

Promoting Sound Health

By Nina Kraus, PhD

In September, the Kennedy Center hosted the second Sound Health concert and workshop series (<http://bit.ly/2laf8qn>). This initiative was organized in partnership with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to connect music and health. It is the brainchild of legendary opera singer Renée Fleming and NIH Director Francis Collins, MD, PhD, and included workshops, public lectures, and concerts.

I had the privilege of participating in this initiative since its inaugural workshop last year. It began with a simple question: Are there connections between music and health? The answer is a resounding yes, noting a connection that encompasses mental health, education, brain development, pain, and more. The initiative has sparked similar diverse interests among musicians, drawing perspectives from leading musicians from classical, jazz, world, folk, rock, and rap genres. In fact, the NIH just announced that they will fund music research for the first time.

At the workshop, my focus was to emphasize the benefits of making music for brain health (<http://bit.ly/2I9pCWM>). Making music is arguably one of the healthiest things you can do for your brain (<http://bit.ly/2IbAGCP>). It tunes your listening skills, sharpens your mental acuity, and boosts language

skills. In children, making music speeds up brain development. In older adults, making music mitigates age-related declines in sound processing.

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A common argument against daily music education is that it takes time away from teaching fundamentals such as reading and math. But evidence shows that music training actually improves children's reading and math skills, suggesting that it can pay dividends in more traditional academic domains. I recognize that schools have limited resources and competing priorities. It's important to remember that their core mission is to promote child development—and music education does just that.

My lab's research has recently grown to study sound processing in athletes, with an emphasis on understanding

concussions (<http://bit.ly/2I9bYD7>). I see a strong parallel between physical education and music education. But as a society, we emphasize neither for the typical child.

My uncle, Hans Kraus, was a physician on the President's Council of Physical Fitness under President John F. Kennedy, which promoted fitness standards for American school children. Today, I fear there is a tendency for only the kids who love sports or make the varsity teams to get the best coaching, even though all children would benefit from being strong and flexible. I see music education in the same way: All children should get high-quality daily training. You don't have to become Mozart or Mickey Hart to have fun, make friends, and boost your brain function.

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Dr. Kraus is a professor of auditory neuroscience at Northwestern University, investigating the neurobiology underlying speech and music perception and learning-associated brain plasticity.