

Should MUSIC Be a BIRTHRIGHT?

The Challenges of Music Education
Is It For Everyone Or Just Those Born Gifted?



Music is emotional. It inspires awe, love, and beauty. It can lift our moods, making us smile amidst sorrow. It can make us cry, with words that touch our hearts and melodies that move our souls. Song can mark a special time for us. Remember the songs that marked those special moments in your life? The first hymn you learned? Songs from your childhood? Or how about that special wedding song? Or those special moments, like singing “Silent Night” with family and close friends on Christmas Eve? Music has the amazing power to bring back memories from years past in an instant.

Music can make us laugh, and it can make us cry. Music is a part of our soul, a gift of the creator; it reaches us on some kind of primary vibratory level, like a radio frequency beacon to always help us find our way “home.” We’ve all had almost miraculous experiences where music brought us back to ourselves, and calmed us or inspired us to be our best fullest selves.

Who hasn’t watched a musician in rapture, wishing they could find a way to tap into those overwhelming emotions and give them wings, give them expression, and set them free? Have you ever dreamed of playing an instrument: walking over to the piano at a party, or church, or just with the family, and bringing joy and unity to everyone around them? Sharing their deepest feelings, or just bringing a smile to those singing along? Or better yet, have you dreamed the same for your child? Only one who has experienced it can describe the joy of a very lucky parent whose child falls in love with playing an instrument at a young age watching them grow more enthusiastic, day by day, and watching their spirits soar and get lost in the realms of musical bliss.. Music is in the very fiber of our being, even before birth. It is said that we are sensitive to music right from the womb.

But imagine, for a minute, our world without music. No songs, no instruments, no dancing. What would life be like devoid of this gift of music? Is it even possible? A scary thought. But the reality is...

To most people, music is a dead language.



How can that be? Why such a bold statement? All of humanity partakes in some type of music, doesn't it? We are constantly surrounded by the sounds of music from all directions.

Well...yes, and no. Sure, we all passively listen and appreciate song. We may enjoy watching and hearing others play the piano, the flute, the clarinet, and other instruments seemingly out of our own reach. But ask any musician about the difference between describing music, hearing it passively, and actually playing music...actually creating it.

What if we could hear language, but not speak? That is where most of us are with music! Making music must be experienced firsthand, just as the overwhelming joy of true love cannot be explained verbally.

We know how sweet music is, how good it is for our souls, and our peace of mind. So what, as parents, holds us back from experiencing the full God given joy of music; of playing it and sharing that joy with our children? What are some of the challenges?

Knowing Where to Start

The first problem that arises in any new endeavor is knowing where to begin. Once you make a decision to learn music, what's the next step? Let's take the example of learning piano.

The questions quickly arise...What is the best way to learn? Will my children have time to devote to music, with their busy schedules? How can we, as parents, be as involved in our children's music education as we are in their day to day education? Sure, we may be able to encourage them to practice at home, but often, our own limited knowledge of music prevents us from getting involved as much as we'd like.

Of course, one of the greatest joys of parenting comes from the precious bonding between parents and children. As parents, we get to savor the hours spent curled

up on the couch reading together, we get to be there each step of the way as our kids grasp new concepts, and we rejoice in their expressions of genuine enthusiasm for learning. How can this enthusiasm be translated into music education? Is there a practical way that we as parents can learn along with our children, like we do while reading literature, for example?

Finally, there is a question regarding the actual approach of music education, but there is something keeping us from experiencing this basic joy. It is true that humanity has an innate desire for music. But the statistics are saddening.

An estimated 80% of those who start learning an instrument end up quitting.

When you think of piano lessons, what are the first things that come to mind? For many, they are mind and soul numbing repetition, a feeling of failure, hard work, confusion, boring songs, theory and more theory, nagging to practice, and pain. And **these are the successful experiences!** Many just quit in shame, feeling inadequate, deficient, and that they lack “talent,” no matter how much they LOVE music. They spend a lifetime wishing they could have had a reciprocal relationship with music, instead of passive, unrequited love. What a musical trauma these approaches create! The scars and damage to children’s self esteem, by peers, teachers, parents or their own self condemnation and dismissal of their ability, which may remain long after they become adults. Of course, this is not universally true, and there are a lucky few with positive, life-changing musical experiences. Perhaps a gracious piano teacher introduced them to a whole new world of delight. However, if one is lucky enough to find such an instructor, they may also discover that their schedule is full, or that they may charge a premium price for lessons. Unfortunately, there’s no guarantee which of the two groups someone may fall into, leaving a lot of uncertainty in the process.

We are all capable of learning and mastering very complex things which we take for granted, like learning to speak, read, and write in our native language. Why is it so difficult with music? What is so hard about music that, while all of us love it, and many would love to play, we find that privilege restricted to a relatively small elite group, who have to slog hard to find their “talent”?



It is not that the desire is not there. But there is an entrenched system that ensures the language of music is restricted to the minority. The problem looks something like this:



What would an artist like Stevie Wonder say if he saw this sheet music? (Well the first thing he would say is, “My Goodness! I can see!”) In the real world though, it is useless to him – he doesn’t need it. He can still play the piano...and play it quite well. As Bach said when someone asked how he did it 300 years ago, “I just hit the right notes at the right time.” Could it really be that simple? This mainstream piece by Chopin looks anything but simple, so what happened?

How many have tried to decode the cryptic “foreign language” of music? The various symbols, the lines, the dots, dashes, and the circles. It all looks like a jumble from a foreign planet. How did it get so complicated, anyway? Well, it took about a thousand years, and it all started with a mysterious Italian monk named Guido.

Guido D’Arezzo was trying to notate some simple hymns, known as Gregorian Chants. He developed some simple notation methods, including the use of fingers of the hand to represent the different pitches, so people could learn and remember more complex songs.



He started with four lines because that was the number of joints he could use on each finger, plus the tip. Over time, it was modified to five lines. With simple harmonies in the Renaissance period, the need to using two hands became clear, with one above the other, and that eventually turned into the Grand Staff you see in most piano books. Finally, the Italians, Germans, French and English all added their own markings, forms and terms, and the whole thing grew into a giant convoluted and complex code. Guido would be very confused. He would not be alone.

Unfortunately, perhaps because it is so complex, the most common approach to teaching music is starting with the theory first, just to decipher a simple song. Key signatures, bass clefs/treble clefs, quarter notes, whole notes, and so on. It surely teaches little children the power of prayer, but unfortunately they are saying, "Take me now Lord, I have suffered enough! I'll be good, I promise, please don't make me take piano anymore!"

Humor aside, imagine what it would be like if we had to learn everything else in life in the same way we are taught to read music. A toddler would have to get through 4th grade grammar before being able to utter a word. If he were learning to walk, he would be put through several years of "walking 101," forced to study the various methods of gait before taking a single step. Or, before learning to ride a bicycle, we would teach the theory of balance as the first step...and on it goes. It may sound silly, but the reality is, this is our outdated approach to music in the 21st century.

And, if we somehow happen to finally figure it out, how can we expect our kids to sit through the same monotonous agony? Having to remind them, time and again, to “practice, practice, practice” in order to make sense of the hieroglyphics of sheet music? One of the biggest challenges with the traditional approach is getting children engaged in the process and keeping it fun and interesting so they actually want to learn and practice the piano, which is a problem even for the most motivated students.

Is it any wonder that the majority who start out on the journey fail? Can the student really be blamed?

We do not fail the system; the system fails us.

The fact is, humans were not designed to learn in the way that music is traditionally taught. It is unnatural and not engaging.

So, what is the solution? Start from scratch? Get rid of traditional musical notation in favor of something simpler? Although some would love the idea of creating a more efficient system, this option would come with its own set of burdens.

In China, they still use ideograms or characters instead of the Roman alphabet system. Why? Surely the Chinese, as smart as they are, must have looked at the first alphabet system, clapped a hand to the forehead and wondered why they hadn't thought of that. So why did they stick to this archaic, ineffective, confusing and difficult system that burdens millions of people with basic literacy challenges?

But imagine what would have been lost: 5,000 years of history, poetry, art, culture. In one generation they would have cut off access to the genius and legacy of the last 5,000 years by changing. Few if any would ever learn to read that now dead language, and there would be no way to translate and update every one of those documents, even in 1,000 years.

We have the same problem with musical notation. A thousand years of music literature—a treasure trove of brilliant musical minds—could be lost, perhaps forever,

especially the obscure, the rare, the special. So traditional music notation, as crazy as it is, is here to stay.

So, the question arises: **With all the challenges of learning to play an instrument, will it forever remain only for the “elite”?**

For many of us who have tried and failed, it would seem like a lost cause.

But was it meant to be like this? Were we not meant by God to experience the full joys of participating in music, in all its glory? Could music have been meant to be restricted to the privileged few?

Is there a possible solution? A way for both parents and children to learn simultaneously? Some way to learn to play and read music—simply, naturally, and, even enjoyably, without having to force ourselves and our kids to practice? A way to continue forging a bond between parent and child through the vehicle of music? A way to ignite a lifelong love for music, starting at a young age?

Over the next several days, we will be sharing some more thoughts. For now, we will end with a quote:

“I’ve never known a musician who regretted being one. Whatever deceptions life may have in store for you, music itself is not going to let you down.” –Virgil Thomson, American Composer



Coming up next:

What are the options for quality music education for parents?...we reveal it next!

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