

A photograph of Steven Sharp Nelson on a stage. He is wearing a patterned shirt, a light-colored vest, and dark trousers. He is gesturing with his hands as if speaking. To his left is a podium with a sign that reads "ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ADHD 2023 Correct Learn Thrive". A cello is visible on a stand behind him. The background is dark with some green lighting on the left.

Steven Sharp Nelson

ADHD

MY PEOPLE! I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be here, because *you get me*. You know how hard it is to sit at anything for an extended period of time and expect to get anything out of it.

When I was a cello performance major my teacher said, "I need you to practice seven hours." And I said, "Oh, a week, that'd be great." The teacher said, "No, a day." And I said, "I'm transferring out of the program."

One of the first things parents do when they bring kids to talk to me, they ask, "Tell my child how much you practice." Can I tell them how many breaks I take? I practice a lot, but I have to practice twice as much to get half as much. And that's okay, because I want to talk about my adventure and how catalyzed it's been by ADHD.

But first, I want to tell you that I have never played the number I just played for an audience that I hoped would appreciate it more than you wonderful people. And here's why. You may have recognized *Carol of the Bells*, which is in 3/4 time. Now that means there are three beats per measure, meaning one strong beat and two weak beats, like a waltz. *ONE*, two, three, *ONE*, two, three. Then I decided, out of the pure nature of who I am, to combine it with *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*. Now, *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* is in 4/4 time. That's four beats per measure, strong, weak, semi-strong, weak, *ONE*, two, *THREE*, four, *ONE*, two, *THREE*, four. When I play these two together, you get a glimpse into what the inside of my mind looks like.

My name is Steven Sharp Nelson, and I am the cellist of the Piano Guys. If you don't know who the Piano Guys are, our M.O. is that we like to take cellos and pianos out of their original context, along with the music that we play, and put them in contexts you'd never expect to see them. We mash up classical music and pop music and original music, and we love playing all over the place. We've played at four of the Seven Wonders of the World and we've had sold out performances at Carnegie Hall, Red Rocks, Sydney Opera House, Royal Albert Hall, and many more. We now have over a hundred videos on YouTube with two billion views, ten million followers, ten albums with Sony. Our content is streamed three million times every day. Now if you put that in context, in the time that this presentation takes, that is eight NBA-sized basketball arenas full of people that have experienced our content.

But I don't want you to think I'm trying to build up out of hubris the accomplishments I've had. On the contrary. I want to tell you from the bottom of my heart that I am on this stage tonight because I had parents who—despite being encouraged by music teachers to give up on me—did NOT. And they loved music so much in front of me that I couldn't help but pick up on it.

Excerpted from the keynote presentation at the 2023 Annual International Conference on ADHD in Baltimore, Maryland. The text that appears in Attention magazine was edited for length and clarity from the transcript of the talk. The full video and audio recording is available at chadd.org/conference-recordings.

Music to My Ears

So I credit my parents, I credit my wife, who is a musician herself, I credit my children. I always say, like Victor Borge, “I’d like to thank my parents for making this presentation possible and my children for making it necessary.” My children remind me every day how not cool I am, and I appreciate the humility that they give me. And I want to also publicly thank God for all the answered prayers that have put me on the stage tonight, too, which have been many, and this has been an incredible journey for me.

But I also want to thank my superpower, which is ADHD. I don’t say this in a trite or platitudinal way. I am very determined to tell you, and to tell the world every time I perform.

When I’m trying to explain to somebody what ADHD is really like, because a lot of people use the label—supposing they have it—and it’s like, *do you really?* And I put them through a couple tests. I say, “When you overthink, is this what it’s like?” [*Video of a horse jumping dramatically over a very small log.*] Oh boy, you can relate to that one, right? And when I show that to most people, they’re like, “Nah, that’s not how it goes.” Then I say, “Okay, what about when you start a task? Or, when you finally get engaged in the task, is this what it’s like: [narrating a video] ‘Oh no, got to replace the lightbulb. Uh-oh. Oh, need to fix that. Oh, squeaking. Get the WD-40. Oh no, it’s out. Go to Home Depot. Oh, the car’s not working.’” Have you ever had that moment when somebody says, “Aren’t you supposed to be doing that?” I’m like, “I am doing that. What’s the matter with you? Can’t you see that?” Can you relate to that or what?

Who, arguably, is the greatest songwriter of all time? Who has stood the test of time? Most of you said Mozart—and Beethoven is up there, Bach is there for sure. But let’s take Mozart, because that seems to be the consensus here. Did you know that there was a study done of Mozart’s life? And experts agreed that Mozart most likely had ADHD? Here it is right here. This is a picture of him when he was younger. A 2007 paper on Mozart’s movements and behavior points to several elements of the composer’s behavior which may indicate the presence of ADHD during his childhood and extending to his adult years. As a cellist, I didn’t like Mozart when I first started learning his music. Do you know why? Do you know what the cello part is for Mozart? Let me play it for you. [*Plays a boring, repetitive cello part.*] I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t. I couldn’t even get through a piece of music. And my dad didn’t understand why. He didn’t really understand what was going on in my head.

When I tell kids about my gift of ADHD, I tell them that when I was in junior high my dad came to me and said, “Steve, your

grades are not good and your friendships are not sticking. You’re a smart kid, you’re a fun kid to be around. What’s the matter?” I said, “Honestly dad, I do not know. I look around and everybody in the classroom is focused on the teacher and all I feel like doing is standing up, running around, and slapping somebody.” I still feel like that most of the time. So, he took me to a psychiatrist, and that psychiatrist ran some tests and diagnosed me with ADHD.

I didn’t know what that meant. Nobody told me about what it could mean, or the potential of it, or the majesty and glory of the gift that it is. So, I walked out of that office in tears because I thought I was broken. And ever since that moment, with the help of music, I have learned that ADHD is my superpower. And so, that’s what I tell the kids that are in my audiences. I say, if you have this gift, if you are part of this cool club, you are going to do incredible things with it, because it is part of your work on this earth and nobody else can do your work. And I say that if you are sitting and practicing your instrument and it goes something like this [*demonstrates getting distracted while practicing*], then you know you have a very special gift. And when it comes to hyperfocusing and doing what you’re meant to do in life, it’s the greatest gift.

Now when it comes to general focus, it’s not so good. But I tell the kids in the audience, “Look, in Mozart, if I focused only on the cello part, the negative aspect of Mozart’s music that is meant to be a supportive foundation and structure for the beauty and majesty of his music, then I will always despise Mozart. But if I could step back and look at the big picture and take in his harmony, the near cacophony of so many notes blended in a way that is majesty and glory, then I will love it.” And that is what I discovered. And I tell them that people will say, “You can’t focus, you always are poking me. You’re annoying.” They’ll tell you all of these things that are the Mozart cello part of your gift. Step back and see the majesty and glory of what you’ve been given.

Do you have any idea of the level of prolificacy that Mozart had? Do you know in his short twenty-seven years—his first symphony was composed at age eight—he composed 600 works. That is 240 hours of music. Now, I’m going to put that into a pop song context so you can understand a little better—that’s an average of one song every other day of his life. You may have the Mozart cello part aspect of your gift, but you also have Mozart’s prolificacy. You can produce so much content that your chance of resonating with others—I love that word *resonance*; I first loved the cello because it sits against your heart and resonates with your soul—when you find the resonance in what you’re meant to do, you will be prolific, and because you’re prolific you’ll have ten



times the chance of somebody else who's less prolific to resonate with others. And that's a wonderful part of this gift.

Mozart said, "Music is not in the notes but in the space between." We're going to look in the space between what the world may diagnose ADHD to be. So first, I want to talk to you about my favorite part of ADHD, which is the subtle science of *self-suggestibility*. This is so difficult to explain to people who don't get it, but you get it. It makes sense to us, but it doesn't make sense to the world. We have the ability to welcome random thoughts into our mind. We treat them as ocean waves coming at us. The world often looks at ocean waves and stands in the ocean and says, "Okay, that's going to knock me over. I'm not going to entertain that thought." But us, what do we do? We learn that if we waded out a little further and we grab a surfboard, that we could actually find the right wave at the right time, and we can surf that all the way back in to the shore. And I've done this so many times in my career.

When I'm playing a particular piece of music, all of a sudden another melody will come into my mind because I'm suggestible—it's *self-suggestibility*. Another aspect will come in, and I am so off the rails that I create something that's entirely unique. I want to play you a demonstration of that. How many of you have heard this piece of music? [*Plays the first few measures of a famous piece of music.*] It was written by Johann Sebastian Bach and he called it *The Unaccompanied Cello Suite Number One Prelude in G Major* because he did not have ADHD. He wrote it for one cello. That's why it's called "unaccompanied." As an ADHD kid, I thought, "What if I added seven more cello parts to the one part Bach wrote?" And you'll hear that I incorporated guitar, drums, and film score techniques and things that a cellist perhaps would have never thought of unless he had this art of self-suggestibility in him.

On my first album, I played the pure form of it straight through, and that piece of music has garnered about ten million

streams. It's wonderful. But the ADHD version of this tune has over 150 million streams—it's like an instant hit just, add ADHD. So, I want to play *The Cello Song* for you. You'll see me cycle through all eight cello parts for you on this video. You'll see in one scene that I actually throw the bow from myself to myself. [*Shows video while also playing one part on the cello live.*]

That, just so you know, is my ADHD theme song, and I love playing it because I get so lost in the music, and that really is what it's about. What Mozart is talking about when he says the space between the notes, he's saying if you focus on the notes, you lose the passion. You lose the energy. You lose the spirit. But if you're in the space between the notes and you get into the music, you get into your craft, then all of a sudden, all of the kryptonite falls away and the superpower comes to light.

If you're going to turn to classical music to expand your mind's ability to process, then I would suggest Baroque music. It's been scientifically proven that this is great music for us and the way our brains work. If you look at the Baroque boys—George Frederick Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Antonio Vivaldi—let me show you the reason why. This is so fascinating. The Baroque period, of course, emerged in the late 1600s, early 1700s; Bach passed away in 1750, just to give you context. Before that was the medieval music period. And do you know what that was like? It was mostly chant and choral music, very drawn out. All of a sudden, Bach decided to light on fire the music scene—he was criticized for being too racy. Can you believe that? There is a constant motion to Baroque music. I've found that, in my life, if I'm still, I'm in commotion. If I'm in motion, I'm a lot better off mentally. I find that Baroque music is very helpful for that.

I also did extra research and looked at some studies. I love the work music therapists are doing, which is still emerging. Most of



The Music of The Piano Guys

Direct links to music shared during Steven Sharp Nelson's keynote speech at ADHD2023:

Carol of the Bells | <https://thepianoguys.com/pages/carol-of-the-bells-the-piano-guys>

The Cello Song | <https://thepianoguys.com/pages/cello-song>

O Come, Emmanuel | <https://thepianoguys.com/pages/o-come-emmanuel-christmas-version-the-piano-guys>

Learn more about the Piano Guys at thepianoguys.com.

the research studies are actually still in process, but let me show you one. I love this study. In 2022, the National Academy of Sciences put out a study where they tried to determine the effect of drum training on neurodivergent adolescents.

We found strong evidence that drumming... reduces hyperactivity and attentional difficulties and increases functional connectivity in brain regions responsible for inhibitory control, action outcome monitoring, and self-regulation. The results also highlighted the central role of the prefrontal cortex in regulating motor impulsivity.

Now, beyond this, I can give you hundreds of anecdotal stories of parents who come to me and say, "I've got an ADHD child. What should I do?" And I say, "Is he or she engaged in music?" And they often will say, "Not yet." And I say, "Let me suggest starting with the drums." When I took on the drums at about age twelve, this is about five years after I started cello, everything in my life was better. I was able to channel the hyperactivity that I had. I was able to listen to my favorite songs and feel like I was playing along with them. I grew a better self-identity. And I found that my friendships even improved. The sociality that existed in the music world actually helped it as well. There were so many beneficial factors.

I believe all musical instruments are beneficial, but drumming is often the lowest hanging fruit because kids will totally dig it. If you hand a cello to a kid? Oh boy, good luck. On any stage I'm on, I want to be a strong advocate for increasing the funding for music in our public education system. A plethora of scientific studies empirically demonstrate that when children are engaged in music in public education, every single test score goes up. Every single one, with the exception of sports—sorry, that doesn't work for some reason.

When you incorporate music in a child's life, you have found a master switch that you can turn up that illuminates every aspect of who they are and what they can do in life.

I love my attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but you know what it is to me? It's my *attention deliberate hyperfocused discernment*. This is really what I have internalized, and I've tried to teach my children this, two of whom have this gift. And I've tried to teach the kids in my audience that if they have this gift, they will do incredible things with it. But I also tell them that it's their superpower, and that's the easiest way for me to describe this message.

I want to play you one more song, a piece of music that is about captivity. It seems negative, but in this piece of music, the prominent word is *rejoice*. We can rejoice in the gift we have been given, the God-given ability to do a work. You have a work in your life, a divinely appointed work that nobody else can do. Will you please think about that? How does it change your perspective on yourself? How does it change your self-talk?

You have a work to do, to lift others. Oscar Hammerstein said, "The modern tragedy is that despair has too many spokesmen, while hope has too few spokesmen." You can be spokeswomen and men of hope. And I want you to lock into that as I play this final piece of music for you. I want you to have a conversation with that part of yourself who still believes in you. I want you to let your mind take on the ocean waves that come, wander if it needs to, wade out into the ocean, the water, and find that wave to surf on that'll bring you into your home to help you discover how much potential you have and how much good you can do in this world that needs you so desperately.

If you are spiritual, have a conversation with that divine being who created you and make sure that you are aware of him or her and she or he is aware of you. Have this moment, please, please, in this piece of music, and know that I am with you, and I love you. **A**

Steven Sharp Nelson is an award-winning, Billboard-charting, YouTube rock star—in a cellist sort of way. He is best known as a member of The Piano Guys. His music invites people in from all walks of life and tastes. He has inspired millions through his music, awakening a newfound love for the cello or classical music, rekindling a forgotten passion, or showing, by example, how to simply smile in order to enjoy life more fully. He plays many instruments and combines multiple elements from these instruments, most notably guitar and percussion, into an innovative and revolutionary way of playing the cello. He is broadly considered a pioneer in exploring the versatility of the instrument. In addition to his cello prowess, he is an award-winning composer, arranger, and entertainer. He has toured the globe performing his works.