I believe music has a unique role to play in the development of our personalities and lives.

While this is a personal belief, I have encountered many people in the world who share it. Furthermore, there is mounting evidence to support it. There is something about music that broadens, deepens, and enriches our personalities and lives, thereby making it of vital importance to people in all parts of the world regardless of what type of music they listen to or prefer.

This belief can be traced back to ancient times. The great Greek philosopher Plato was a strong believer in the unique role that music can play in our lives, especially at an early age. Not only did he say, “I would teach children music, physics, and philosophy, but most importantly music, for the patterns in music and all the arts are the keys to learning,” but also he believed that “Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten.” In his book The Republic Plato also said, “Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything.” This book is filled with references to the role music can play in the development of people, their personalities, and their lives, as well as the development of societies, countries, and the ideal state.

Recognition of the unique role of music is not limited to Plato or to ancient times. Over the course of history, many individuals and institutions have recognized the importance of this role. In the nineteenth century, for instance, the American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, said, “Music is the universal language of mankind,” and the Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen, said, “Where words fail, music speaks.” In both cases, it was felt that music occupies a crucial position in people’s personality development and their lives because it possesses certain qualities that make it even more important than language and the language arts in some ways.

Contemporary research is revealing reasons why music plays a powerful role in our lives. Scientists involved in Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (FMRI) have discovered that music provides “a total workout for the brain,” whereas most other activities provide “a partial workout for the brain.” Music performs this role by stimulating not only the brain and blood flow, but also
the mind, body, senses, and all the other human faculties. It reduces anxiety, high blood pressure, and pain, improves sleep, and enhances moods, motivation, mental alertness, and memory.

Findings like this have been confirmed by the International Arts+Mind Lab at the Brain Science Institute at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Medicine, as well as by Isabelle Peretz at the University of Montreal and Robert Zatorre at McGill University, who created the International Laboratory for Brain, Music, and Sound Research (BRAMS) to “study music as a portal into the most complex aspects of human brain functions.” Jonathan Burdette, a neuroradiologist at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center who has conducted numerous studies of the effects of music on the brain, concluded that, “It doesn’t matter if it’s Bach, the Beatles, Brad Paisley, or Bruno Mars. Your favorite music likely triggers a similar type of activity in your brain as other people’s favorites do in theirs. Music is primal. It affects all of us, but in very personal, unique ways. Your interaction with music is different than mine, but it’s still powerful.”

We have all been so touched and moved by music at times that we feel we have transcended the world and entered a very special place. This is because music brings joy and happiness into our lives and moves us in profound ways that reach right into our hearts, souls, and being. Musicians are fully aware of this, which is why they create sounds, rhythms, melodies, and compositions that produce musical experiences that resonate strongly with our feelings, emotions, hopes, dreams, and aspirations, often in far-reaching, engaging, and mystical ways.

Just as Elizabeth Browning asked the question, “How do I love thee, let me count the ways?,” so a similar question can be asked about music. And the answer is the same: music affects our personalities and lives in countless ways. There is music that satisfies our every mood, moment, and situation. It invigorates, stimulates, and motivates us, activates, agitates, and challenges us, soothes and relaxes us, inspires us, enables us to soar to great heights, is incredibly beautiful, gives us a sense of awe, wonder, and ecstasy, is nostalgic, helps us to express our feelings, emotions, love, and compassion, connects us with other people and makes it possible to share experiences, depicts specific places, acts as a gateway to cultures, enhances our awareness and appreciation of nature, and a great deal else. Here are examples taken from my own experiences in the western musical tradition. I believe others would also find countless ways that music affects with examples from their musical traditions and experiences.

Take music that stimulates, motivates, and invigorates us. There is an incredible amount of music that does this, largely by getting us up and getting us going. This happens to me whenever I listen to trumpet voluntaries, especially those by John Stanley, Henry Purcell, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, Jeremiah Clarke, and Johann Friedrich Fasch. It also happens when I listen to Charles-Marie Widor’s Tocatta from his Symphony No. 5, Jean Sibelius’ Finlandia, Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstance March No.1, and the last movement of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, which is totally different than the first movement. Anytime I hear any one of these pieces, and others I might mention, I feel energized and want to tackle things that I have left undone.

Then there is music that activates, agitates, and challenges us. This music is often concerned with social issues and political concerns. Some of the best-known examples of this are the activist activities and musical works of American folk singers such as Woodie Guthrie, Pete Seeger, the Weavers, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Johnny Cash, and Bruce Springsteen. Each of these musicians were involved in social and political causes that were
designed to bring about change, especially during the Dirty Thirties, the Great Depression, the Vietnam war, the Civil Rights movement, and so forth. In the process, they created many popular songs, including “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” “This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land,” “Blowin’ in The Wind,” “If I Had a Hammer,” and “We Shall Overcome,” “Born in the U.S.A.”

What makes the activist activities of musicians so important is the fact that they challenge existing ways of doing things, foster new relationships, patterns, and possibilities, bring about transformation and change, and are provocative, much like Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* did when it was first performed in Paris in 1913 and for some time thereafter. Initiatives like this are needed more than ever in view of all the racial, social, and human injustices and inequalities in the world.

While many pieces of music stimulate, motivate, activate, and challenge us, others have a different effect. They soothe and relax us, especially when we are feeling uptight, distraught, or experiencing anxiety and apprehension. Whenever this happens to me, I often listen to Rachmaninoff’s *Second Piano Concerto* and especially those remarkable chords at the very beginning of the first movement that set the stage for the entire composition. I am also soothed whenever I hear Emile von Sauer’s *Cavatina* from his *Piano Concerto No. 1*, the second movement of Beethoven’s *Fifth Piano Concerto* and *Violin Concerto*, Cécile Chaminade’s *Concertino for Flute and Orchestra*, and *Dinner* from Morricone’s *Lady Caliph Suite*.

There is also music that inspires us. Music that inspires us is extremely important because it causes us to reach above and beyond ourselves in the search for the sublime. Personally, I am inspired whenever I hear the last movement of Saint-Saëns’ *Organ Symphony* (Symphony No. 3), Wagner’s Overture to *Tannhäuser*, and Ravel’s orchestral version of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Music like this enables us to “soar to great heights” and “fly with the eagles.” This is not confined to classical music. A great deal of popular music also does this, such as “You Raise Me Up” and “Wind Beneath My Wings,” and “Flying Free.”

To this must be added music that is very beautiful. This is one of music’s most cherished qualities. In the western musical tradition, Chopin, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Dvorák had a special gift for creating beautiful pieces of music, as well as beautiful melodies and sections in music. Chopin had a flair for creating captivating melodies, which are often buried in the middle of pieces, such as the enchanting melodies in his *Fantaise-Impromptu in C sharp minor, Opus 66, Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor, Opus 31*, and *Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Opus 23*.

Music that is very beautiful often gives rise to a sense of awe, wonder, and ecstasy, thereby occupying a powerful place in the development of our personalities and lives. Sacred and choral music often do this for people, such as the sacred and choral music of the Renaissance and composers like Hildegarde von Bingen, Corelli, Gabrieli, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Striggio, and Tallis. Some of Wagner’s preludes and overtures do this too, especially the ones to *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*. Added to this would be Barber’s *Agnus Dei*, Mozart’s *Ave Verum Corpus*, Dvorak’s *Song to the Moon*, Fauré’s *Cantique de Jean Racine*, Franck’s *Panis Angelicus*, Mendelssohn’s *Verleih Uns Frieden (Grant Us Peace)*, Bach’s *Air on a G String*, and Mahler’s *Adagietto* from his *Fifth Symphony*. 
There is also music that is nostalgic. This is one of the most fascinating but frustrating things in music, because nostalgia is almost always bitter-sweet. Not only does it produce fond memories that flood into the mind and memory, but also it is tinged with a certain amount of sadness and sorrow because these memories can never be repeated in real terms, regardless of how close they are or may seem. This is surely one of the most difficult things to come to grips with in personality development and in life, since it feels like you can actually reach out and relive these cherished moments from the past until reason and logic set in and remind us that these moments are gone forever and will never be experienced again in fact. Nevertheless, we constantly replay them in our minds, as well as at concerts and celebrations because they are so precious to us.

There are countless songs that are nostalgic, such as “Time to Say Goodbye,” “Londonderry Air (Danny Boy),” “Loch Lomond,” “Auld Lang Syne,” “Carrickfergus,” “The Last Rose of Summer,” “Shenandoah,” “Return to Sorrento,” “Goin’ Home,” “Ladies in Lavender,” “She’s Called Nova Scotia,” and “Ashokan Farewell.” Pieces like this always leave us hanging in a certain sense, since they are usually concerned with a family member, friend, loved one, group, or experience that may last forever in our minds and memories but will never be experienced again in reality.

One of the reasons for nostalgia in music is that it is filled with a great deal of emotion. This is equally true for music that helps us to express our feelings, love, gratitude, affection, and compassion. A favourite of mine is “I’ll Walk Beside You.” This song was very popular during and after the Second World War. When exquisite music is added to evocative words, the combination is unbeatable:

I’ll walk beside you through the world today
While dreams and songs and flowers bless your way
I'll look into your eyes and hold your hand
I'll walk beside you through the golden land
I'll walk beside you through the world tonight
Beneath the starry skies ablaze with light
Within your heart love’s tender words I'll hide
I'll walk beside you through the eventide
I'll walk beside you through the passing years
Through days of cloud and sunshine, joy and tears
And when the great call comes the sunset gleams
I'll walk beside you to the land of dreams.

Thus far, we have been considering types and pieces of music that shape and affect our personalities and our lives in an internal sense. But there are also many types and pieces of music that do this in an external sense. Whereas the first type of music is concerned with “the self,” the second is concerned with “the other.” This enables us to get out of our own skin and into the world at large. Music that does this is often very revealing, since many composers have a knack for depicting people, events, experiences, stories, places, cultures, nature, and nature’s diverse elements in very descriptive and highly revealing and compelling terms.

Music enables us to develop our personalities and lives on a much higher level of existence. Not only can music commence the process that is required to make us “whole people—people who have achieved oneness and unity among all our different faculties—but also it can help us to
live in harmony with other people, other cultures, other religions, other species, nature, and the natural environment. In doing so, it can make us complete and centered as well as altruistic, compassionate, sensitive, and humane. This enables us to experience more meaning, purpose, and spirituality in life, as well as enjoy all the qualities and capabilities that are needed to produce a full and fulfilling life.

Just as providing specific examples is helpful in understanding how music can broaden, deepen, and enrich our personalities and lives, so providing specific illustrations of people who have used music to achieve many outstanding things in life is equally helpful. While I can think of many people who have been able to do this, the person who stands out most in my mind in this respect is Albert Schweitzer.

Schweitzer was a student of music, a musician, and an organist long before he became a theologian, philosopher, humanitarian, and physician. Born in France in 1875, he studied music and took organ lessons in Mulhouse from 1885 to 1893 and learned to play the piano as well. He was especially knowledgeable about the life and musical works of Johann Sebastian Bach and even wrote a two-volume book about Bach and his musical achievements. Later in life, he focused his studies on theology, philosophy, and medicine and obtained degrees in theology and medicine from the University of Strasbourg.

In 1913, Schweitzer decided to leave his musical career and Europe behind him and go to Africa to create and develop the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lambaréné, now in Gabon in west central Africa, for the remainder of his life. He spent many decades there on a full-time basis treating thousands of patients with different types of illnesses and diseases. Interestingly, he had a piano created for him when he was there that was made specifically for the tropics which he played every day after lunch as well as on Sundays.

Schweitzer received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his personal and professional contributions and commitment to “reverence for life” and “the necessity of ethics and ethical behavior in society.” While he was criticized for being paternalistic towards Africans and the lack of proper sanitation in his hospital, he labored intensively for more than fifty years in Africa as a medical doctor and humanitarian dealing with sick people under extremely difficult conditions. When he was no longer able to do this, he fought against nuclear tests, testing, and weapons, which he believed were contrary to his belief that all life is precious and that everything that advances life is good and everything that degrades life is bad.

Schweitzer provides a valuable illustration of how our personalities and lives can be enriched and transformed by using music as a springboard. This is confirmed in the following statement about what life and living can and should be all about when it is viewed from a cultural perspective according to Schweitzer:

The ripeness that our development must aim at is one which makes us simpler, more truthful, purer, more peace loving, meeker, kinder, more sympathetic. . . . That is the process in which the soft iron of youthful idealism hardens into the steel of a full grown idealism which can never be lost.
Schweitzer is not the only person to use music as a springboard for transforming his personality and life and achieving great things in life. Music enabled Schweitzer to live life on a much higher plane of existence and level of consciousness. This will be needed more than ever in the world of the future.

Editor’s Note: This is a condensed version of a larger article. A complete version of this article together with pictures and videos containing music is available here.