

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING MUSIC THEORY?

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Learning Music Theory Will Not Make You a Better Classical Guitarist

What are the benefits of learning music theory? Honestly, there are not many. I am not anti-education. I am not against scholarship. I love learning. I spend most of my day learning about all kinds of things. Through my video lessons, tutorials, and technique tips, I spend most of my time educating others. I was a professor of music for 39 years at a university. But the bottom line? What are the benefits of learning music theory? Will the study of music theory make you a better player? Maybe, but only a little. And the time spent studying music theory could be used to practice, which yields real, measurable benefits. But you cannot practice 24/7. In your downtime, learning the basics of music theory and some music history can be helpful, but again, do not expect to see a pronounced improvement in your guitar playing.

The Benefits of Learning Music Theory: The basics are essential

The basics of music theory are essential for the classical guitarist. The guitarist must know the notes' names *and what they look like on the musical staff*. They must know where they are on the fretboard. The guitarist must understand time signatures, key signatures, and how to count rhythms. Those are definitely the benefits of learning music theory. But beyond that, honestly, you are not going to get much "bang for your buck." Knowing how chords are built and recognizing them on paper is extremely helpful for sightreading and memorization but is not essential. That information will not make you *play* better. For a jazz guitarist, the situation is quite different. It is crucial to understand chord progressions and functions. But for the classical player, no.

Knowing that a piece is in sonata-allegro form or that a chord progression moves from a German augmented 6th chord to the dominant chord is nice to know but will not make you play more accurately or musically. It is the development of finger speed, mobility, accuracy, and finger independence that will make you a better guitarist.

Ear training is VERY important

Universities in the U.S. often combine ear training with music theory classes. Ear training is a far more crucial part of a musician's training than the academic study of music theory. When I was at the conservatory, I remember thinking the ear training component should have been 80 minutes of the class and music theory 10 minutes.

Some fantastic players (usually in non-classical styles) do not read music or have any understanding of music theory. BUT, their hearing is exceptional, which makes a huge difference in how they play.

If you are a classical guitarist, it is unnecessary to know the terminology of musical forms or have in-depth knowledge of music history or music theory.

- But you must be able to HEAR the entrance of subjects in a fugue.
- You must be able to HEAR where the sections are in a piece written in 3-part song form.
- You must be able to HEAR that the music of Fernando Sor sounds different than J.S. Bach or Francisco Tárrega, rather than knowing the composers' birth and death dates.
- You must be able to HEAR the ebb and flow of a phrase rather than knowing that a phrase is usually 4-8 measures long with a climatic point approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through. Instead, hearing and feeling the tension/release in a phrase, in a section, or the piece as a whole will make you a more expressive musician.

Hearing and feeling the music is far more important than knowing it is in the early or late classical period style. Or that its composer is a bridge from the classical to the romantic period. The theory and history are nice to know, but they will not help you play the piece substantially better.

Ear training will absolutely make you a better guitarist. Listening to others is another type of ear training. Listening to other performers and other musicians (not just guitarists) will make you a better guitarist.

Knowledge and study are not substitutes for practice

I frequently hear "performers" who have expert knowledge of music theory, history, and performance practice. Unfortunately, many of them are substandard players. Such was often the case in the early stages of the historically-informed performance-practice movement. The performers spent too much time in the library instead of the practice room. Or, they did not have much talent to begin with and tried to make up for it by speaking and writing learnedly on their specialties. Some of my fellow professional concert artists jokingly referred to such a person as a HIPPLF—a member of the "historically-informed performance-practice lunatic fringe."

Again, education is good, but you need a balance. If you spend all your time with your nose buried in books reading music history and theory instead of practicing, you are in trouble. Some people who study

more than they practice become bound by the formulation of rules and generalizations. Playing music by the rules will not produce good music.

Knowledge is marvelous. I love it. But you must spend time in the practice room to train your fingers. You must learn to practice correctly. You must develop your ear.

Knowledge is wonderful

I am not advocating for ignorance. But I know the benefits of learning music theory, history, and musical form are few and will not make me a substantially better guitarist.

Even so, I think they are fascinating subjects, especially music history. I have a personal library of several hundred books I read and thoroughly study on these subjects. But you should not think that spending hours and hours learning about those subjects will make you play the guitar better. It probably will not.

When I was in music school 50 years ago, I loved learning everything I could about music. It was a dream come true to study music history, music theory, and music literature instead of chemistry, trigonometry, or dissecting dead animals in biology! But in the end, the specific music courses I took did not make me a better guitar player.

1. Practicing 6-10 hours a day made me a better guitarist.
2. Practicing ear training for an hour every day made me a better guitarist.
3. Going to concerts and spending every Sunday afternoon at the Conservatory library, *listening* to all types of instrumentalists, ensembles, and types of music made me a better guitarist.

So, pursue the joy of learning. Read about what interests you—music theory, music history, musical form and analysis, ethnomusicology, historical performance practice, etc. But spend most of your time with your hands on your guitar. That is what will make you a better guitarist.