

Choosing a music teacher for your child

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Introduction

This little book is written for parents who are thinking of starting their child on the journey towards learning music. It is written from my personal experience as a teacher – mostly of adults, but also of children of various ages. Other teachers may agree or disagree with my points; we all have different ideas and views. However, my main aim in writing this short book is to guide parents to find a competent teacher, get the best outcome for their child, contribute in the best possible way to learning and to ask the right questions. There is no “one size fits all” for matching a child to a teacher. By the end of this book, I hope that parents will be able to confidently interview prospective teachers and make good, positive decisions along the journey.

My qualifications are a B.Mus and an M.Mus (Hons) from the University of Sydney. My M.Mus thesis was on the pedagogy (teaching) and development of technique on the viola da gamba, and I had lessons in the US and Norway with Laurence Dreyfus, Mary Springfels, Catharina Meints and others who are well-recognised in their fields. I have also done some courses in the Dalcroze method of music education. I have taught music since the 1980s, privately in NSW and Queensland, as well as at workshops around Australia, and continue to do so. I’m a professional member of both ASME and AUSTA.

I have performing experience on viola da gamba across Australia and a few concerts overseas.

I’m also a qualified naturopath, and I keep my health comments to a bare minimum when I’m teaching music, but occasionally I see something worth discussing with the parents.

Patrice Connelly

Why learn music?

What’s in it for your child? Rather a lot, really. Music training has many advantages for the student, including better development of the areas of the brain devoted to language and reasoning. Learning music can help to rewire some areas of the left brain to help language processing. It helps to open the imagination.

Another benefit is in spatial development. This helps the development of mathematical intelligence, pattern recognition and problem solving. In general, learning music through childhood is associated with higher marks and better performance in high school and beyond.

Music comes to us from many countries, and children are exposed to music from other cultures. This helps to encourage tolerance and empathy towards difference without it being threatening.

Fostering excellence is the work of a good teacher. If a note is out of tune, a student has to learn to get it into tune. It has to be in time, and if playing with others, one has to come in at the right time too. All of these things must be learned, which is excellent discipline and helps the child look for and attain excellence, which translates into other areas of life.

Performing with others is part of music education. Whether it’s a symphony orchestra, big band, recorder group, choir or small ensemble, this is teamwork and discipline, as well as being highly enjoyable to most participants. Rewards come from hard work, and self-esteem is enhanced.

The experience of dealing with preparation and performance will expose the child to some degree of nervousness, as well as achievement. The ability to cope with these events helps them to cope with other stresses in later life, and know that they can come through them safely. It's important for your child to be resilient enough to fail occasionally and rise again!

Music is self-expression and creativity. Through learning an instrument, the child may well foster a talent in composing or other aspects of creative work. Working with others can be rewarding and spiritual, leading to a more well-rounded person.

All of these benefits come from long-term musical training, preferably with a good, professional teacher, an investment in a quality instrument, and lots of positive encouragement from parents and family. Forcing a child to learn when they aren't interested is a waste of time and money. But if they are interested, even if they don't have a lot of talent, they can still enjoy themselves and reap rewards.

When to start

I've often been asked at what age should a child begin music lessons. This depends on what is available in your area. Perhaps I could answer pre-natally. It's well known that babies in the womb can hear sounds from outside and react to them. Some mothers purposely play music to their children while in the womb, which might affect their musical progress positively.

But let's assume your child didn't get that experience, which is OK. If there is an infant's music program locally, that could be very beneficial. Using music games can help your child grow in many different ways: socially, in listening skills, motor skills, appreciation of music and much more. These programs involve a group of children in skipping, running, dancing, walking and other activities to music. The teacher may tell a story and get the children to move in a particular way to illustrate the story. They might clap to a rhythm, or sing or carry out instructions. It's all very valuable, but not always easy to find teachers who run these groups.

Then there are Suzuki teachers. Dr Suzuki's method of teaching young children relies on the "mother-tongue" principal – that children learn best from hearing what is around them. Parents are strongly involved in lessons, taking notes and acting as home teachers. Children need to listen to repertoire, and repetition is a strong aspect of learning. Reading music is postponed, and children memorise their music from an early age.

If you are interested in Suzuki teaching, there are plenty of teachers who practise it, and Suzuki centres around Australia.

But if you haven't done any of the above, all is not lost! Let's say your child wants to learn piano. Age is not terribly relevant. It could be any time between roughly age four and eight or older, and it depends entirely on the child. It's important to get this right. A pushy parent who asks about exams long before junior can read music is a very bad sign, as is the child who continually tells the teacher that they would much rather be swimming instead of carrying out my last instruction! That child is not interested in music lessons.

Music lessons cost money. A good, professional teacher with qualifications will be charging at least \$30 for a half hour lesson (and probably more), and for a child, weekly lessons are mandatory if they're to have a chance of success.

The things that tell you your child is ready include:

- sufficient hand development so that they have the strength to push down a piano key or use a small instrument, and the co-ordination to hold a pencil or crayon. If they can't do that, then don't even think of lessons yet, except for special infant music lessons.
- the ability to count to at least ten. Counting is important in learning music.
- enthusiasm. If a child doesn't want to learn, no music teacher really wants to teach them.
- an attention span that is long enough to cope with a 30 minute lesson.
- enough development so that they can follow a list of instructions and achieve them. If you can't expect your child to go and change into a particular T shirt, put their used clothing in the basket and then come back and see you within five minutes, all without help, then it's also too early to start formal lessons.

When children begin lessons around age four to six, it's important for a teacher to create games, explain things clearly and be patient. Your child should want to come to lessons each week. A little chat about what is going on in their lives is good to build rapport. Clapping, dancing, singing and playing with percussion instruments or music cards is all part of the fun. Cute stickers in their theory book is also a good way to reward the child.

As they get older, the teacher has to adjust their explanation, and raise the stakes a little, but still keep a sense of fun and achievement going so that the student wants to keep going.

What about the parent?

A good parent from the point of view of a music teacher is one who comes to lessons, asks good questions, but preferably at the end of the lesson (make notes as you go), and supervises their child's practice at home. Praise is important, but when it is deserved. Children know when praise is false. I do not believe in saying something is good when it isn't, but I do believe in picking up on anything positive a child has done to reinforce progress and desire to go on.

As a parent, you need to commit to weekly lessons. Children need that supervision as well as the regime of practice and review by a qualified teacher. It's quite easy for a child to forget instructions, and start to create bad habits. Fortnightly lessons will only worsen this.

Parents need to have enough money to pay for lessons, music books and accessories (strings, reeds, etc). For children, most teachers charge for a term of 8-12 weeks. Payment upfront and on time is appreciated. Ask the teacher what arrangements they have.

You also need to obtain an instrument, and if you want to inspire your child, then getting the cheapest and nastiest isn't good. A bad instrument will always sound bad, which means junior will hate it. It's a waste of money! You also need to be patient and encouraging, as enforcement of practice is another good way to kill a child's love for their instrument.

And remember your teacher is (or should be) a professional. Teachers have to pay bills just the same as parents do. Having a child not show up for their lesson causes stress if there is no notice. Please give your teacher as much notice as possible. Everyone understands that there may be a few times when late notice may be inevitable, but it is just rude not to give any notice at all. And please don't treat your music teacher like a cleaner and order them around.

What to look for in a teacher

Music teachers should have formal qualifications: if not a music degree, at least a recognised diploma or certificate in performance for their instrument and some teaching courses. These could include a B.Mus, B.Mus Ed., M.Mus, B.A. with music major or a similar degree with some music education component, or a Dip.Mus. Ed, Dip. Ed with a music major or a Graduate Diploma or Certificate. The AMEB (Australian Music Examinations Board) and similar bodies around the world may also have teacher qualification courses. Look for a T.MusA which is the AMEB's diploma qualification.

There are other music education courses too. Three: Orff, Kodaly and Dalcroze are all geared at teaching children music through movement, singing, rhythm and games. If your choice of teacher has experience in one of those three, this is a good sign. The use of percussion instruments as well as movement and clapping in a lesson is good, especially for small kids.

These days a music teacher should also be able to produce a blue card. However, if parents stay in the room with the student, nothing should go wrong.

Never entrust your child to someone who is just one or two lessons ahead of them. Bad habits are SO hard to break. I have taken on children who have learned for a significant period of time – over a year – and who still cannot read music properly, have no theory knowledge at all, cannot sight read or do scales properly or have spent all their time learning music hands separately when this is a technique to be used only in the beginning stages of learning a piece. Generally I have to start them all over again, and I am aghast at the waste of time and money the child and their parents have endured.

Does the teacher treat all the students the same, regardless of age and ability? I don't see the point of that. We have left or right brained people with very different outlooks and abilities. A teacher needs to be able to see where more help is needed and give it. Also to modify explanations to suit the age and ability of the student.

I have often been asked if I teach clarinet or guitar or drums. I don't, and I make it clear when asked. I only teach what I am qualified and well-prepared for. If you ask a teacher and they say they don't teach XYZ but maybe they could, that's not professional.

When you change teachers, please give your old teacher sufficient notice. A text message or email on the day the child is expected for their lesson is impolite. You should give at least two weeks' notice. Many teachers put heart and soul into teaching and helping children, especially if they have talent. It can be a bit of a wrench to lose them. Of course that can happen because families move out of the area, or for various other reasons. But speak to the teacher you are leaving rather than just sending a message.

Also be prepared for the new teacher to do things differently. All teachers have their particular skills and there is not just one right way to do many things in music. With any luck, the new teacher will like what the old teacher taught, but that may not always be the case. Try to work positively with that and avoid badmouthing about any teacher. It's not a good example to your child.

Avoid a teacher who shouts at students (unless they've broken something or been very naughty). Teachers should never include shouting as part of the music teaching process. Also avoid any teachers who make snide remarks or do not give praise when it's due. It is not out of place to speak to the teacher privately after the lesson about anything that concerns you as the parent.

What instrument should someone start on?

There's only one choice for me: piano. That doesn't mean your child wants or needs to continue with piano if they really want to learn trumpet or cello. But doing at least a year on piano will have some really great benefits, and keeping it going as a second instrument can also be very useful.

Firstly, it gives the ability to read two lines of music at once: treble and bass clefs. If you start first on recorder or violin, you only read treble clef. I know people who have done this and they never get as good at reading the bass clef if they're not using it.

Secondly, you can see your theory lesson on the piano. You can't see it on a violin or a trumpet. With the layout of the keys, you can count your intervals, play scales and gain an appreciation of space in a way which is much less likely on any other instrument.

Thirdly, it's fun. Most kids love plunking away on a piano and it will often get them asking for their music lessons to start with.

Remember a good instrument is important. There are good electric pianos around if you don't have a good acoustic instrument. If you do have an old piano downstairs, please make sure it is in tune. A piano tuner needs to come to the house and repair and tune it if it's an oldie. This can cost between \$140 and \$200 plus parts if necessary. Learning on a broken or out of tune piano is a no-no, and the same goes for any other instrument.

What else can they play?

If a piano just isn't an option, and it may not be for some, then at least learning recorder, flute, clarinet, violin or any other instrument, or singing is going to be of benefit to your child. If it's drums or something loud, please remember your neighbours.

A recorder is not just a kid's instrument. There are wonderful professional recorder players who give concerts internationally, as well as the difficult repertoire for them to play. Don't go out and buy a \$5 recorder. Deal with a shop that is reputable and specialises. Likewise stringed instruments, saxophones, trumpets and anything else. That dented old trombone you picked up on eBay for \$10 won't do for even a minute.

Classical or pop?

Many kids will want to play the pop music they've heard on radio, TV or their games. There's nothing wrong with this, but remember, it's not necessarily going to teach them a great deal. Talk to your teacher about this. As a teacher, I like to see all of my students learning music which has depth and quality to it. Not something that's here today, gone tomorrow (for good reason).

I would recommend classical training. If your child wants to go in the direction of jazz piano, pop music or something else, everything they have learned in classical music is still relevant. A traditional classical training will teach them to read music, count, get rhythm right, and give them a grounding in music theory.

Some (not all) pop musicians who teach guitar or pop music may not have had a good music education. Just because someone can get up on stage and play quickly doesn't make them a good musician. On the other hand, there are some wonderful jazz musicians who have been through degrees at their local Conservatorium of Music, and if they have teaching ability, they could be a fantastic choice of teacher for your child. It's great to learn many genres of music.

What it comes down to is your child. Some kids will only learn music to have a bit of fun. There's nothing wrong with that. Even if they have no real musical ability, a year or so's tuition with a compatible teacher should be a really useful experience for them. But if there's talent there, it's a shame to waste it. Every music teacher will want to see potential realised as far as possible.

Theory or not?

I believe that every student should start theory pretty soon after they start learning an instrument and the teacher should integrate theory into the lesson. The theory supports the practice, and the practice supports the theory. I will take the theory book and show where a particular aspect of theory occurs in their piano book. For example, an upbeat or anacrusis is a little incomplete bar at the beginning of a piece, and that number of beats is taken away from the last bar. Usually they learn about it on piano first, so they understand it when it comes up in theory, but I get the student to go back and find pieces with an anacrusis so that they see the relevance of their theory.

A music teacher who can't teach any theory or isn't sure enough of their theory to teach is not good enough in my opinion. If they're great at their instrument, they should go and learn the theory properly so they can teach it. If a child doesn't learn any theory at all, by fourth grade or higher they are really not able to know what is going on.

Pitfalls

Usually the 6 month point is the stickiest. This is the point a child might get bored with the book they're working on, or just get a bit sick of practice. I've had students drop out with the parent saying "Little X doesn't seem to be enjoying it now, so we're going to give it a bit of a break." In my experience that "bit of a break" will be permanent, and as an adult, that person

will say “I had a few lessons when I was a child, and I wish I’d kept it up, but I was too lazy to practice.”

You as a parent are in charge. If your child has had lessons and shown absolutely no interest or aptitude, then it’s time to give up. You gave it a shot, and that’s fine.

But if it’s just a passing hiccup, please don’t give up. Talk to the teacher. Ask what can be done differently. You may need a change of teacher at this point if things aren’t working. But give the teacher a chance to talk to your child, offer something new or do something differently. Some kids are really obvious about how they feel and others aren’t.

Listening

These days there are some fabulous resources out there. YouTube, Spotify, radio stations, movies, DVDs to borrow at the local library. There’s a lot more than when you were a kid. Teachers should use and suggest some of these resources to add to the lessons. For example, if your child is learning a piece by Bach or Beethoven, then go to YouTube and find some other pieces by the same composers and their contemporaries for your child to listen to. They can really impress the teacher by saying they listened to a Beethoven symphony (he wrote 9 ...) or some Bach Preludes and Fugues. It broadens their musical knowledge and their ears!

Your place or the teacher’s?

I prefer to teach from my studio. I know there won’t be interruptions. I have a good acoustic piano to teach on. All of my books and music library are available. And coming to someone else’s house usually means a child might take things less for granted than they might at home.

Some teachers will come to your place. That may be really convenient, but there are some things to note. Firstly, please minimise interruptions. Make sure your piano is in good condition and everything is set up properly so time isn’t wasted. Even if you’re tempted to do something else, it is useful (if the teacher prefers it) for you to stay with the lesson. This is for the same reasons I outlined in the section above on What about the parent?

Posture and ergonomics

It is the teacher’s job to look after the student in terms of encouraging students to have good posture. This can help to avoid problems like RSI if the student goes on to full time studies in music. One thing to watch out for is that shoulders should never be raised. This goes for every instrument. Raising the shoulders is unnecessary, and can interfere with correct technique. Talk to the teacher about correct height of the chair, good posture sitting or standing, depending on what is being learned, and try to get everything at home the right height for practice. There should never be pain from learning music. If there is, something is wrong.

How long should practice be?

This depends on your child, what they are learning, and where they are going with it. A four or five year old should do short practice, probably with some parental guidance perhaps twice a day. At that age, practice has to be fun or they will decide they never want to learn music again.

It depends on your child's concentration and focus whether you set a particular period, such as half an hour after school, or fifteen minutes before school. It is easy to waste time if there are distractions, so try to find a good time each day and stick to it as much as possible. I believe that shorter periods of practice with good focus are better than a mandatory half hour or hour where the student is not concentrating on what they're doing.

Of course if the student has an exam or a concert coming up, extra practice will be needed, and your teacher can direct you about how much practice is needed.

Exams

Some teachers insist on all of their students doing exams, and they teach from the published exam books. I don't.

Exams are run by the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) in Australia, or Trinity College or the Associated Board of the Royal School of Music (ABRSM) in the UK. All are reputable and recognised systems. These exams may be needed for scholarships, to certify that someone has achieved a certain level to get into a school or university or some other reason.

Exams can give a student something to work towards and provide discipline in the learning. The exam requirements are 3 pieces plus 2 "extra list" for the early grades, and 4 pieces plus more extra list in the higher grades. Alongside this will be sight reading, aural testing and general knowledge about all of the pieces selected for the exam and the composers.

I don't teach to exams. I use the exam requirements as a point of departure, but I take my students in all directions. Some of the pieces I teach will be set for exams, and others won't be for no particular reason. I teach all of the exam requirements, but try to go further, and teach music. Any performing musician has to be able to swap genres and change and react very quickly to new stimuli or requirements. On a concert platform, you may need to play a very happy piece followed by a very sad one, and convey those emotions clearly and faithfully. No doubt there are other disciplines where a similar change is required. I don't like to see a student in a rut.

In fact, my aim is to see students learn as many pieces as possible and in different genres. This gives them a wide appreciation of music in general, great reading ability and improves their sight reading no end, as well as keeping up the interest. It may not work for exam preparation, but I'd still throw in the odd new thing now and then to change the pace.

The exam syllabuses are not a music course, but many teachers use them as such. Some of these are excellent teachers and they turn out a well-trained student with a set of certificates for each exam. Other teachers turn out students who have not gone any further than the requirements, and who may have little or no experience of repertoire outside their exam pieces or other types of music. This may reflect the teacher's own experience of learning too. Teachers often teach the same way they were taught and some go no further than what they learned.

For example, the AMEB syllabus has very little music dating from before about 1700. This ignores centuries of music before that. As the student progresses, I give them pieces to learn which were composed well before that date so as to broaden their knowledge of music throughout history. I also teach them music history as we go and give listening tasks.

Exams can be expensive. For theory, I have a set of old exam papers, and I get students to do them during a lesson so I can mark them and give them their results straight away. If you do a formal exam, you will get a piece of paper, but you never see the exam paper again, and often find out very little about what went right or wrong.

Students can also get terribly nervous about exams and not sleep well or have nightmares. Or they may get so nervous that they fail the exam and give up. Rather than doing exams from Preliminary to 8th grade and beyond to the diploma exams, I'd rather spare them a bit in the early stages. They could always do their first exam at the 4th or 5th grade level if necessary.

You could argue that it's good experience having to present a program of pieces to an examiner. I agree, and if you choose this path, make sure your teacher encourages your child to play in front of others a few times before the exam so that they get used to having people listen. At school or in a little student concert is fine. Try an old people's home too. The residents usually love it. Call first of course, and ask if there's a suitable instrument and make a time.

Eating right!

It's certainly not the job of your music teacher to review or criticise your child's diet, but be aware that a few things will be of benefit. Everyone needs essential fatty acids. Note the word "essential" there. They are in fish oils, flaxseed oil, walnuts and other foods. Without them, a child's brain will not develop properly, and they may experience mood swings.

If your child bites their nails, can't quite always think straight, and is a bit too upbeat, calcium is a sedative mineral which is needed by the body for many functions. Just any old calcium may not be right, so seek professional advice.

Or do you have a moody teenager, with pasty skin, a few pimples, split ends to their hair and bitten fingernails. Did they decide they suddenly weren't going to eat meat for some reason? Or do they just live on junk food? Chances are they aren't getting enough protein and vegetables. Again, seek professional dietary advice.

And then there's water. I like to see a water bottle at lessons. Dehydration means that they can't necessarily think straight. And people do get chronically dehydrated. Have the equivalent of a glass of water before a lesson, and results will be better.

I could say a huge amount more about diet and learning, but that's not the point of this little book. See a professional naturopath or nutritionist (check the qualifications) to get your child's (and your) diet assessed and see what can be improved. Everyone will benefit.

Mozart on your mind?

Have you heard of the “Mozart Effect”? The term was coined nearly 20 years ago, by a French music researcher who used the music of Mozart (pronounced Moat-zart) to promote healing within the brain. Since then a number of researchers have investigated this phenomenon, and have found beneficial if temporary effects on spatial reasoning, which helps the listener with the ability to visualise patterns, and mentally manipulate them, which helps with things like science, maths, art and games.

The Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1792) had a short life, but composed over 600 pieces, ranging from little piano pieces to large-scale choral and orchestral works. Would he have been surprised that his music is still popular centuries later?

In 1997, the author Don Campbell wrote a book on the “Mozart Effect”, discussing the theory that listening to piano concertos by Mozart can temporarily increase one’s IQ, and produce many other beneficial effects on mental function.

Since then there have been many attempts (some successful) to replicate studies showing the effect, as well as the doubters who put it down to the relaxing effects of the music putting the listener into a good mood. But further research in America has shown that listening to a Mozart piano sonata has been associated with a strong reduction in epileptic seizures, even from patients in comas.

So, if you’re studying or working, having Mozart quietly on in the background instead of the local radio could be a useful thing to do to improve mood, concentration and ability to focus.

Adult learners

I love teaching adults. People bring such interesting life experiences to their lessons. But best of all are the parents who might have played when young, or maybe never had the opportunity. Having some piano (or other instrumental) lessons a month or two before your child starts is just great. Why?

Firstly, you’ll know what they’re going through. Secondly, you’ll have a better idea of how it feels and what’s expected. Thirdly, you can help your child, especially if you keep going. And lastly, any teacher should be able to find easy duets so you can play with your kids. What better family bonding experience is there than sharing the learning and the fun of playing?

Internet music lessons

Can you successfully learn music via the internet? In most cases the answer is no, but there can be exceptions. The internet can be a wonderful supplement to face to face weekly lessons and has a lot to offer, but you need to look out for a few things, not least that you can’t believe everything you see online.

For people in remote areas without an available music teacher, then Skype lessons could be the answer. These won’t be free, and you should ask all the same questions of that teacher that you would of a local teacher.

There are also various online courses without support or the intervention of a person at the other end. These may or may not be free. It would be good to get the opinion of someone who has studied music if that's possible. If not, look for the qualifications of the person behind the website and try to work out if it's a quality presentation or not. The other main problem is that children usually don't have the willpower to keep going with courses like this.

Professional music education bodies

The Music Teachers Association of Australia has branches in each state, and requires all of their professional members to be fully qualified.

ASME is the Australian Society for Music Education. This covers mainly school music teachers, and advocates for quality music education throughout the school system in Australia.

AUSTA is the Australian String Teachers Association. They look after all string teachers, and run professional development courses.

There are other associations and societies which may be useful. If you are in a city, talk to the nearest conservatorium. They may be able to recommend teachers.

There are many websites which list music teachers. Check qualifications and speak to the teacher to see if their attitude and expertise will suit you and your child's situation.

And for more information ...

For an inspiring lecture on why every child needs music in their education, check out Richard Gill's TedX Sydney talk which is on YouTube. Richard Gill is one of the most important people in Australia who advocates for quality music education, and you should check up on his videos and blogs. There are also a lot of other TedX talks on YouTube about music education which are worth watching, but please start with Richard Gill's.

Another great animated video is at www.ideapod.com. Search for "How playing an instrument benefits your brain". This is a great one to show your music student. It's less than 5 minutes.

Conclusion

I hope this information has been interesting and helpful to you. Remember other teachers may differ on various points, or have requirements and ideas quite different from mine. It is your choice, your child, your money and your time. Sometimes the teacher with the best qualifications can't teach for peanuts, and one with lesser qualifications may be extremely gifted, but every music teacher should have studied how to teach music and be qualified and act professionally at all times.

Best of luck!

Patrice

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