords By Ear
- Chord Ear Training: What Is It and What Can It Do For You?
Improvising a solo

Conjuring up great-sounding music out of nowhere is perhaps the pinnacle of musical expression. Many musicians yearn for that freedom but don't know where to start.

As with many things in music, the trick is to start simply. It's better to improvise something short and simple that sounds great than to try for something long or complex, and end up playing a bunch of notes that don't fit.

Learning to improvise benefits greatly from some core ear training in relative pitch, so it's closely related to playing melodies by ear. This helps you go from music in your head to actually playing those same notes in the real world on your instrument.

Then, by choosing to practice with simple exercises, including games and mini-challenges, you can build up your improvisational skills: from "simple and great-sounding" to "advanced and great-sounding".

By focusing on the musicality of your improvisations (instead of complex rules and systems) you can make sure you always sound good and enjoy improvising.

Learn more:

- Roadmap: Learn to Improvise
- Can't Improvise? There’s Just One Thing Holding You Back
Jamming with other musicians

When you see a group of musicians sitting and jamming it can seem a bit intimidating if you've never done it before.

The truth is that jamming actually does not require advanced musical ability.

What it requires most of all is a willingness to make mistakes and keep trying. The real secret to successful jamming is to realise that nobody else is perfect! And they will all be very forgiving of newcomers making mistakes.

Often a "jam" is much simpler than it sounds. Some musicians will be playing very basic chords or accompaniments. The overall group may sound sophisticated and impressive - but don't let that hold you back. Even just playing a very simple accompaniment part lets you be a part of the jam, and the person organising it will be happy to help you figure out what that part could be.

So don't be nervous! The whole point of jam sessions is to let anybody get involved. Give it a try, don't be embarrassed to be a beginner at jamming, and keep what you play simple. In a jam session any contribution is a good contribution!

Learn more:
- Musicality Means... Jamming
- The Secrets to Jam Session Success, with Kim Alexander
Talking about music with others

Music is a wild and wonderful world of variety. For every flavour and genre and tradition in music, there is a set of words, phrases and expressions.

That means that even experienced musicians sometimes have trouble communicating!

So if you've struggled to join conversations with other musicians or explain what you mean, don't worry! You are certainly not alone. Even a professional orchestra musician would feel out of place chatting with hip-hop artists in the studio, or vice-versa.

There are two ways to get started learning to "talk music". The first is studying. The internet is your friend, here. Simply explore web articles about music slang, jargon, terminology. Look for glossaries and dictionaries. Try to connect up the words used in one style (e.g. jazz) with the words for the same concepts in other styles (e.g. classical). Often the words are shared, sometimes they vary.

The key thing is to relate it all to real music, the music you actually listen to. Practice describing the tracks you love, even just to yourself. If you can't find the right words, go look and see if you can find out what they are.

The second way to learn to "talk music" is by getting out there and doing it. If you're nervous talking to other musicians "live" then try to connect online. Find a friendly, supportive community where people discuss music and dive in. If you don't understand the jargon, just ask - musicians are often glad to show off their knowledge! And if you've done a bit of studying up, you'll probably have your own explanations to share too.

Learn more:
- Musicality Means... Knowing the Slang
- Singing Vocab 101: The Words All Singers Need To Know
Performing confidently live

Stage fright strikes every musician at one time or another. In a way, it's an unavoidable part of performing music live, and the nervous energy provides some of the exhilaration of music-making.

However, there are practical techniques you can use to reduce your nervousness and conquer stage fright. These include things like breathing techniques, visualisation exercises and very practical steps you can take to prepare for each performance.

If you've never performed music live before, or had a bad experience or two, the whole idea can seem scary. But if you take concrete practical measures to boost your musical confidence, performing live can become a true joy for you.

Learn more:
- Musical U Training Module: Get Confident
- How To Stop Doubting and Start Performing, with Brent Vaartstra
Understanding music theory

Music theory can seem strange and abstract, even mathematical. But the truth is, it is simply "how music works" - and that makes it essential for every musician.

The key to succeeding in learning music theory is to connect it with real music. Each time you learn a new concept, ask yourself where you've seen examples of it in the music you listen to or play.

Try to find sources of music theory instruction that illustrate using real musical examples. For the core theory we highly recommend DaveConservatoire.org’s great explainer videos.

Inside Musical U we focus just on the essentials of music theory - the stuff musicians actually use day to day - and connect it directly to real music recordings and instrument practice, and creative exercises.

You can do the same as you learn music theory. Adopt the mindset that theory is "how music works" and it is only useful if you also learn how to apply it in your own musical life - and you will find that learning music theory can be just as enjoyable as music itself.

In fact, one of the best ways to learn theory is to play with it. Learning a new scale? Improvise short melodies with it. Learning a new chord? Create a groove with it on your instrument.

Learn more:
- Dave Conservatoire: A Free Online Music School
- Rewind: A Mindset for Music Theory
Writing music notation

As you develop your musicality you will find yourself with more and more musical creativity. Ideas for new melodies, chords and songs will spring up in your mind and you'll want to save them somehow.

One way is to learn to play by ear, and then record yourself playing your newly-created music. But there are also challenges in that method. With the skill of writing music notation, you have an easy way to jot down any musical thoughts or ideas you have at any time.

Plus music notation helps you build your perception of what's happening in music, giving you deeper understanding and mastery over musical concepts and your own musical expression.

Reading and writing music notation can actually become a natural process when we develop the right “mental models” of the music itself. When you learn to recognize pitches with the Solfa system (also known as solfege) and rhythms with Kodály rhythm syllables, the transition from ear-to-notation is quite intuitive.

The best way to get started writing music notation is actually to read it. Learning to read music notation gives you the connection between symbols on the page and musical ideas in your head. Then, it's relatively simple to begin writing it down yourself, whether that's with pen and paper or notation software.

Learn more:
- Solfege: Why Do Re Mi Isn’t Just Child’s Play
- What is the Kodály Method?
- Foundations of A Musical Mind Course
Reading music notation

Traditional music notation is often associated with classical music but the reality is that it's still used widely throughout the music world.

Learning to read music notation helps unlock a whole range of new music for you to learn and play from sheet music.

The "how to" of reading music is actually fairly simple and you can learn it from online tutorials in an hour or two. What trips musicians up is what they do next...

The most important thing as you start learning to read music notation is to remember that reading music is different from what's known as "sight-reading". Don't expect yourself to glance at a new sheet of music and play it directly!

First, it will be a process of step-by-step figuring out each symbol on the page, the timing of each note and rest, figuring out the note names and how to play them on your instrument. Give yourself the time to work it out, note-by-note and bar-by-bar. Separate out "figuring out the notation" from "learning to play the piece fluently". In time, with practice, the two will merge together and you will soon be able to sight-read (i.e. play immediately without the "figuring out" stage) any new piece of sheet music you discover.

Learn more:
  - Musicality Means... Writing Notation
Sight-reading written music

Once you've mastered the process of reading music notation, you can begin practicing sight-reading. This is a skill in itself! You must dedicate practice time if you want to learn to do it. We recommend the website SightReadingMastery.com as a great source of sight-reading practice material.

As you begin learning to sight-read, remember this: it is absolutely normal for your performance level to be substantially lower for sight-reading as for playing learned pieces. For example, if you can comfortably play intermediate (e.g. Grade 5) level pieces on your instrument, you should be aiming to play beginner (e.g. Grade 2 or 3) level pieces when sight-reading.

What generally discourages musicians is trying to sight-read pieces at their normal performance level. This is bound to be frustrating! The sight-reading itself is an extra challenge and you must allow for that.

If you set your expectations a notch or two lower like this, and regularly practice sight-reading new music, you will find the frustration disappears and it becomes a smooth and gradual learning process.

Learn more:
- Sight Reading Mastery
- About Sight-Reading Music
Creating my own music

Simply learning an instrument can be rewarding - but ultimately if you only ever play what somebody else composed, it can feel limiting. You're missing out on the true creative expression which being a musician can provide.

Learning to create your own music doesn't have to be hard. Once great way to get started is by exploring improvisation. This helps free you up to create new musical ideas without worrying about making "mistakes" -- and it's also great practice for expressing your ideas through your instrument or learning how to write them down.

Another key to successful music creation is understanding musical form and structure. That way you can take various snippets of inspiration and build them into a full and satisfying musical composition.

Active listening will help you learn to hear those structures in the music you love, so you can then use those structures in your own music creation - whether improvised or composed.

If you sit down with the goal of creating a masterpiece, that can quickly feel like a crushing burden. Instead, set yourself free with a goal to simply create something new and interesting. Let the masterpieces follow in due course as you playfully explore new musical ideas.

Learn more:
- About Listening as the Route to Musicality
- About Improvisation
- Roadmap: Learn to Improvise
Playing from a lead sheet

When you see jazz musicians sit in with a new group and somehow play songs you're sure they've never learned before, how do they do it? The answer is probably that they're relying on a "lead sheet". Instead of trying to memorise every jazz standard or becoming expert-level sight-readers carrying a suitcase full of sheet music, they have a small book of simplified notation.

Lead sheets typically contain the notation of the main melody of the piece along with chord symbols that indicate the harmonies. All the rest - bass lines, chord voices, accompaniment rhythms, arrangement, solo sections and more - are up to the performers, and the conventions of the particular musical genre.

Lead sheets are much easier to sight-read due to being simpler - but they do require some extra skills. For example you'll need to interpret and adapt rhythmic patterns to match the style, jam well with other musicians so you sound like a cohesive group, improvise a solo when your turn comes around, and depending on your instrument you might also need to improvise a suitable arrangement from the chord symbols provided on the lead sheet.

This means that learning to play from a lead sheet is actually a vehicle for several other skills of musicality. The best way to learn it is to practice by yourself at first, learning to interpret the specialised notation, while also doing ear training for melodies, chords, rhythm and more.

Whatever style you eventually want to play, it's best to start simple: try picking up a rock or pop songbook rather than going to sophisticated jazz standards. This will give you a much easier outlet for exploring your musicality and developing your confidence playing from a lead sheet.

Learn more:
- Musicality Means... Playing From A Lead Sheet
- About Playing From A Lead Sheet
Tuning my instrument by ear

Today we rely on electronic devices for almost everything, but if there's one place you should steer clear, it's tuning your instrument.

Tuning by ear may seem relatively slow and inaccurate compared to a clever digital tuner, but in fact it is a dangerous dependence to have. How will you know if you've gone out of tune again?

Learning to tune by ear isn't just a convenient skill - it also trains you for a level of pitch perception which will improve all your intonation and give you a more subtle appreciation of music.

The simplest way to start learning to tune by ear is to try it, every time you sit down to practice. Keep using your digital tuner to check and correct your attempt, but always start by trying to tune up by ear first. There are ear training exercises you can use to accelerate the process of fine-tuning your sense of pitch - but this simple practice habit is a great way to get started today.

Learn more:
  - Musicality Means... Tuning Your Instrument By Ear
Knowing my instrument(s) inside and out

Some people say there are two types of musician: those who can play and those who can just talk. And it's true, you do sometimes encounter musicians who can talk to (or "at"!) you for hours about music - but don't seem to have gone beyond the basics of playing their instrument.

But don't let that deter you from learning all you can about your instrument. Studying the history, classic performances, playing techniques and future directions of your instrument enhances your musicality by giving you a broader and deeper connection with your instrument.

A great way to start learning about your instrument and its subtleties is in online communities where you can quickly find a large number of people to discuss your instrument with, exchanging tips, tricks and resources.

At the same time, you’ll want to learn your instrument from the inside. And the best way to do that is to step up your practice game.

Musical practice is an art and a science - just as much as musical performance! With the right practice skills, you will develop an intimate knowledge of, and connection to, your chosen instrument.

Learn more:
- Musicality Means... Knowing Your Instrument Inside Out
- How to Learn Like A Genius, with Gregg Goodhart
Playing more than one instrument

One of the joys of developing your musicality is that it benefits you across all instruments. Once you can understand theory, play by ear, improvise, or jam with others on one instrument, it is very quick to learn to do it on another.

You will still need to learn the physical practicalities of the new instrument - but even that goes faster, as your body understands the rhythmic precision of music already.

Most musicians who have spent time honing their musicality while learning their first instrument are easily able to pick up another. If you have tried and found it very challenging, it's likely that your musicality lags behind your physical instrument skills.

Spend some time honing your "inner musician" on your primary instrument and you will find it brings a new freedom as you try to learn a second (or even a third!)

Learn more:

- [Seven Reasons To Learn A New Instrument](https://www.musical-u.com)
What’s Next?

Now that you’ve read this Musicality Action Plan and discovered some real steps you can make towards your musical goals, which way will you go first?

One of the beauties of musicality training is how the various topics work together synergistically. That also means that they aren’t necessarily required to be in any particular order. You may find that learning a new instrument leads you to discover a certain aspect of music theory, or that learning to write music notation stimulates you to delve into ear training so you can better write down songs that you are creating yourself.

While the steps are there for you to take, your musical journey is as unique as you are. And we hope this Musicality Action Plan has helped shed some light on your path!

In other words, the most important thing isn’t which step to take. Because any step, any action you take is going to lead to a more enjoyable and satisfying musical experience on your way to your musical goals.

So go ahead, just commit to exploring at least one of these topics, starting... today!
Looking for a proven, flexible and fully-supported training system to help you develop your musicality?

We'd love to help you inside Musical U!

Join Now