

BLUE BEAR SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Brand New to Music Lessons?

Many of our students are square-one beginners, learning how to sing or to play an instrument for the first time. Our teachers welcome first-time music students. Here is some information you might find helpful if you are thinking about getting started.

Basic Requirements

You will need an instrument and you'll need to set aside time for practicing.

How Much Will I Need to Practice?

Regular daily practice is most effective. If you can average 30 minutes a day, you'll make good progress. For younger students, 20 minutes a day is often sufficient. Of course there will be days when your busy schedule may not permit playing for 30 minutes. However, you will be well served if you can at least pick up the instrument for 5 minutes. Don't let a day go by without getting some playing in, and try to average 20-30 minutes per day over the course of a week. For singers, if you already sing during the course of the day, you may not need to add a lot of additional practice time. It is often effective simply to bring your attention and new understanding to the singing that you already do. But vocal exercises your teacher will give you can also be a great help.

How Quickly Will I Learn?

Learning music is not something that promises immediate success. The physical skills involved can take quite a while to develop to a high level. The mental understanding of music theory and the language of music is likewise a long-term undertaking. However, if you enjoy the process of hanging out with an instrument (voice included) and learning how to make it sing, you'll be well rewarded at every stage of your progress. There's no better way of finding out if you're well-suited to playing an instrument than beginning instruction now!

What's the Best Age to Start?

Are you older than 10? Then it's time to begin. (And it's never too late.) Here are some specific guidelines to help parents know when their young children might begin:

Guitar - Our youngest students are around 6. It's best at the younger ages to be using a small-sized guitar. While it is possible to begin lessons as early as 4 years of age with a trained Suzuki instructor, our current instructors prefer to work with slightly older students, at least 5 years old.

Voice - Our instructors don't usually begin to work on technical vocal development with a student younger than 12-14 years of age. However, singing lessons can still be worthwhile for students as young as 6. For the younger students the lessons focus on singing enjoyment, working on the basics of breathing and pronunciation, and developing a stronger sense of musicality.

Piano - It is very common for piano lessons to begin at 5 years of age. We have instructors who are experienced working with these younger students.

Bass - Our bass instructors are happy to work with students 6 years old and up. For smaller hands, a smaller bass is definitely required.

Drums - Our drum instructor can work with any student 6 years old and up.

Saxophone - Due to the requirements of breathing and holding a somewhat heavy instrument, it is best to start the saxophone not much before age 10.

Should I Start With Piano?

It is common knowledge that piano is a foundational instrument. For most musicians, having some piano skills is very helpful. Also, music theory is most easily visualized on a piano. But we believe there is no reason to begin your music lessons on the piano if that is not the instrument you are most attracted to. What makes for successful music study is long-term practice. What makes for successful long-term practice is an abiding interest in and

attraction to the instrument. On this issue we are on the side of immediate gratification: start with the instrument you most want to play!

What If I Want to Write Songs?

The first thing you should do is to learn either piano or guitar. You need to be able to string together chord progressions that will accompany your melody and lyrics.

Should I Learn Music Theory Before Taking Up an Instrument?

No, it's really best to learn an instrument before learning music theory. While you might think that learning some theory will facilitate learning an instrument, it's actually the other way around. Knowing at least some basics on an instrument will make music theory much more understandable and meaningful.

Acoustic or Electric Guitar?

You may have heard that it's best to start with acoustic guitar before switching over to electric. We do not subscribe to this advice, since we believe it is trumped by the "immediate gratification" principle above. If you really want to play electric guitar, then go for it! We offer Beginning Electric Guitar as a square-one beginner class just for you. Following are some things you should know.

For beginners, playing an electric guitar is easier than playing an acoustic guitar. Electric guitar strings are smaller in gauge and strung with less tension than acoustic guitar strings, so it takes less pressure to play the notes. If you do learn on an acoustic, you'll find many things suddenly easier when you play them on an electric. The acoustic guitar causes you to develop strength in your hands and calluses on your fingers faster than an electric does. (This may be part of the reason for the standard advice to start with an acoustic.) All the chords, scales and strums, and much of the technique are completely transferable between electric and acoustic guitar. However, the kinds of tone you get out of an electric are very different from the tones you get out of an acoustic. There are a lot of techniques very specific to the electric guitar-amp combination that cannot be learned and explored on an acoustic guitar. When all is said and done, we think you should learn to play what turns you on.

Of course, the great advantage of an acoustic guitar is that it can be played anywhere, regardless of the availability of an electrical outlet. It's a great party or campfire instrument, and a great solo or accompaniment instrument. With an electric guitar, you'll want to get an amp, and you'll most likely want to be playing with others.

Acoustic Guitar - Steel String or Nylon String?

The steel string acoustic is by far the more commonly played acoustic guitar. Nylon string guitars have a warmer, softer sound, while steel string guitars have a brighter, louder sound. Classical guitar and flamenco music are played on nylon string instruments; Willie Nelson and Earl Klugh play nylon string guitars; many artists play both, but favor the steel string. Initially, the steel strings are harder to play because of higher string tension. The neck of the steel string acoustic is usually narrower than the neck of a nylon string acoustic. Therefore, if you have thick fingers, some chords may be harder to play on the steel string. If your fingers are short, some chords may be harder to play on the nylon string. But with practice, these difficulties are easily overcome. The bottom line is that you should try to have someone else play both for you and see if you are more attracted to the sound of one or the other.

When buying a guitar, keep in mind that a higher quality instrument may well be easier to learn on and may be more aesthetically pleasing as well. Anything that attracts you to playing the instrument is a good thing. Read more about buying your first guitar here:

<http://www.themusicedge.com/moxie/news/inthenews/guitar-bazaar-shopping-fo.shtml>

Some General Observations on the Instruments Blue Bear Teaches

Maybe you're not clearly drawn to any particular instrument. Here are some comments that might be helpful as you think about what instrument you might like to play.

Voice - The voice is really the starting point of music. Most instruments that are capable of playing melody refer back to the human voice - they are all trying to "sing." When voice is your instrument, no additional equipment is required. Voices are remarkably able to improve. Just by singing more regularly you can strengthen your voice and gain more control over it. And with sustained practice, even the most out-of-tune singers can see real

progress. Working on your voice often leads to increased self-confidence in other areas. And it's a great social asset to be able to break out in song whenever the need arises.

Guitar - It seems that guitar is the quintessential instrument for accompanying the voice in American popular music. From Woody Guthrie to Tracy Chapman, from Chuck Berry to Metallica, the guitar is everywhere. Just by learning a few chords, you can bang out literally thousands of songs or write your own.

Piano - The piano has a huge repertoire ranging from classical to blues, jazz to pop. It is a fantastic instrument for vocal accompaniment and for solo playing, as well as for ensemble playing. It is the opposite of the acoustic guitar: totally unportable. It is fine to learn on an electronic keyboard. If you go this route, you should get a keyboard that has at least 5 octaves, has full-sized keys, and is touch-sensitive (the harder you strike a key, the louder the sound it produces). Even better is to get a keyboard with weighted action (similar to that of a real piano), though these are more expensive. Electronic keyboards are great for playing in bands and for situations where sound level is a consideration. You should realize, however, that electronic keyboards do not come close to the living, breathing, hugely dynamic and very individual natures of real pianos. Just as there is a huge palette of sound available to you with synthesizers, there is a huge palette of nuance, dynamic range and expression with an acoustic piano that cannot be replicated with an electronic keyboard. A lot of catchy synthesizer sounds get old after a while. The sound of an acoustic piano is still of interest to our modern ears centuries after the instrument was first developed.

Bass - The bass may be one of the easier instruments to learn - we've had students join our band workshops after only 6-9 months of instruction. It is clearly an instrument meant for playing with others. Given the popularity of singing and guitar playing, it seems that people are always looking for a bass player to complete their band! Unlike the guitar and piano on which you are playing chords (groups of several notes played together), the bass plays primarily single notes and usually locks in rhythmically with what the drummer is playing. It's a whole lot of fun to play, and gratifying to be wanted by others for your musical skills.

Drums - Drums are probably the most physical of all the instruments. You're playing with all four limbs as you lay down the groove for everyone else. As the drummer, you are the keeper of time, in charge of the feel. Like the bass player, you are in demand. It is possible to start drum lessons without getting a full kit. You can do a lot of work developing good stick control with just drumsticks and a practice pad. But the real fun comes when you get on the full kit, and for this you'll need a place you can set up and make some real noise.

Saxophone - Sometimes there is just nothing like a wailing sax solo. The emotional tone that comes from someone like Clarence Clemons, Junior Walker or David Sanborn is nothing short of musically hot. And in the world of jazz, the saxophone is perhaps the pre-eminent soloing instrument, like the electric guitar in the world of rock & roll. Need we mention names other than Charlie Parker and John Coltrane? Most students begin on either alto or tenor saxophone; the tenor is bigger and plays a lower range than the alto. Other saxophones include the baritone sax (even bigger and lower than the tenor) and the soprano sax (usually a straight horn, without the curve, that plays higher than the alto). The fingering patterns you learn on any of the saxophones transfer directly to the others. A big deal for all saxophone students is developing a good tone on the instrument. Unlike the piano, where the basic tone of the instrument is set, the saxophone requires the student to do a lot of work before a satisfactory tone is achieved, even on a single note.

Flute - While flute has a minor role in Rock, Blues, Jazz and other Pop styles, it is a wonderful instrument, very satisfying and rewarding to play. It obviously has a major role in classical music, as well as in many folk traditions from around the world. And unlike most other instruments, it is easy to take just about anywhere you might want to go.

We hope you find this information helpful as you contemplate starting music lessons. Please feel free to set up a free consultation with our Program Director if you have additional questions. Regardless of where you might choose to study, we wish you success and enjoyment on your musical journey.

