

So, You've Got Talent. Now What?

by [Dennis Winge](#)

What really is musicianship and how do you develop it? Dictionary.com says that it's "knowledge, skill, and artistic sensitivity in performing music." How can you really know how much you have? How do you develop it? How do you use it real life?

I. A Contradiction?

When I was 15, I thought I had musicianship because I had learned some things in my guitar lessons that no one else I knew was able to do. I was completely oblivious to the fact that there was still another 35 years' worth of stuff I couldn't do. (Now you know how old I am. LOL)

Overall, I believe this is a good thing in young musicians, because it fosters the internal motivation to keep going, keep learning, and keep getting better, despite many frustrations & distractions of all kinds that inevitably come along. However, it is also naïve because it is blind to all the other things a young musician doesn't know they need to know.

There were also several times where I did not feel I had strong musicianship, and it was very difficult at the time, even downright depressing! However, looking back, those were times I became so dissatisfied that I simply had to do something about it. I took action in the form of lessons, more dedicated practice, etc. and catapulted my musical growth by leaps and bounds.

The times a musician experiences frustration with their own lack of abilities can be a good thing because it gives them a reality check and spurs them on to expand their comfort zone.

So, is there a contradiction here? On the one hand, thinking you have musicianship is good, yet thinking you don't can also serve you. Before we can address that question, we need go a little deeper into what role "knowledge, skill and artistic sensitivity" play in making music. Or, more specifically, it would be ideal to realistically evaluate them in your own music-making.

II. Many Multi-faceted Aspects

I can think of literally dozens, if not hundreds, of guitarists who have more technique than Eric Clapton, more music theory than Carlos Santana, and more artistic sensitivity than Gary Moore. (Sorry these are all guitar player examples, but hey, I'm a guitarist, so what do you expect?) Does that mean Clapton, Santana, and Moore don't have strong musicianship? On the contrary, they all have extremely strong musicianship.

This is because they are ridiculously good at the things they do well, and no one else on the planet can do those things quite like they do. This leads us to the first main point

about musicianship: **To succeed in music, you can either be extremely original or unique at a few things, or you can be talented in many.**

Consider that there is a gigantic array of skills that musicians can have that are all separate and distinct from each other, such as:

- innovative technique
- solid or fluid rhythmic feel
- expressiveness
- originality of style
- uniqueness of tone
- lyricism of phrasing
- ability to create catchy melodies
- ability to delivery compelling harmony to melodies

...and this list only scratches the surface. You don't have to be good at every aspect of music-making to have strong musicianship, if you have a few of them very strongly. On the other hand, the more you do have, the more well-rounded you will be as a musician, which enhances your ability to express yourself as a leader, to collaborate creatively with other musicians, and to solidly support other artists to better express themselves, no matter how simple or far-fetched their artistic vision may be.

III. Artistic vs. Theoretical vs. Technical

So how do you begin to assess what you should focus on now to increase your musicianship? Let's clarify some terms, and as we do so, ask yourself "Which of these am I most passionate about?" Our definition above lists "knowledge, skill, and artistic sensitivity" as the 3 elements of musicianship.

Knowledge – this is the know-how. How do you play a shuffle groove? What are common forms used in pop songwriting? How do you spell an F#7 chord?

Skill – this is level at which you can apply the knowledge. How smoothly can you transition from one section to another? How accurately can you play the most complex section? How fast can you play a certain lick or technique?

Artistic – this may be the aspect most subject to debate on precisely what it entails, but for simplicity we are going to use L. Ron Hubbard's definition of art, which is the "quality of communication" of a piece. How well is the intended emotion conveyed? What array of emotions can you portray as an artist? How do your knowledge and skill support your ability to communicate effectively to an audience?

Think about it: if you have a great stage presence and can woo an audience effortlessly but have little skill or knowledge, your success will be short-lived, because you don't have very many tools by which to keep the audience engaged song after song, year after year.

In contrast, if you have plenty of skill but little knowledge, you may wow a few people, but it won't be self-sustaining. You see this on YouTube sometimes: kids who can play a difficult piece of music note-for-note accurately. In many cases, they have skill but their musicianship is not yet developed because they lack knowledge of, or skill in many other basic areas.

Thirdly, if you have lots of knowledge of music theory for example, but little skill and no artistic sensibility, your musicianship is not overall well-developed.

Thus our second main point about musicianship is: **In order to succeed in music long-term, you need knowledge, skill and artistic sensitivity relatively equally.**

IV. Higher Quality Questions

Putting these two main points together: to succeed in music, you can be very strong in a few elements or good at many, but either way you need knowledge, skill and artistic sensitivity in whatever you do. What we have established here is that the term "musicianship" is so broad in its implications, and the ways to achieve musical success are so diverse, that expanding one's musicianship must be defined on an individual basis. So while this article concludes with overarching answers to the question that opened it, by having read this, you are hopefully now able to ask higher quality questions by which to help guide your musical development.

I invite you to add to this list and send your high-quality questions to me by email.
"How do I really want my music to affect other people?"

"How well do I do this now? What skills or knowledge do I need to acquire to do this even better? How can I increase my artistic sensitivity?"

"Am I going to concentrate on only a small handful of things that I do very well and build my artistic presentation around them, or am I going to be a well-rounded musician?"

"What specific areas am I working to develop right now, this week? What do I hope to achieve in the development of my musicianship in the next 3 months? In one year? In 5 years?"

About the author: Dennis Winge is a pro guitarist living in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State who runs [Guitar Lessons Ithaca](#) and has 6 instrumental albums as a leader, including his latest ["What are the Odds? \(odd meters and other types of fun\)."](#)