

# Music

## for the very young

BY WENDY HILL

There has been much interest in *The Elements of Music* course and I have often been asked if I've written anything to precede it.

*The Elements of Music* volumes are for eight years and over because of the reading, writing and cognitive skills needed. After much thought about music for the very young, I concluded that no new books or recordings are necessary. This article explains why and then offers fifteen tips for musical training of the very young.

### A BIG PICTURE OF MUSIC EDUCATION

There is enormous pressure today for very young children to learn an instrument. From the 1980s, music education became a low priority in the curriculum. I remember my primary years in the 1960s, beginning the school day with music. In the school assembly we sang the National Anthem and marched around to rousing music before starting classes. A myriad of reasons and benefits are given to justify learning music—the emotional, physical, social, cultural, cognitive, aesthetic, and creative benefits.

In the last 50–60 years there has been a proliferation of new music methods—Suzuki, Yamaha and general music groups

for pre-schoolers and even babies. Countless instrumental music methods with their colourful music books teach the very young. Publishers and music retailers profit from this huge market. Seeing a young child play fast, loud and beautifully is very impressive. Many parents see this and want these skills for their own children. Schools are beginning to see the benefit of starting music early and realising the cost of its neglect of music.

Music is now being blown out of all proportion in relation to its position in the whole scheme of God's creation. Let's attempt to bring balance based on a Biblical perspective.

God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the second of which tells us not to worship idols. Today musicians (and even music itself) have become idols, like sports or film stars. This applies not only to contemporary, popular music but also classic styles. So-called great classical composers, most of whom have led ungodly lives, are worshipped. History usually records their musical output and the sordid details of their lives rather than the spiritual beliefs which form the foundation of their lifestyles. In comparison, Godly Christian hymnwriters get far less recognition because their music is not as technically brilliant or designed for performance.

## WORSHIP MUSIC

Many churches today place too much emphasis on music. Worship is easily worshipped. Music is used to attract youth. This unfortunately replaces the work of the Holy Spirit so that many young people attend to hear the music and enjoy the mood and atmosphere more than learn from God's Word. Contemporary rock music floods many churches. The development of Christian character is affected as music gains a stronghold, which flows down to the very young even babies and toddlers. Many songs for little children have the essential features of rock music.

## MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

I mentioned earlier how there is much pressure today to learn a musical instrument. We associate learning music with learning an instrument. In the Renaissance Period (1450–1600), when instrumental music began to become prominent, there was a parallel surge in humanism, which has continued to present day. Much of the music written since the Renaissance has been instrumental music—for man's entertainment and glory. Consequently it is assumed an instrument must be studied before we can understand music.

God's words to the Romans still apply today:

They exchanged the Truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator.

*Romans 1:25*

The humanistic path glorifies three things: **music**; **man** and his achievements; and **money**, which keeps the wheels of the music industry turning.

Having given a big picture of music history and education, I trust you will understand my reasons for not writing more materials for the very young at this stage.

Instrumental music is vastly over-rated today. God has given us all an instrument—the voice. We should encourage our Children to sing, especially praises to God.

For me to create more music materials would be to join others on the bandwagon of appealing to another market.

## Fifteen tips for musical training of the very young

1. Recognise any pressure to start your child on an instrument. Question yourself : 'Why do I really want my child to learn an instrument—is it prompted by God?'
2. Make music a part of everyday life. Music is essential, not an elective subject. Singing praises to God helps lift the spirit and builds faith. Learning an instrument is a privilege and luxury but not an essential.
3. Encourage your children to sing. Make up little songs or sing songs of praise as you work and play together.
4. Memorise as many hymns as possible. These important life-giving words and

melodies will be firmly planted in your children's memories and hearts and will remain the rest of their days.

5. Put scripture to simple songs. This is a great way of memorising verses as the rhythms and melodies add an extra aid for memorising. The melodies can be very simple. This is between you, your children and God. No-one else need hear them.
6. Listen to good quality music. By this I mean music with well-balanced music elements—melody, harmony and rhythm. Apply three basic concepts:
  - a. Rhythm represents the body. The beat and rhythms are based on time which binds and dictates our lives.
  - b. Harmony represents the soul. Chords in music directly affect emotions and can excite or calm the listener. The mood and atmosphere of a household can be changed with music.
  - c. Melody represents the spirit. Melody is the part of music which can be sung. Melody is directly linked with language, our God-given ability to speak.

Well-balanced music emphasises melody and words. Rhythm and harmony are secondary. In other words, the spirit is dominant. Where the beat is too loud or there is too much rhythm, excessive physical movement results. This is increasingly evident in music and in TV shows for earlier ages, including toddlers. In

other words, when beat and rhythm are too strong, the body is dominant. Be aware of not enough melody or rhythm and too much harmony. The chords drift into one another. New Age music and relaxation and meditation music have this dreamy, 'at one with the universe' quality. In other words, the soul is dominant.

God designed us with spirit, soul and body in perfect balance and music should reflect this. The music elements affect our whole being. Melody and words should be strongest, with rhythm and beat in the background.

7. Realise that you as parents are the main influence and God's chosen teachers for your child and you have power and authority to develop his/her character. Music can be a powerful tool as a child's whole being is affected by music both negatively and positively depending on the balance of the elements. The styles of music you allow your children to hear influence their character. YOU decide what music is allowed in your home, not the child.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, the ancient Greek philosophers, Napoleon and many others recognised the influence of music on youth and society. Many books have been written on this topic of music influencing character. A lot of teenage rebellion can be prevented by developing good listening habits in the early years.

Use the quickening of Holy Spirit in your heart and conscience to help your

discernment. So many parents know intuitively there is something ‘not right’ about the music blaring from their child’s bedroom but cannot give reasons why it should be stopped. Explain to your children the links between spirit/melody, soul/harmony and body/rhythm.

8. Be aware of how God has designed the ears to be supersensitive for higher purposes—not just for learning words, language and music notes, but also receiving subtleties of voice tones and musical expression. I shudder to think of the effects of new little ears being assaulted with poor quality background music. Some examples are the sounds from TV in maternity wards of hospitals on newborns; TV shows and commercial radio as young mums feed their babies; the mechanical, relentless, addictive beat in computer games played by older siblings; the scary, sinister, sudden, aggressive loud music as parents watch movies; and the lifeless, artificial music-box sounds from modern babies toys. Background music is composed to create a specific atmosphere and depict the characters in the shows and games. Would we allow those characters associated with these types of sounds enter our home and influence our children?

Life gives life. Electronically generated, synthesised sounds are dead sounds. They lack the spirit and human energy of a live musician.

Genesis 2:7 tells how God ‘breathed into his [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being.’ Man-made things are merely copies of what God has already made—a computer copies the brain, a microphone copies the ear, a camera copies the eye, a robot copies the human body. Likewise electronically generated music copies a musician. These man-made machines lack the breath of life from God. Only humans have this gift.

Babies or toddlers may seem asleep, unresponsive and unaware of ambient sounds around. But all sounds are absorbed and are often reproduced later in the choice of music played and listened to. Unfortunately in public places such as shopping centres and waiting rooms, some sounds are hard to avoid. But in the home, parents have control to set high listening standards. Parents have the authority to decide what goes into their child’s ears—junk or healthy.

9. Avoid dumbed-down music. Don’t underestimate the listening abilities of a young child. They don’t know whether music is simple or complicated. Little children can learn several languages in a few years. They can easily absorb complicated music. A Bach Brandenburg concerto is just as interesting as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. The very young are better off listening to original versions of the classics rather than simplified and

shortened versions. Our two children had complicated Renaissance, Baroque and Classical music played nightly as babies and toddlers. Those early years of listening set high standards for listening which last a lifetime.

Much popular, contemporary rock music today is based on only three basic chords and is highly repetitive and can be boring, uninteresting and addictive. The brain switches off after three repetitions. God has given us brains capable of comprehending much more stimulating and sophisticated music.

10. Discern between good and poor quality vocal music. Professionally trained singers have learned how to pitch notes accurately, how to use clear diction and breathe properly. Typical popular, sensual singers will often slide up or down to notes, use excessive vibrato ('wobbling' on a note), slur words into each other, not pronounce consonants clearly, and breathe close to the microphone giving an atmosphere of inappropriate intimacy. God wants us to use our voices skilfully just as he expects musicians to play instruments skilfully. Your children will imitate what they hear.

11. Train your child to appreciate the blessings of silence. Psalm 46:10 tells us to 'Be still and know that I am God.' So many young people are addicted to sounds in their iPods and

car radios and are afraid of silence. Many cannot study without music in the background. Even the elderly leave their radio or television on for background noise to avoid silence. When our ears are always bombarded with soundwaves it can be extremely difficult to hear the small, calm voice of God speaking to our hearts.

12. Attend a church which plays music with well-balanced elements. Many churches have separate services for youth and families. The most noticeable difference between the services is the music. Music has power to divide as well as unite. Keep your family together by attending church as a family. Please note also that all of the music benefits and justifications listed at the start of this article can be gained through studying God's Word, Christian fellowship, worship and growing in Christ. Young children can have very positive learning in all areas—emotional, physical, social, cultural, cognitive, aesthetic, spiritual and creative expression.

13. Listen to a wide variety of selected music—fast, slow, loud, soft. There are countless recordings of good quality music available today. The Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP) has an excellent range—classics and Christian with well-balanced music elements.

Some pieces for starters may include the following.

### *Baroque*

Bach: Brandenburg concertos, the Italian concerto, cantatas, children's pieces for Anna Magdalena

Handel: *The Messiah*, *Fireworks* and *Water Music*

Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons*

### *Classical*

Haydn: symphonies (*The Clock*, *The Surprise*) string quartets, piano sonatas

Mozart: piano concertos, clarinet concerto, piano sonatas

### *Romantic*

Beethoven: fifth, sixth and ninth symphonies

Chopin: piano nocturnes and preludes

Any hymnwriters: vocal and orchestral arrangements of hymns.

Be aware of the effects of the mood of certain pieces on your child. I played Beethoven's *Appassionata Sonata* only once to my young daughter because she was so frightened of the passion and drama in it. She could not handle it until her teens.

14. Be very cautious of rushing out and buying cheap little electronic or battery-run keyboards to see if your children are interested in music. Initially they will be interested and fascinated because it is just another toy. Cheap keyboards may have their place but do not produce the sounds of an acoustic piano made from natural God-made materials. Electronic instruments sound very different to the

acoustic equivalent. They require a different touch and playing techniques. Do not be fooled by salespeople who say a digital keyboard is just the same as a piano but cheaper. If children learn on an acoustic piano, they can quickly learn the keyboard later if necessary. But if they start on a keyboard they will learn poor playing habits and will not play a piano as sensitively. Parents of my piano students appreciate the difference between a piano and keyboard and are glad they chose piano first. If you decide to start your children on an instrument, start saving from birth, have a music fund, and aim to get the best quality instrument you can afford. Research the instrument thoroughly, and talk to teachers and musicians and not just shop salespeople.

I suggest you read my article *Should My Child Learn a Musical Instrument?* for more information.

15. Some questions which could be asked when selecting music include the following.
- What is the purpose of this music?
  - What feelings does it stir in your children—calm/fear, joy/sadness, motivation/boredom, peace/aggression, positivity/negativity, inspiration/depression?
  - Are the words clear?
  - What do the words mean?
  - Which music element dominates—melody, harmony or rhythm?

- g. Am I happy allowing my child to be influenced by this music style and/or musician?

In conclusion, I trust I have presented a bigger picture of music for the very young based on a Biblical perspective rather than worldly, humanistic philosophies and fads. Colossians 2:8 warns, ‘See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.’ Styles of music can reflect humanistic philosophies or Christian beliefs. Parents have a God-given authority to make wise decisions for their children.

I hope the fifteen tips of advice are helpful in making wise decisions about music choices for your little ones. I see no reason at this stage to make yet another recording of music for the very young when there is so much suitable music available. It is up to the parent to be selective and discerning. Whatever you feed to your child’s ears now will surface later. In the very early years it is more important to listen, experience and absorb excellent music rather than understand the technicalities and concepts. Nurturing a pure heart, sensitivity, training good listening habits, memorising hymns and scriptures and discerning God-honouring music are far more important than playing an instrument.

Dorothy Sayers in *The Lost Tools of Learning* describes these early years as the ‘Poll-Parrot years’:

The Poll-Parrot stage is the one in which learning by heart is easy and, on the whole, pleasurable; whereas reasoning is difficult and, on the whole, little relished. At this stage one readily memorises the shapes and appearances of things; one likes to recite the number plates on cars; one rejoices in the chanting of rhymes and rumble and thunder of unintelligible polysyllables; one enjoys the mere accumulation of things.

Just a few years later, and the time goes fast, a more detailed understanding and appreciation of music can begin. Perhaps an instrument can be started or Volume 1 of *The Elements of Music* commenced about 7–8 years, depending on reading and writing skills. The Gift of Music program also has a biblical piano course called *Music for our Maker* which can be started from five years on.

## Further reading

Check [thegiftofmusic.com.au](http://thegiftofmusic.com.au) for details about the program and more articles on music education.

Articles include:

- Should my Child Learn a musical Instrument?
- The Elements of Music
- More than Music
- Music—a Biblical Approach
- Music Moses’ Way
- Philosophy and Music
- Music History—Why Learn it?

Also recommended is the book *Oh, Be Careful Little Ears* by Kimberly and Lee Smith.



**Wendy Hill**

42 Christa Ave, Burwood East, Vic 3151, Australia

Phone: +61 3 9802 6317 or +61 3 8802 7650

Email: [wendy@thegiftofmusic.com.au](mailto:wendy@thegiftofmusic.com.au)

Website: [www.thegiftofmusic.com.au](http://www.thegiftofmusic.com.au)



200 Florey Drive, Charnwood, ACT 2615, Australia

Phone: +61 2 6259 3944 Email: [asklem@lem.com.au](mailto:asklem@lem.com.au)

Website: [www.lem.com.au](http://www.lem.com.au)