

Should Music Lessons Be

FUN?

By Lesley Sisterhen McAllister

Of the many philosophical questions that music teachers face on a regular basis, one of the most fundamental is the purpose of taking music lessons. Teachers must consider the function of their calling in order to serve their students and their field in the most effective way. At times, the reasons that students are enrolled in music lessons do not align with the teacher's thinking.

One of the reasons that parents or students often cite is that they enjoy music and want to take lessons for "fun." Parents may say things like, "We want our child to *enjoy* her lessons!" Or, "It is more important for our child to have *fun* with it than to be able to play perfectly." We also hear similar requests from students: "Can I play this just for fun?" Often, teachers translate this question as "Can I just play through this without actually practicing it or learning all the notes?"

Some teachers bristle at the idea that music should be "fun." It is, after all, a serious art, requiring discipline and hard work. Part of the goal of music lessons should be learning how to learn—how to focus and practice for long periods of time, even without immediate gratification.

Other teachers build a whole teaching philosophy around enabling students to have fun while playing music. They have their students play in ensembles or duets with the idea that it is more fun to collaborate with other musicians than to practice alone. Or they teach their students to improvise, which often seems more like a creative game for students rather than hard work. Offering regular group classes, such as theory or musicianship classes, may also provide an informal atmosphere, especially when the classes include games or other entertaining activities. These teachers may put on theme recitals or blend recitals with

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parties so students associate performance activities with relaxation and recreation. All of these ideas work because they provide a stimulating experience, as well as a comfortable environment in which students can enjoy themselves while learning. But no matter what tactics a teacher designs, there remains an underlying question: Is enjoyment for its own sake the final goal of music lessons?

Play is the active verb when talking about making music; for instance, we *play* an instrument, or we *play* in the band. The very word “play” is usually used for activities that provide amusement or entertainment. Music is a form of entertainment in almost every known culture; it often accompanies times of celebration, such as weddings, religious ceremonies, patriotic occasions and dances. Turning on the radio in the car can provide “down” time during a stressful day; we have a natural inclination to sing and dance to music, and it makes our lives richer. Often the ultimate goal for people who want to study music is to capture this sense of enrichment, but for many, music lessons are more laborious than joyful.

A Bygone Era

Most children today spend a great deal of their time watching television or playing video games, and they have adjusted to, perhaps even expect, quick-paced action and immediate results. Traditional music lessons require a type of concentration and diligence that is foreign for many of these children. Music teachers often lament the fact that children today do not want to work hard for any length of time; instead, they need constant stimulation and entertainment.

If this trend continues, and in all likelihood it will, the traditional role of the music teacher, and private lessons in particular, will become obsolete. If we as music teachers continue

to teach the way we have been taught, and if we do not change our expectations of students, we will begin to see more and more students dropping out of lessons. Our very livelihood depends on changing our conception of music lessons.

What is it that needs to change? We need, first of all, to stimulate students in ways that will connect with other sources of enjoyment in their lives. The use of technology is one of the primary ways to offer subject-centered incentives. For example, having computer software available with games that require speed and creativity will keep students engaged, and it can also be designed to help solidify the concepts they are learning. In addition, using MIDI accompaniments while students play gives the sound a thicker texture and more complicated harmonies, adding aural stimulation to motivate students at the elementary level.

Secondly, we need to clarify to both parents and students what music lessons offer. Seeing that there is a reward for the hard work and effort will help students and parents place more value on music study.

What Do Parents Want?

Most parents want to see their child happy, and that is really at the heart of their desire for their child to enjoy studying music. Of course, they want their child to enjoy school too; and yet, they almost never go to the math teacher at school and say that math lessons should be “fun.” Is it because so many people consider music to be a supplement to real learning experiences—an unnecessary but probably beneficial activity? Or is it related to music itself—that making music is supposed to be enjoyable? It is probably a combination of both factors. Yet it is hard to ignore the fact that most people see music as a hobby rather than as a serious undertaking,

especially if they do not intend their children to become professional musicians.

Parents also want their child to continue with music lessons. So many parents tell the same story that it begins to sound like a prototype: they took lessons for years and quit for some reason, usually in high school. Perhaps they did not like to practice, or their teacher was unkind, or their parents could no longer afford lessons. No matter what the story, there is always a sense of shame and a sense of lost possibilities that pervades the manner in which they tell it. It is sad to hear these stories, but even sadder to see the same thing happen with the next generation. Sometimes when students quit, we blame the parents for not emphasizing the importance of lessons, or we blame the students themselves for not having the work ethic or the love for music. But we can also blame the proliferation of students who quit as evidence that we are no longer teaching with the right goals in mind.

Choosing Repertoire

It almost goes without saying that the most successful way to increase students’ enjoyment of music lessons is to choose high-quality repertoire that they want to play. Our job as teachers is to get students to the point where they feel satisfaction and pride in addition to the sheer delight brought on by making music. Part of how we do this is by giving students pieces that are attainable at their individual level. If teachers assign music that is too challenging, the student will always feel frustrated and will not be motivated to practice.

Furthermore, even when a piece is within a student’s level of ability, it is the teacher’s job to sequence tasks and choose learning strategies that will provide for student success. Often that means teaching appropriate practice strategies, such as isolating particular

measures and perhaps practicing slowly or hands separately. Learning to isolate difficult measures and practice detailed work using focused attention is a valuable skill. For one thing, practice strategies help students become independent from their teacher because they can begin to apply the same strategies in multiple pieces. In addition, students learn to tackle challenges by buckling down and giving these challenges careful, focused attention. The importance of this skill cannot be overemphasized because it offers young people the tools for success in a world where creative solutions are valued and financial or professional challenges can be overwhelming.

Often, students request a particular piece, such as Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata or Debussy's *Claire de Lune*. There is much to be said for the motivation brought on by a genuine love for a particular piece. However, many times, teachers are forced to refuse a student's request because the student lacks the technical proficiency or musical maturity for the chosen piece. It is always helpful in these situations to offer students an alternative—a piece that sounds similar, is by the same composer or otherwise possesses the qualities that initially drew the student in. For instance, if a student wants to play Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata Opus 13, a teacher could offer the Bonn Sonata in F Minor, which presents many similarities.

Another idea is to offer the student an easier arrangement of the piece. An example of an anthology that could be used in such a situation is the Alfred *Famous and Fun: Classics* series, in which well-known pieces are arranged by Carol Matz.¹ With good reason, however, some teachers philosophically oppose the idea of teaching a standard piece that is not in the original version by the composer.

Teachers should consider variety, balance and the appropriate level when making repertoire assignments. Some students only want to play slow pieces

in minor; other students want to play only fast pieces with a thick texture. Teachers should be careful to assign pieces students will enjoy, while also including pieces that will help students continue to grow as well-rounded musicians. Short pieces that are an appropriately challenging level will expand students' repertoire list, and students may find their preferences expanding as they play more music.

The Teacher As Model

Passion for music is contagious. When a teacher demonstrates a piece to a student for the first time, it is immediately obvious whether the teacher has a genuine love for the piece. If the teacher's eyes light up as she plays or sings the piece, a smile spreads on the child's face, and he is anxious to get home and practice. By showing her own excitement about the music, the teacher has kindled a fire that can begin to burn brightly if the student knows he is capable.

Additionally, teachers who practice and perform regularly show their students that making music is enjoyable and is a worthwhile expenditure of time and effort. Demonstrating often will help students hear a sound ideal. Playing or singing pieces by the same composers or in similar styles will acquaint students with a more general sense of how their particular piece fits into a larger musical, historical and stylistic context. Students are often astonished to see their humble teacher transform into a musical virtuoso. They may leave the lesson impressed, inspired and hopeful that they may one day be at the same level as their teacher.

The Motivation Factor

Unfortunately, there is little that teachers can do to force students to practice. Scolding or admonishing students goes only so far, and sometimes it even backfires. Occasionally, encouraging parental involvement can help underscore the importance of regular

practice. But for the most part, teachers need to turn their attention to the students themselves. If the students are not motivated to practice, it will not happen, no matter what external forces are present.

There are several factors that affect motivation. Fear is one such factor, but it only works on a temporary basis and only when the source of fear is present. The pressure of being prepared for an upcoming lesson or a performance can motivate students to practice. Competition can also affect motivation: a desire to perform better than a sibling, finish a book before another student at the same level or practice more than any other student in the studio are examples of practicing as a result of competition.

Rewards are another source of motivation. If students are given a sticker for practicing a certain number of days per week, for example, a reward system is being presented in which students do the work only for an external result. Rewards may be quite effective in getting students to accomplish the work, but they may not emphasize the value of the work itself. If students practice to get a sticker, rather than because they enjoy playing music or want to play the piece well, the teacher may question what the student is actually getting from music lessons. If the long-term goal for music lessons is to increase discipline, overcome challenges and develop a love for music, short-term rewards will not help achieve this goal.

In *Punished by Rewards*, Alfie Kohn attacks the behaviorist learning theory that is so prevalent in our educational system. He states that rewards used for extrinsic motivation, such as grades, are destructive to interest and achievement because they focus students' attention on performance, rather than on the process of learning. Learning should be a process of discovery, Kohn says, in which teachers elicit students' curiosity and clarify the value of assigned tasks. He defines the term

“intrinsic motivation” as “the desire to engage in an activity for its own sake—that is, just because of the satisfaction it provides.”² Demonstrating the value of practice, modeling the pure enjoyment of making music and establishing an appreciation for music in our young ones will help achieve the goals of music lessons for parents and teachers. It will also instill core values in students that will last a lifetime.

Success breeds more success. Teachers who give their students pieces at an appropriate level are taking a step in the right direction. Furthermore, teachers should sequence tasks in ways that will lead students to be successful. By breaking down information into small pieces that can be easily absorbed and applied, teachers mold their students into proficient learners who have more confidence and will therefore put more effort into each task.

The Final Reward

The very act of practice is satisfying. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states:

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives.³

What Csikszentmihalyi is saying is quite revolutionary within our culture, which perceives work as difficult, seri-

ous effort—the opposite of “fun.” But complete absorption in a task is actually a peak experience, the highest form of happiness. Although we may not

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reach the “flow” state every time we practice, attaining that condition once may offer the impetus to continue practicing.

The temporary enjoyment of an activity—the “fun” factor—is not the long-term goal of music study. The satisfaction of being able to play a piece well or mastering the technical difficulties of a complex passage; the pride that comes from being able to play an instrument or sing when so few people can even read music; the confidence that arises when performing well in front of friends and family—these are the types of rewards that music offers, if students are willing to put in the necessary work. But they are external rewards and even less affirming than the very act of making music. Practicing is work, but playing music is fun. There is perhaps no activity so life-affirming or gratifying for the soul. Those who have felt this joy are willing to put effort into the work because they are familiar with the intrinsic reward.

Children have not stopped being creative. They have an innate desire to

make music, and that is obvious every time a child sings, dances to music or gets such delight from playing a simple instrument, such as a drum or a slide

whistle. There exists in every child a strong imagination, a powerful need to create and a natural, instinctive understanding of rhythm and melody that has been part of every human generation since the beginning of time. Those qualities are not going to disappear because of video games or television. It is up to us as teachers to learn how to capture those natural abilities and mold them to meet the highest standards. Our most difficult job is not the actual teaching of music—it is learning how to reach children imaginatively, teaching them about the rewards of hard work and keeping them

enrolled in music lessons even when other activities seem like more fun.

The final goal of music lessons is not to enjoy oneself. But if students have fun while they are learning, then they are more likely to learn the material better and do the necessary work more often. If challenges are undertaken and attained, if students begin to enjoy the act of performing because they feel proud of what they have done and if they develop a love of music that will last for a lifetime, music teachers will have done their job.



NOTES

1. Carol Matz, *Famous and Fun: Classics, Books 1-5* (Van Nuys, California: Alfred, 2005).

2. Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 290.

3. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 6.

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