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The Essentiality of Music: Developing Effective Advocacy Campaigns
Music Advocacy Within the Institution

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Author’s note: What follows is a written version of a “heart-to-heart talk” presented at the National Association of Schools of Music Annual meeting in Orlando, FL on November 23, 2025, under the title, “The Essentiality of Music: Developing Effective Advocacy Campaigns - Music Advocacy within the Institution.”

The reader is encouraged not to mistake this piece for scholarly academic writing. It is, rather, a letter from an old, retired soldier to beloved comrades still in the field, and is best read with the gentle humor, profound reverence and deep affection that I hold towards all of us who make, teach, and carry music.

-- Karl Paulnack, December 2025



Many of you, perhaps especially those of you who are newer at this, may have sensed by now that music doesn’t behave like all the other animals at the academic zoo. On some level, music departments just don’t work like other academic departments.

For example, take *anything* you can drop into a spreadsheet: lay out six departments side by side and some associate provost will walk into the room, point at the music spreadsheet and ask, ‘what’s going on there?’ The RCM always needs to be calibrated, the faculty/student ratios are off the wall; FTE-to-credits-generated looks bizarre. Tenure qualifications generally have to be translated from one language into another, normally for someone who isn’t fluent in either (“now is a Grammy award bigger or smaller than a Nobel Prize?”).

If you sometimes worry that maybe music doesn’t really *belong* with all the other academic subjects? BINGO! It does not. It never has, not since the beginning of the academy, not for a thousand years, and it never will. Not ever.

Let’s start there.

When NASM called me and asked me to present at this session? I tried to talk them out of it. I did not think it was a good idea. I did not think I was the right person.

For I am a mystic. When you ask a mystic a question, instead of an answer, a mystic will give you more questions, harder questions than the one you started out with, leading ultimately to questions that are impossible to answer.

You go to a mystic looking for tips and tricks and we respond by opening up what one of my colleagues in Boston refers to as “The Full Catastrophe.”

However, I assure you it is my sincere intention to help you today. I think I can, and I hope I will. But it will not be a straight line. Things will get *much* worse before they get any better, and you will need to give me a little bit of leash and lean into the messy stuff with me.



Academia as we know it today—the college, the university—descends directly and inseparably from Western European monastic practice from a thousand years ago.

Monasteries and the monks who lived in them had become storehouses of knowledge, of books, of practices including musical practice (chant) and we built thick stone walls between the people who had knowledge and the people who didn’t. Then, something of a miracle happened, a miracle without which we would not be here today.

Around a thousand years ago, the monastery walls got porous. A genuine interest in learning and knowing things—*philo sophia*, the love of wisdom—swept through the villages outside the monasteries, making villagers curious and eager to learn. It also swept through the monasteries themselves, shifting the monks from instinctually hoarding and protecting knowledge, to sharing and giving it away instead.

Monks began to leave the monastery and go down into the villages, during the daytime, when it was safe, to teach people, to share their *philosophia*. And villagers would gather together in the square to hear the monks “profess” what they knew.

Within a few hundred years the academy separates from the church, so by the 1300’s we start to see secular universities and by the 1500’s European conservatories of music, all of which emerged from and are rooted in monastic practice.

And incidentally, another really interesting thing happens in the 11th century, in multi-voice chant in England around the time of the *Winchester Troper*. We start to see the emergence of root position major triads, which of course ends up being of crucial importance for Ben Folds, Sabrina Carpenter, and many others whose entire output consists almost exclusively of root position major triads. What luck! The 11th century was quite the happening place to be.

Does this all have any residual impact on us today? Well, if the academic drag we wear at the end of the year isn’t enough, let me throw you some other hints.

Most of you have a person in your building called a ‘dean’. Ever wonder why the adjective form of dean is ‘decanal’? Because it comes from the Latin *decanus*, meaning—wait for it— “a leader of ten monks.” Dean is an ecclesiastical title of leadership that we brought wholesale into the academy. Today, one only finds deans in chapels and colleges.

Most of you are in music buildings where the lower floor contains the same rows and rows of individual cells that we used for monastic practice and study a thousand years ago. The architecture is virtually unchanged.

For many of you, they are in the most buried and protected part of the building. If there were a nuclear war or a tornado and you ran for shelter, you'd go to the practice rooms. That's where you can still feel the monastery wall.

How many of you have put paper over the practice room window when you were a student? Can you feel the instinct to close that wall, to keep the outside world out so that you are safe when you practice? And can you still feel, conversely, how dangerous it feels the first time you walk out onto the stage, venturing down into the village, to "profess" what you know to a waiting audience? If you pay attention to this part of the building and that holy pilgrimage from the practice room to the stage, you can *feel* a thousand years ago! You can feel it in your belly.



So, what did monks teach in the 11th century? They were teaching what we know today as the seven "liberal arts", helping the villagers to master these arts. The "Master of Arts" was our very first degree. They taught language and numerical skills, geometry, astronomy, and music, but here is where details matter. Music was not just one of the subjects.

Monks, living in a monastery in the 11th century, sang together every few hours. They sang in the morning, they sang in the evening, they sang at prescribed times during the day, at least five times a day.

They chanted as a form of meditation and prayer. They made music as an expression of community and as a form of worship. Music was not just one of the subjects they taught; it was the foundation of their lives together, the basis of their practice. They sang when they woke up and before they went to bed. As they got old and died, they literally sang each other out.

So, on your campus, today, when a beloved faculty member passes away suddenly and a campus reeling with grief needs to come together in ceremony, does the provost call upon the Math Department? Archeology? Physics?

No, they call music. Music majors do that. When we inaugurate a new campus president, Chemistry department? Anthropology? Big holiday shindig for the campus—do we have the Hall of Haiku from the poetry majors? The biomedical engineering department Festival of Joints? Please. Have I made my point? Of course it's music. Everyone knows it's music.

But: if you asked most provosts in this moment, "*why* did you call music instead of math" you would stop them dead in their tracks. Deer in the headlights. Most provosts couldn't give you an immediate answer, because they don't have a *rational* reason. They have a *gut instinct*, but even if they searched there for an answer most would come up with the wrong answer.

And that's our fault. It's your fault, and my fault that our provosts can't answer that in a split second. We're going to fix that today. But for that answer, I need to go back not 1,000 years, but 100,000 years.



Music emerged in the two species prior to human beings 100,000-500,000 years ago. We know because of very rapid evolutionary changes in the hyoid bone (the primary structure supporting the vocal mechanism) that both *homo Heidelbergensis* and *homo Neanderthalis* were vocalizing prior to the emergence of modern humans.

We were singing by at least 100,000 years ago. We have fossilized bone flutes dating to 60,000 years ago. These are scaled flutes, not whistles. From 30,000 years ago, we have cave drawing of musicians and spirit animals depicting rituals around death and dying. From this same time, we have cave drawings of musicians facing each other playing wind instruments, suggesting we had both pedagogy and chamber music.

Music is one of four known stimulators of human brain *neuroplasticity*, the ability of the brain to form new connections. During the period anthropologists call “The Great Leap Forward” (50,000-65,000 years ago), there was a tremendous surge in the rate of human evolution at the same time we had a very evolved and intensive music practice. It seems likely that the impact of music on the brain, specifically the impact of neuroplastic stimulation, is at least partly responsible for everything else that developed.

Today with the discovery of functional MRI brain scanning, we can prove, because we can image it, that music produces neuroplastic brain stimulus with applications that range from stroke recovery, creativity, autism, child development, memory loss, to dementia and beyond. If you would like to see actual fMRI scans that demonstrate the impact of music on the brain and the many applications that flow from this, check out *musicianbrain.com*. This is the website for the Music, Stroke and Neuroimaging lab at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, part of Harvard Medical School, which developed the protocols for music and stroke recovery in the early 2000’s that are now the front-line therapies for aphasia related stroke damage.



Every human being is a musician. But *this* room is full of what I call “fancy” musicians, people with degrees in music, and the downside of a degree in music is that it typically causes us to close in on a narrower and narrower slice of the pie.

Once you’ve figured out how to resolve augmented sixth chords and find all the retrograde inversions and you’ve launched into set theory, that fuse is lit. The body of music you focus on starts to get smaller and smaller.

[And friends: the gateway drug? Parallel fifths. If you don’t want this to happen to your children do not let them anywhere near four-part writing. Once you successfully evade your first set of parallel fifths, you’ll be chasing that high for the rest of your life. Don’t do it.]

Because we have many different definitions for music, I want to give you my own admittedly clinical, sterile definition of music so that you can understand what I’m talking about when I say music. Music is a “meaning-making system based on pitch and rhythm.” Pitch is of course how high or low a sound is, and rhythm is the spacing and stress between sounds.

We rely on it for two things: expressing individual experience, and forming connection with others. I'm going to borrow Ken Wilbur's terminology here: expressing individual experience I will call "agency", that sense of "I" or "me" in the world, and connecting to others we're going to call "communion", this sense of "we" or "us". We use pitch and rhythm to establish agency and communion. That's the working definition of music I'm using here: pitch and rhythm for agency and communion.

By this definition, most "fancy" musicians are completely unaware of most music because they simply don't recognize it as music. It's happening all day long, around you, and it's invisible to you because of the ways in which advanced degrees limit us. When you focus your eyes to scrutinize the obscure you can no longer see what is obvious. Let me give you some examples.

When a baby is born, if the baby is healthy, the very first thing the baby does is phonate. We say the baby "cries", but tears are only part of what is happening. Babies use pitch and rhythm to express agency and establish community.

Anyone who has raised a baby knows that within weeks, parents can distinguish the sound of a hungry baby, a tired baby, or a baby with a wet diaper, even if hearing it from the next room. How do you know? Pitch and rhythm. "It's different music." A baby and a parent use pitch and rhythm to form connection within a few weeks.

In cultures, notably in the Middle East, where "wailing" as public expression of grief is embraced, you only need to hear the sound of a parent holding the body of a dead child once—you will never forget that song. Pitch and rhythm, personal expression and group connection.

When we humans are dying and we have pain that is not controlled medically, it is typical that we moan. We use pitch and rhythm to express experience and invite connection. One of the first tasks a bereaved family must do after the loss of a loved one is choose music for the memorial.

Now, connect the dots: the song of birth, the diaper song, the song of the grieving mother clutching her son's body, the song of dying, the music at the memorial. Notice. Notice the universal use of pitch and rhythm to establish agency and communion.

Earthquake victims buried in the rubble of the 2010 Haiti earthquake were found singing together by the arriving first responders, using pitch and rhythm to maintain their connection through the devastation. Italians in Siena opened their windows and sang with their neighbors while dying of COVID.

Everything I have done with you in the past few minutes is pitch and rhythm; there is no other content. All spoken language is a form of music. Vowels are purely pitch—the only difference between the American words "like, lake, look, luck, lack, lick" is a difference of a few hundred cycles per second in pitch.

(Notice, if you are reading this piece, that you are translating the images on the page into pitch and rhythm in your head! You can't go directly from print to meaning-making—there is an intermediate step where you hear a voice—my voice, your voice, some voice in your head—translating the image into sounds before you can understand it. Try it. Am I correct? You "hear" this exactly like you "hear" a musical score. The symbols are shorthand for pitch and rhythm.)

When I make a vowel, I am actually singing two fundamental pitches, we call them vocal formants, F1 and F2, a few hundred cycles per second apart. Because most American vowels are diphthongs, I'm actually producing a pair of pitches a few hundred cps apart and then sliding to two other pitches at the release. You hear all of that as one American vowel.

Most animals make noises. But there is no other species able to produce, hear, and interpret frequency clusters 50 cps apart and say, "oh! That's the word 'hard', not 'herd'". This is essentially and uniquely human; it distinguishes our species from all other species. Our first, our universal, our primary system for agency and communion is pitch and rhythm. It has been this way for 100,000 years.

So, let's jump back now to that question your provost couldn't answer, and this gut feeling that music doesn't really seem to belong in the academy.

The vast majority of what we teach at the college level is about 8,000 years old at most. That includes numbers, math, accounting, written languages, engineering, Abrahamic religions, philosophy, literature. 8,000 years old. Global trade and marketing are perhaps 5,000. The sciences are younger by thousands of years. Some things like modern psychology or modern physics are very young, less than a hundred years. Musical practice goes back at least 50,000 years before that.

When students go through the "academic cafeteria" and they grab their tray and we assemble their curricular "plate", we try to give them a scoop of math, a little science, a bit of writing, all the other scoops the degree schematic says they need on their plate. Then, someone will try to sneak a little scoop of music on to the plate, and the world explodes. Administrators get all weird and the spreadsheets blow up and RCM doesn't work and everything feels wrong, and that's because it IS wrong. Very, very wrong.

Music isn't one of the scoops! *Music is the tray!* Music is how we hold everything else; historically, developmentally, personally, music is how we express our experience, and how we connect it to the experience of others. Music is the substrate upon which all other human development evolved.

Music is the practice that held the monks in place five times a day as they taught. *That's* why the provost calls us, not math, when faculty members end or presidents begin. You don't scoop music onto the plate. Music is how we carry everything else!



So, *here's* a conversation for your provost!

Madame Provost:

A student, of any major, who learns to play an instrument to proficiency, at any age, acquires the following:

We show up "for work", in a practice room, alone, with no supervisor. Only we know if we came in that day, if we were on time, or if we engaged our work whole-heartedly.

We learn to show up for work whether anyone is watching or not. We learn how to practice when we don't feel like practicing. We become accountable to ourselves. We acquire personal integrity.

We learn how to deal with frustrating situations, alone in that room, day after day, and to return willingly to the thing that is vexing us—the high note, the squeak, whatever it might be. We learn patience, diligence, self-respect. We learn discipline. We learn not to throw the metronome. We learn to self-regulate emotions in order to accomplish a task.

We learn how to work with a mentor. We get help, an hour a week perhaps, but we quickly learn that unless we apply 10, 20, 30 hours to each hour we receive, it is meaningless. We learn that we are not “made” by a teacher and that our success does not depend on those around us.

We become responsible for ourselves and to ourselves; the teacher simply helps. We acquire self-direction and agency.

If we are given the opportunity to perform in public, we learn how to stand in front of a group of strangers, make ourselves vulnerable, and feel safe doing so. We learn how to make a mistake in front of a large group of strangers and continue, unruffled, to the end. We learn how to keep going no matter what. We learn to “fly the plane” and land safely, even with an engine fire. We acquire persistence and confidence.

If we are given the opportunity to play in ensembles, we learn how to listen deeply to others without losing ourselves. We learn to ask the question, “how much of me does this group need? Should I speak up a bit? Should I tone it down?”

Allow me to summarize, Madame Provost, the list of character traits and skills from the previous discussion:

- accountability
- personal integrity
- ability to work unsupervised
- patience
- diligence
- self-respect
- discipline
- self-regulation
- self-direction
- agency
- vulnerability
- confidence
- persistence
- deep listening
- awareness of one’s relative position in a group.

Madame Provost: For which majors at our college are these characteristics not really useful, not really necessary? Which students of this generation wouldn’t benefit?

Please, make a list. I’ll wait.

Finished already? Goodness, that was quick.

Ok, so: for all the majors *not* on your list? Let’s offer them some musical training.

Get your wallet.



Now: I'm going to do something atypical for a mystic, but I suspect it's an expected part of the gig today. I'm going to give advice. Now this is not just cheap advice. This is absolutely *free*, worth five or even ten times what you paid for it. *Caveat emptor!*

To further discount any possible value you might accidentally impute here, let me remind you I've been retired from music now for six years. You are on the front lines, in the trenches, and I am no longer even in the game.

I bow to you. I have tremendous respect and deep affection for you because you are caring for the people who come after me, tending to our village. Every morning, I take an hour for myself for various kinds of prayer and reflection, and there's rarely a day that goes by where I don't think of all of us, the hundreds of us, the deans, directors and chairs of music programs. I hold you, and what we do, as sacred. I feel simultaneously so connected to you and *so happy to be done with that!* It's this mixture of deep connection and profound relief; it is absolutely delicious and I hope you all get to taste this someday. After this, you have to go home and deal with your provost and I go back to my happy retirement in beautiful Ithaca, NY. It's easy for me to see clearly and speak boldly because I'm not in the middle of it. You are.

So, all of that, is a disclaimer to any advice that follows.



The Greek liberal arts system had a group of three subjects—the *trivium*, which contained the language and thinking and reasoning skills—and a set of four, the *quadrivium*, which contained the quantitative skills, math and geometry, observations of the outside world, astronomy, and music. Now, note in the Greek system it was not “the arts” or “the creative arts” or “the performing arts” or “the fine arts”—it was music. Just music.

Did the Greeks not *have* art? Did they not *value* art? Don't be silly. Greek art is one of the pinnacles of human achievement. We know every great civilization by the art they left behind, perhaps the Greeks more so than any other culture.

The Greeks practically invented theater, had astounding statuary, architecture, it goes on. So why did they require only music in the seven must-haves for educated people?

Well, they had a very good reason that we couldn't know until we had fMRI machines in the 1990's and did the research. Music is one of the four neuroplastic stimulators of the brain. Art is wonderful, statuary is inspiring, theater is thrilling, but none of those things creates an impact on the brain we can image the same way music does.

When you're lying in a bed at Beth Israel in the music and stroke recovery floor and we treat you to help you recover language, the protocol there is singing, and no, you can't substitute a course in art history, Film Noire, Macrame for Better Living, you know the list, and the reason is that none of those other things light up the brain scan.

Music lights up the scan. If you want regrowth in the brain, it's going to be music.

This modern taxonomy of “music and the arts, the creative arts, the performing arts, the fine arts”—listen, far be it from me to disband the Alliance of the Truly Desperate as you cling to each other while going underwater.

And let me be absolutely clear: *I deeply value and respect all forms of art.* I just said we measure civilizations by the art they leave behind, and I mean it.

But cheap advice #1? Ditch the “music and the arts” shtick.

When you're lying under the machine and you have a choice between music, art history, film noir and macrame, if you want your brain to heal? Sing!

Practicing music is not about learning a subject. Practicing music is about being transformed. If you're not clear about this yet, your provost certainly won't be: music is about personal transformation. Music is *literally* the renewal of your mind—go look at the pictures on the website I gave you! We study music to become more than we are, different than we are. We study music to be changed.



Cheap advice #2: If you think getting music as an option into one of those long distribution requirements is a step forward, it's not. Have the courage to stand on 100,000 years of history and say, “no, music is not like those other things. Music is fundamentally different; it has a measurably different impact on the brain. Grab a chair, sit down, let me explain it to you.”

When someone suggests to you that the Greek model of liberal arts education requires “the arts”, correct them. “No, actually it's music, not the arts.” Just music. Everything else is a great option; music is a requirement.

Have big, difficult conversations with your provost about things that matter. Instead of three-quarters of a credit-hour here or a few thousand dollars in a budget line there? Make a list of all the things people do to cling to their humanity while being crushed to death in an earthquake (it's a very short list) and then, you tell me: is music optional or required? Open *The Full Catastrophe* with your provost. Quit tiptoeing around. It's life and death.

Cheap advice #3, If you've been telling people that music raises math scores, please stop. If you've been telling young couples in love that they should get married for the tax breaks, please stop. Don't do that to innocent young people. If people need a tax break to get married, they should stay single and pay a little extra for a few years. Divorce is unbelievably expensive.

I value my marriage more than almost anything in my life, but I don't even KNOW what we save in taxes, I never checked. Marriage is not about tax breaks and music is not about math scores. It cheapens both music and marriage when we make those kinds of arguments.

Cheap advice #4: STEAM is a form of hot air. When Bach was writing *Brandenburg Concertos*, medicine was treating headaches by drilling holes in the skull. It will take human scientific practice thousands of years to achieve parity with human musical practice, and I don't think we should wait around.

End of cheap advice, and now a couple of paradoxes for you as I close.



Mystics love paradoxes, because they tend to be doorways into really deep truths. I can't answer these (that's what makes them paradoxes!) but I'm going to leave you with them, unanswered, in hopes they will irritate and provoke you into interesting and useful places.

It seems strange to me that we are obsessed with every detail of musical practice of the past 400 years but almost completely uninterested in the past 40,000. What has happened with humans and music in the past 400 years is not really that remarkable compared to the past 40,000; in fact, it's not even interesting. On a practical level, it's much less important, much less useful.

I would love for you to lose interest in the last 400 years and get obsessed with the last 40,000!

It seems strange that so many of you feel like you are fighting to save music on your campuses. I say this as gently as I can, because I imagine many of you don't know it yet. But if we completely defunded and closed all of your music programs? The amount of music on your campus would not change measurably. Most students wouldn't even notice it happened.

They have terabytes of music on their phones. As far as music, freshmen go to college loaded for bear. If they couldn't go to college with all their music, they wouldn't go to college. And there will be garage bands as long as there are garages. Remember, when necessary, people make their own music as they are dying. Music is not fragile. We are fragile; music is indestructible.

Does this mean that what you do doesn't matter? *You're the tray that holds all the rest of the food!* You carry the practice that carries an entire species!

People can't save music. Music can save us. Music does not need us to come to its rescue. If we are willing to engage music deeply, to yield, it can come to ours.

I want you to imagine a world where Congress sings together five times a day.

Pitch and rhythm, agency and communion. That. That is what you carry for the people of the earth. Go do that. Thank you for what you do for all of us, and thank you for reading.



Epilogue

I am both indebted to and profoundly grateful for my longtime friend and colleague Dan Goble, and for his skillful moderation of the NASM session. There were so many good questions (I should say ONLY good questions) in the follow-up, all of which deserve and are worthy of lengthy discussion. I must plead "retirement" as my only defense for not responding to all of them!

I would, however, like to expound upon one question, regarding the word "proficiency" in the "Conversation with the Provost" section, because if asking a mystic "what is proficiency?" isn't pouring gasoline on a fire, I don't know what is.



What does it mean to learn a musical instrument “to proficiency?”

Proficiency is not measured so much by the changes coming out of the instrument as it is by the changes happening within the person. A few analogies from spiritual practice serve us well here.

If I pour some eggs into a pan, and apply just a little heat, I have warm runny eggs. If I let them cool and come back the next day and do it again, I get warm runny eggs again. I can do that repeatedly until one day I have warm runny smelly eggs, and must toss them out the window, but I will never have cooked eggs with this approach.

If I return the next week, determined to have cooked eggs, turn the heat to the highest setting, get the pan red hot and pour in the eggs, then I will have burnt eggs, with a layer of carbon adhesive between the outer layer of the eggs and the (ironically, still uncooked) eggs in the middle of the pan. In this case the eggs, pan and all, must go out the window.

Cooking eggs, like baking a cake, requires a certain amount of heat combined with a certain amount of time. I don’t want to warm them; I want to transform them. Cooked eggs undergo an internal state change.



When I throw a pot on the wheel, the clay needs to be fired in a kiln to change from a mudpie into a waterproof vessel. The silica in the clay “vitrifies”, turning into glass. For the particular clay I throw, I take it slowly to a temperature of about 1940 F. over a course of about 12 hours. Now, I have a bit of leeway—I could take it to 1960 over 11 hours or hold it at 1920 for 15. We call this combination of heat plus time “heatwork.” A pot needs the right amount of heatwork, a combination of temperature and time.

If I take the mug straight up to 1940 F. like a rocket, it will shatter in the kiln (probably around 1050 F., where the quartz in the clay undergoes a state change called “inversion” that causes it to suddenly increase in volume by almost one percent!) If I take it up too slowly, say over a day, it will overvitrify by the time I get to 1940 and won’t accept any glaze when I try to finish it later. In pottery, there has to be the right combination of heat and time.



Some of you may have a system at your school where a private music lesson for majors is taken one hour per week over the 15 weeks of a semester. You may also have a system, over the summer, where a student can “double up”, and take a semester’s worth of lessons in 8 weeks by having two one-hour lessons per week and practicing “twice as much” (wink wink) in order to earn the same academic credit as a semester’s worth of study.

You probably know where this is going. You may be fooling the student, and the provost, and the parents, perhaps even yourself, but you’re not fooling me. These are not equivalent. (Enjoy your breakfast of burnt and raw eggs while sipping coffee from your pottery shards.) If you’ve played in chamber groups, you know that three weeks of two-rehearsals-per-week is not the same as six

rehearsals in the seven days leading up to the concert. Chamber groups make progress *between* the rehearsals, not *during* the rehearsals. Students “cook” *between* the lessons.



Music, cooking, pottery, athletic training, and spiritual practice all require the right amount of “heatwork”, a combination of the right effort over the right period of time. Playing an instrument to proficiency involves a mixture of time and effort that transforms the student in the way the egg and the clay are transformed. The student is proficient when they have undergone an internal state change, the way my pot vitrifies in the kiln. A properly thrown pot lasts a lifetime, not a month or a year. The student is not completing a course; they are acquiring a life-changing practice that alters them forever.

This is what it means to play an instrument to proficiency.