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SCIENCE FILE

For children, the music lasts

Benefits linger long after lessons end, a study finds

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Lapsed music students — and their disappointed parents — take heart: A new study finds that a child who gets even a few years of formal musical training shows evidence that his or her brain has been changed in ways that improve mental function for years.

Researchers from Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., compared 30 young adults who took music lessons in elementary or middle school to 15 others of similar age and intelligence who had no music training. Those who used to practice the piano — or clarinet, cello, flute or a handful of other instruments — for as little as two or three years showed a more robust brain response to sounds even years after quitting their weekly lessons.

The echo of those lessons faded as adults grew more distant from their days as music students. But it was still there an

average of seven years later — and whether the subject had taken lessons for three years or eight did not seem to make much difference in the strength of the effect, according to the report published this week in the *Journal of Neuroscience*.

Past studies have linked the kinds of brain signals seen in those with musical training to heightened auditory perception, as well as improved executive function, which encompasses such key learning skills as attention, organization, short-term memory and reasoning. So boosting that in enduring ways could arguably give a child an academic edge for years.

The study also suggests that formal musical training is not wasted after a budding Yo-Yo Ma or Lang Lang gives up the lessons in favor of, say, basketball or cheerleading. Even “a little” formal musical training “goes a long way,” the researchers concluded.

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