

# Considering music as a major?

## Recommendations for Those Thinking about Music Study after High School

“Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here!”  
— J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Our society needs passionate, talented, and dedicated musicians to educate, inspire, and lead upcoming generations. YOU can be an integral part of ensuring our culture continues to appreciate and enjoy high quality, entertaining, and meaningful musical performances!

“Music can change the world because it can change people.”  
— Bono

Here is some valuable information that you should keep in mind when looking into music study as a major.

### Where to Start

*When: All 4 years of HS*

Use your time in high school to immerse yourself in as much music-making and learning as possible! While seriously studying music, you will discover all of your personal strengths and natural talents, as well as the weak spots you want to work on. The more you prepare during high school, the more in-depth your college-level music study will be. Here are some things to consider doing while in high school if you are contemplating a music career:

- Take private lessons on your instrument. This is perhaps THE most important advice for any future music major. Amarillo College offers private lessons to pre-college students ([www.actx.edu/music/ce](http://www.actx.edu/music/ce)) if you need a teacher resource.
- Start learning music theory. Even great performers find that a lack of fundamental theory skills will hold you back in college. Take a music theory class, ask your ensemble and private teachers for their favorite resources, and use websites like [www.utheory.net](http://www.utheory.net), [www.emusictheory.com](http://www.emusictheory.com) and [www.musictheory.net](http://www.musictheory.net). Amarillo College offers The Fundamentals of Music each summer for college credit or non-credit.
- Gain some experience on the piano. Piano skills are essential to understanding theory, and most colleges require some level of piano proficiency in order to graduate their program. Amarillo College piano proficiencies can be found at <https://www.actx.edu/music/amarillo-college-music-major-handbook>. AC offers a piano camp for beginners every summer.

- Listen to all types of music. Seek out music from every time period and genre. Listen to music from all areas of popular music. Dismissing a certain classification of music just means you haven't listened enough to find which pieces you enjoy yet!
- Join lots of ensembles. If you are in band, join a choir. If you are in choir, try learning an instrument! You'll learn different aspects of music from each teacher and peer group. If you've only performed in a large ensemble, chamber or small group experience is extremely valuable.
- Perform frequently. Add to your school ensemble concert schedule by volunteering for extra gigs such as special school events, talent shows, musicals, board meetings, honors banquets, community groups, etc. Each performance provides a different experience that will build your resources for a career in music.
- Take on a leadership role. Apply to be a section leader, drum major, president, etc. Do anything you can to promote the success of your ensemble, and offer your director as much assistance as you can. You will learn much more about what it takes to be a career musician by seeing what goes on behind the scenes.
- Tell your music teachers you are considering a career in music. Your teachers will be happy to steer you in the right direction and give you more information about majoring in music.

### Research the variety in music majors and careers

*When: Sophomore and Junior year*

A slideshow describing the most common careers in music can be found at

<https://www.actx.edu/music/careers-in-music>.

Amarillo College's Associates in Music is the equivalent of the first two years of music degree at any Texas public University and most other music schools. It transfers directly to these majors that are most commonly found at 4-year colleges and universities:

- Music Performance
- Music Education
- Music Composition
- Music Production
- Music Business/Management
- Music Therapy
- Ethnomusicology

Colleges and universities across the United States offer many variations of the majors listed above, but, again, the first two years of study typically require the same courses you will receive at AC. Check the degree plan of the bachelors degree you are interested in, and compare it to the AC degree plans at

<https://www.actx.edu/music/music-degree-checklists>.

## Start thinking about the right music major for you

*When: Junior year-early Senior year*

All music majors at Amarillo College focus on honing their performance skills along with foundational theory, ear training, and piano skills. Music faculty will assist you in exploring career options, thinking through your personal strengths, and planning what music major may be a good fit for you at the bachelor degree level. Different music majors prepare for work as:

- Music Performer: work as solo performer, rehearsal accompanist, opera, church, civic/regional chorus member, session, backing musician, studio musician, church, civic/regional band member, theme park, cruise staff, house band musician, church, chamber, symphony orchestra member, worship team member, small ensemble member, etc. Requires the highest level of musical technique, and dedication to auditioning, practicing, and rehearsing. Full-time performers expect frequent travel.
- Music Educator: work in many different areas, including elementary school music teacher, middle and high school band, orchestra and choir director, public school private lesson instructor, individual and/or group lesson teacher with a music program or school, individual and/or group lesson teacher with a music store, independent private lesson instructor or studio teacher, coach for other music teachers, and college/university professor. Needs a strong command of music theory, history, conducting, and technical skill on his/her instrument, plus a full understanding of educational theories, and pedagogy. ([www.nafme.org](http://www.nafme.org))
- Music Composer: Composers, and lyricists create original music and/or lyrics for films, video games, commercial music, plays, and more. Music Arrangers take an already existing piece of music and reorganize it to be used in a new way. Work in film, television, advertising, or with producers in the music recording industry.
- Music Technology/Recording Arts: work as music producer, sound engineering technician, audio and video technician, film and video editors, media technical directors/managers, live sound engineer, etc. Combines musicianship with recording technology expertise. Requires the ability to operate complex equipment while collaborating with musical artists and producers. Work in film, television, advertising, music studios, live music venues, and more.
- Music Business Manager: work as a music producer, artist manager, artist or business accounting manager, entertainment law specialist, copyright specialist, music promoter, etc. Requires more business, legal, and financial savvy than musicianship, but a deep and varied knowledge of music is vital.
- Music Therapist: combines a passion for helping others with a strong level of musicianship. Work with groups and individuals of various ages and in many settings, including general and psychiatric hospitals, mental health agencies, rehabilitation centers, day care facilities, nursing homes, public and private schools, and private practice in areas such as psychiatric, cognitive and developmental, speech and hearing, physical, and neurological development.

([www.musictherapy.org](http://www.musictherapy.org))

- Music Conductor: lead a variety of ensembles and have many roles, including shaping a musical performance by an ensemble, communicating tempo, beat, emotion, quickly processing sheet music, physically leading the ensemble with gestures, posture, and other visual cues, providing constructive criticism, and educating performers

Think ahead 10-20 years. What do you see yourself doing? Which career descriptions appeal to you? Most musicians combine two or more of these roles throughout their careers. Whatever your career path, make it something you LOVE to do. Of course, it's essential to earn enough money to provide for your family. Some music majors have greater earnings potential, job security, and job availability than others.

Do recognize, however, that there is a huge difference between a JOB and a CAREER. A job is something you do to make money in order to sustain your everyday lifestyle. A career is a job that also fulfills your personal goals and dreams. A career is a "life calling," something that may require sacrificing personal time and wealth for a larger purpose. If a job is all you are looking for (\$ to pay bills), becoming a music major is NOT for you. Being a life-long musician can be both challenging and rewarding at the same time, depending on your priorities and goals.

## Finding the right college or university

*When: Junior year*

Once you've chosen which major suits you best, use the internet to research schools that offer that program.

To help narrow your search, consider the following:

- How big is the music program? Do I want to be in a big school or small school?
  - Amarillo College is small enough to offer individual attention to each music student, and partners with you to build your skills from day one. If a large school is your dream, consider starting at AC then transferring to a large institution to complete your bachelor degree - you'll have the best of both worlds!
- Will I be able to have a job while in school?
  - The Amarillo College Music Department has several student worker positions available each year, and the majority of music majors hold at least one student worker or outside job.
- How are my grades? Can I get into my school of choice?
  - Amarillo College meets each student where they are, and has 100% transfer acceptance of music transfer students to their top choice school.
- Can I afford my school of choice? What scholarships do they offer?
  - Most music majors at Amarillo College receive 75-100% tuition, books, and fees in scholarships and awards.

- Which professors will I be working with? What is their background and experience?
  - All music classes at Amarillo College, including class piano, theory, and ear training, are taught by seasoned faculty members (not teaching assistants).

Remember, an Associates Degree in Music at Amarillo College is the equivalent to the first two years of almost every music major at colleges and universities throughout the nation. Starting at AC may not be for every music student, but if you would like to ensure personalized attention, increase your educational experiences, and save money for educational and career goals, Amarillo College may just be the perfect place for you to start your education. Include AC in your list of potential schools to learn about.

### Visit and learn more

*When: Junior year, summer before Senior year*

To keep exploration expenses down, work to narrow your list down to approximately 3-5 schools. Once you are ready to learn more about them, do the following, ideally during your junior year:

- Visit every school on your list
- Try to schedule a sample “lesson” with one of the teachers on your instrument
- Watch a rehearsal of an ensemble (choir, band, etc.)
- Get a feel for the campus to see if the environment is right for you
- Speak with the professors who teach the classes you’d have to take.
- Speak with current music students to find out what their experience has been so far. Speak with as many as you can to get a wide variety of opinions.
- Speak with admissions counselors about the application process for the school
- Speak with someone in the music department about the process for auditioning for the music program.

### Make your choice and apply

*When: Fall of Senior year*

After you’ve done your research, made a decision about your major, and visited schools, it’s time to make your final choices and apply to your short list of schools!

Some suggestions:

- Know what’s due, where, and when. Stay on top of every deadline!
- Make sure you get recommendations from music teachers
- Apply for as many scholarships as possible

### Prepare for auditions

*When: Summer after Junior year into Senior year*

Depending on your major, you might need to audition to get into your program. It is

possible to get accepted to the college or university without being accepted into the music program.

- Find out exactly what you need to prepare for auditions. Some schools require certain pieces to be performed, others give a genre/time requirement that you must follow.
  - The Amarillo College Music Department asks that two contrasting pieces are prepared for the audition on all instruments and voice types.
- Some schools also have students complete a theory or aural skills exam in addition to
- performing at the audition.
  - The Amarillo College Music Department includes a short theory and aural skills placement diagnostic in the audition process.
- Practice with your private teacher or school music teacher for several months, not weeks before your audition.
- The more elite the institution, the tougher it will be to get in. Conservatories like Eastman or Julliard will have much higher standards than state schools. Remember, even if you are the best in your school on your instrument, there are thousands of others who fit the same description across the country. Spots in these programs are limited!
- Professors want to see how prepared you are, how mature and professional you can be, and to assess your musical technique foundation.

### Commit to a School

*When: Between April 1 and May 1 of Senior year*

After auditions, you generally wait until April 1 to be notified of each school's decision. You usually have until May 1 to make your choice. After you find out which schools have accepted you, you must make a final choice on where to attend! When doing that, consider the following:

- Which school meets your needs best in terms of location, size, and quality of program?
- Which school offered the most in scholarships and is most affordable overall?
- Which school will offer you the best experience in preparing you for your career?

### You Made Your Decision. Now what?

*When: Summer before starting college*

After you have committed to a school, they will take it from there in regards to information about housing, billing, scheduling classes, etc. From a music standpoint, however, there are several things you should do in order to prepare for life as a music student:

- Continue practicing your instrument as often as possible. Your professor in college will expect you to be at least as good as you were in your audition. Don't lose your skills by taking the summer off!

- If you take private lessons, keep them going all summer before heading to school. If you don't take private lessons yet, consider finding a teacher for the summer.
- Continue learning and practicing as much music theory as possible.
- If you haven't learned to play piano, now is the time to start! Regardless of your major or instrument, piano skills are essential and extremely valuable.
- Use your summer free time to listen to as much music as possible from all time periods and genres. Broaden your horizons beyond Pop or Broadway, as most music schools focus on Classical music as the foundation for your skills.

“Music is the great uniter. An incredible force. Something that people who differ on everything and anything else can have in common.”

— Sarah Dessen, *Just Listen*

More questions? See your music teacher or reach out to Camille Day Nies at [cdnies@actx.edu](mailto:cdnies@actx.edu).  
We're here to help!

“If there is a future wave of wellness, of harmony, of peace, an end to war, mutual understanding, equality, fairness, I don't expect it to come from a government, a military force, or a corporation. If there is a future of peace for humankind, if we are to have an understanding of how these invisible, internal things should fit together, I expect it will come from the artists, because that's what we do. As we did in Nazi camps and on the evening of 9/11, the artists are the ones who might be able to help us with our internal,

invisible lives.”

— Karl Paulnack