

12 questions to consider for rising Fifth Grade musicians

1. *How do I know which instrument is the best fit for me?*

The instrument that is the best fit for you is, quite simply, the one that interests you most. If you are interested in a particular instrument then you are more likely to practice it. The more regularly you practice, the better chance for you to enjoy success.

2. *What are some other secrets to success?*

A famous Greek philosopher once said, "Know thyself." Think about who you are and what really engages your enthusiasm. Learning to play a string instrument requires patience and persistence. Success often does not come right away. It is somewhat like gardening: you prepare the ground, you plant the seed, you water and fertilize the seedling as it is also nourished by sunlight, rain, and nutrients in the ground and, eventually, the plant will bloom.

3. *Am I required to take private lessons?*

You are not required to take private lessons, but it is still by far the best way to learn an instrument. So much so, that Greenhill's Strings program begins with individual lessons (at no cost to families) that I teach during the summer to get students started. *The Jump Start for Strings* program gives you 10 lessons (every weekday for two weeks) and speeds up the initial process of learning to play. In these lessons we have three goals: learn to hold the instrument correctly, learn to use the bow to get a beautiful sound, and learn to play simple tunes correctly and in tune. Nearly all students for the past twelve years have participated during the summer before their Fifth-grade year. Because of their strong start, they have generally started the school year at least a semester ahead of those who would be brand-new beginners. Again, there is no fee for this program, but I ask students and their families to commit to a faithful effort for the 10 days (2 weeks).

4. *Am I "stuck" forever playing the instrument I choose now?*

From time to time we will encounter a student who for some reason does not want to continue with the instrument he/she initially chose. We Greenhill MS Music teachers all agree that the best way to go about this is, first, to give 100% effort during the initial year on the first-chosen instrument. After a year if the student still does not want to continue with the instrument originally chosen, then the summertime affords him/her the best time to catch up on a new instrument. (Usually this comes with the requirement that he/she study privately). The good effort expended on learning the original instrument is far from wasted effort. Good effort on the original instrument trains the ear, the mind, and musical sensibility so that learning the new instrument comes more easily.

5. *I love to play piano. Is there any outlet for me for that acquired skill?*

Playing the piano is a wonderful companion skill for any other instrument (and I include voice). Most professional musicians (those who play in orchestras, jazz bands, or who sing professionally, for example) will also play piano – many of them quite well. For Strings students, piano/keyboard study is particularly beneficial: it helps reinforce note-reading and solidify a sense of rhythm; it provides a model of clear tone and consistent tuning – two of the primary concerns for a beginner on a string instrument. (See #3 above re: *Jump Start for Strings*).

12 questions to consider for rising Fifth Grade musicians

6. *I have been playing the violin for 3 years already. Will I be in a class with beginners?*

We have two Strings classes in Fifth Grade, usually with about 15 to 20 students in each. This affords us an opportunity to distribute the students into two different groups according to the way that seems best for all. We often do give the “veteran” fiddlers a chance to work together on special music in addition to what the class is playing. And we often call on them as leaders to help their less experienced classmates, demonstrating how correctly to play a particular passage or use a new technique. But I’ve also observed that the students seem to have the most fun when sharing and playing together with their friends and classmates – these are the same buddies that they share with in science or literature projects or on the ball field. In general, we try to balance the two groups so that all instruments are well represented in both classes, and we try to place “veteran” players in both classes. As they year progresses we introduce ensemble music experience for the kids. And, of course, we look for opportunities to combine the two Strings classes for concerts.

7. *How much should I practice?*

The question is probably better put this way: how *often* should I practice? The answer is one that many wise music teachers have given their students for generations: *Practice only on the days that you eat!* It is more important that you practice every day rather 100 minutes one day and not at all for the next two days.

8. *What kind of music will I play if I choose strings?*

The string instruments of the violin family have the richest repertory of any instrument family. These instruments have formed the core of the orchestra for over 500 years, from the Renaissance period until the present day. The string instruments also have the greatest repertory of chamber music (duets, trios, quartets, etc.): wonderful music that gives each instrument a unique voice, and is played without a conductor. Then there is the solo repertoire for violin, viola, cello, and bass that is only matched by that of the piano in terms of its richness and variety. Studying the great music from the legacy of orchestral, chamber, and solo repertory remains the best way to learn to play. But we string players are so fortunate to live in an age where there are so many other wonderful styles available: jazz, swing, rock, pop, as well as fiddle and folk styles from many areas throughout the world. With a parent’s permission, I encourage students to look at youtube clips of strings performing all these different kinds of music.

9. *A guitar has strings; why can’t I choose to play guitar?*

True. The guitar is a string instrument with a beautiful sound and rich repertory. But it is traditionally not a regular part of the orchestra, so it is not part of Greenhill’s String curriculum that leads to participation in 7/8th Grade *Sinfonia* or participation in the US *Chamber Orchestra*. At Greenhill guitar electives become available in 7/8th grades.

10. *Can strings play pop or jazz?*

Absolutely! Some of my favorite string players are jazz musicians, and major symphony orchestras devote a significant part of their programming to music featuring famous jazz and pop composers and performing musicians. Still, the best way to learn these styles is, first, to know how to play

12 questions to consider for rising Fifth Grade musicians

one's instrument. Then, learning a new style is made much easier. Learning a second language is made much easier by gaining fluency in the first.

11. *Where can I acquire an instrument? Do I have to buy one now?*

There are several options for acquiring an instrument. We are fortunate that there are several musical instrument suppliers, both local and online, who can provide good instruments at a modest fee. Generally, beginners will rent instruments for the first year or two and delay purchasing an instrument until the young musician has grown enough to require a full-sized instrument and has demonstrated enough interest to his/her parents that it is now a worthwhile investment. I will be happy to discuss the acquisition of an instrument with your parents during the course of summer *JumpStart* lessons.

12. *What are the benefits from learning to play a string instrument?*

Much is written these days about the benefits of musical study: that it makes you smarter, that it helps you to develop focus and good study habits, that it teaches patience as you work for goals that take time to realize, that it requires and builds grit, that it helps instill a sense of community effort toward a common goal. All this is true and will certainly help to make the great effort worthwhile. But let's not forget what a wonderful gift it is to be able to play beautifully and to share music with friends and family. Our Greenhill curriculum gifts each 5th and 6th grade student with precious time in the school day to nurture musical skills. Playing a string instrument is a life-changing skill that you will have the opportunity to enjoy now and for the rest of your life whether you choose eventually to use that skill in a profession, as an avocation, or as an enlightened listener.

Nicholas Paraskevas 972.628.5603 paraskevasn@greenhill.org