

# What Ancient Greeks Can Teach Us About Success In The Music Industry

Watching a blacksmith hammering on his anvil, the Greek mathematician Pythagoras noticed a relationship between the size of the hammer and the level of pitch: heavier hammers created lower notes, lighter ones produced higher notes. From this encounter, he concluded that musical notes could be translated into mathematical equations. Historians debate the accuracy of the blacksmith story, but there's no argument that 2,500 years later, every stringed instrument is based on Pythagoras's equation detailing the relationship between string length and pitch.

Like Pythagoras, the ancient philosopher Plato also noted that music was based on precise structure and formulas. However, he observed that it also contained a magic, capable of swaying human emotion, which defied precise definition. (Louie Armstrong was apparently channeling the same thoughts when he said of jazz, "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know.") Sometime around 370 BC, Plato concluded, "The man who arrives at the doors of artistic creation with none of the madness of the muses would be convinced that technical ability alone was enough to make an artist." This "madness of the muses" probably explains a lot of rock star excess, but it also, to cite the ancient philosopher, allows "music to give a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything."

Greece today is an economic basket case, and the poster child for all that's wrong with Europe. But it deserves credit for turning out the perceptive minds that identified the combination of mathematical precision and undefinable art that define music. Unknowingly, this pair also displayed a pretty perceptive assessment of what it takes to succeed in the contemporary music industry.

Our industry includes an extremely diverse collection of companies, but the successful ones all manage to blend art and science. The art is evident in products and services that stir the musician's muse. The science includes operational and financial issues necessary to ensure profitability. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the guitar industry. Elsewhere in this issue, we discuss why over the past five years, the acoustic guitar has been one of the industry's bright spots. Chalk some of this up to musical trends, which are both extremely fickle and beyond control. However, manufacturers deserve some of the credit for their current good fortune.

Art and science blend seamlessly on the floors of the leading acoustic guitar manufacturers, where you can see slick

computer-controlled carving machines cranking out component parts and automated buffing machines at work alongside skilled craftsmen doing painstaking inlay work. This combination of automation and handwork is augmented by teams that analyze production flow, process control, and materials usage in an effort to push quality and value. Couple these production skills with people who understand what makes a beautiful looking and sounding guitar and you get, what one retailer described as "a guitar industry renaissance."

The Stratocaster, now celebrating its 60th anniversary, owes its longevity to a similar blend of art and science. Through dogged persistence, Leo Fender worked out the physics of guitar design—scale length, the bridge configuration, and ergonomics. But, the unprecedented curves of the Strat's body, its tonal versatility, and its original tremolo can only be described as a work of art. There are quantifiable measures for why the Strat is a highly functional instrument. But the reason it has become a timeless icon is beyond measurement. Like a Stradivarius violin, it possesses a magic that has inspired musicians for six decades.

If the best instruments are defined by of art and science, so too are the industry's best enterprises. Both are needed to address the market. The corporate graveyard is full of enterprises that have offered up exceptional products and inspired marketing efforts but lacked comparable operational and financial skills. By the same token, the market hasn't been kind to companies that have operated on the premise that with slick logistics, selling music and sound gear is no different from moving office products.

Combining art and science takes a lot of different forms. In retail, it involves good merchandising and promotions along with shrewd buying, tight inventory management, and vigilant cost control. On the production side, it comes down to gear that inspires, delivered at a compelling price. Like most things, this is pretty simple in theory, but devilishly difficult to put into practice. But it's something that sets our industry apart and makes it one of the more interesting places to work.

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