

@UlowaNeuro Notes

August 2023

For most of my life, music has been a creative outlet. I sang with my dad from an early age, picked up the clarinet in 4th grade and played through high school, sang in choirs as an undergraduate and grad student and even performed with the New York Choral Society while I was a postdoc. A few years ago, I returned to woodwinds and started learning to play the saxophone.

I'm no expert, but I can feel the impact of working to improve my musical skills. It's a brain workout of a different type than I get in the lab. So, I'm eager to hear from next week's INI visitor who studies the neuropsychological mechanisms of musical expertise from both the lab bench and the piano bench.



Fredrik Ullén is Director of the Department of Cognitive Neuropsychology at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt, Germany, and a celebrated concert pianist who has performed as a soloist and chamber musician at many leading venues throughout Europe and in the United States.

He will share both his science and his music with us in two public events that I hope you will attend:

- **Tuesday, Sept 5, 4 p.m.**, 1110A MERF: Scientific seminar
“Gene-environment interplay in skill learning and expertise: what have we learned from research on music?”
Reception with light refreshments to follow
- **Wednesday, Sept 6, 7:30 p.m.**, Voxman Recital Hall: Informal talk and piano recital
“A man with many muses: science, art, and Ligeti’s etudes for the piano”
Piano etudes of György Ligeti, Books 1 and 2

We are so fortunate at Iowa to have colleagues in the arts who are open to collaboration. This is a fantastic opportunity to connect with our colleagues in the School of Music. Fredrik Ullén’s visit offers a unique occasion to consider both the neuroscience behind musical expertise and the human side of why we study normal brain processes.

I’m intrigued by the work of the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, which aims to use scientific methods to explain the psychological, neuronal, and socio-cultural basis of aesthetic perceptions and judgments. It’s fascinating that this international scientific organization has a whole institute dedicated to the scientific study of art.

I know I'm not alone as a scientist who also plays music. Iowa neuroscience would not be the same without Dan Tranel's guitar, and Josh Weiner, who was the driving force in bringing Ullén to Iowa, performs regularly on drums with his band (including at Science Thursdays each summer) and also plays guitar and bass. Our INI administrator, Meghan Lawler, is a classically-trained soprano, and Bob McMurray just released an [EP](#) with his band The Negotiators. I'd love to know more about your musical pursuits—send me an email!

Whether playing an instrument or singing in the shower, music can stimulate our brains to new levels of scientific creativity. I am eager to hear any insights you gain after hearing Fredrik Ullén share his science and his music next week.

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