

SHOULD MY CHILD LEARN A

Musical Instrument?

BY WENDY HILL

The answer to the question, ‘Should my child learn a musical instrument?’ may appear to be a simple yes or no.

I am a music teacher so my bias should logically be an automatic ‘Yes, all children should learn a musical instrument.’ However, the answer is not so straightforward. I have been teaching music for over thirty years including to my own children. Half of those years were as an unbeliever trained in humanistic philosophies and constantly wondering exactly why I was teaching music. The other half has been spent discovering the truth of Isaiah 55:8: ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.’ God’s ways are certainly different to our ways.

Today there is enormous pressure on parents to start their child on an instrument. Seeing others’ children, especially young ones, play fast, loud and musically can create mixed feelings. Some may be inspired and think, ‘I want my child to do that.’ Some may have guilt feelings and think, ‘I’d never be able to afford that and my child will be deprived of a music education.’ Others may reason, ‘I learned music so my child will too.’

Not many would consider, ‘Is this what God wants for my child?’

In this article I want to present some ideas which may help you weigh up the pros and cons to make up your own mind. Firstly I will present twelve justifications for learning an instrument based on my rationale for teaching music in order to get teaching qualifications. Secondly I list eight facts based on Biblical teaching. Thirdly I apply some deeper Biblical perspective to the subject of music. Finally I offer five possible answers to the question whether a child should learn a musical instrument.

JUSTIFICATIONS

Over the years I did many different teaching courses including a Diploma of Education, Yamaha and Suzuki training. They all required a rationale justifying teaching their way. All of the courses were essentially humanistic so the emphasis was on man and not God. However many reasons are still worth considering. Here is a summary.

Music:

1. develops sensitivity, imagination, creativity and aesthetic awareness.
2. has great impact on the brain and improves spatial awareness for learning maths and science.

3. relates to other subjects such as science, physics, maths, language, history, physical development and body co-ordination.
4. develops memory, concentration and discipline.
5. is a means of personal expression, emotional release and relaxation.
6. helps develop character eg. diligence, perserverence, obedience, patience.
7. provides a wide range of career opportunities.
8. can improve family relationships by involving parents in child's activities such as practices.
9. adds greater quality to one's life.
10. may produce a better generation than the present one.
11. may even save the world. This was quoted from a famous cellist, Pablo Casals, who said, 'Perhaps music may save the world.' The 'perhaps' has since been removed.
12. replaces the need for religion. A famous composer, Terry Riley, claimed that 'Music replaces the need for religion.'

Obviously Riley doesn't know the difference between religion and a relationship with Christ. But his message is the same — if we have music we don't need God.

I certainly don't agree with the last three but include them because they have sometimes been given as reasons.

Most of these reasons for learning music and an instrument are interesting but the lack of acknowledging God as the Creator of music reveals the humanistic basis. It also show the truth of Rom 1:25 'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator.' Today many worship the god of music. Consequently the focus shifts to music, man's abilities and commercialism.

If we look closer at the first nine justifications, they can all be achieved by leading a Christian life. The same physical, intellectual, emotional, creative, social, character and educational benefits are also found in Christian fellowship, worship, Bible study and growing in Christ.

EIGHT FACTS BASED ON BIBLICAL TEACHING

1. *We don't have to play an instrument to be reconciled with God and get to heaven.*

This seems quite obvious but is overlooked. How much does one need to know about music in order to get to heaven? Nothing, of course. Many people who are in heaven did not play an instrument. This seems so obvious, even absurd, but it is fundamental in how we prioritise music in our children's education. Read on.

2. *God does not want everyone to be a musician.*

In David and Solomon's time the Levites were set apart to be trained

musicians for the Temple. It was their job. The musicians had no other duties and even lived in the Temple. This still left eleven tribes, the majority of the Israelites. Most people were not trained musicians. If we look at a church service, are there more musicians or people in the congregation? In a concert are there more musicians on stage or appreciative listeners in the audience? A minority are trained musicians.

Exodus 31:3 tells how God gives different skills, abilities and knowledge to different people. He filled Bezalel ‘with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts.’ Verse 6 tells how the people who built the tabernacle had different skills and abilities according to their God-given purpose.

Proverbs 22:6 says, ‘Train a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it.’ Some translations say in the way ‘he leans’ or ‘is bent.’ God does not give everyone equal musical gifts. Some lean more to academia, sports, computers or trades. Some are obviously musically gifted and some are not. I’ve had so many piano students over the years and they have all been different. On one extreme, some could be described as musically gifted but others have little or no sense of rhythm or pitch. In between, there is a huge range of varying talents.

3. *God gave everyone a free musical instrument — the voice.*

All other instruments are man-made. This sends out a strong message. Not all need to play an instrument but all need to sing. It doesn’t matter if we feel we are out of tune. The Bible says several times to ‘make a joyful noise.’ (KJV)

4. *We don’t have to be a genius or brilliant or musically trained or even know what a treble clef is to know God and get to heaven.*

We don’t even have to be a tiny bit clever or smart. 1 Corinthians 1:19, 27 tell how God uses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and He will frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent. Worldly knowledge will not always lead one to God or get one to heaven. Exams, competitions and music knowledge about theory, playing, history, composing do not guarantee salvation.

Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not against instrumental lessons. It is OK for your child to learn. There is plenty of evidence in the Bible that instruments are very useful and have much value. Psalms is full of instruments and tells us to play skilfully. I have written a Biblical piano course and train teachers for it. We just need to get a bigger, balanced, eternal perspective on the importance of music.

5. *The rewards of learning music are enormous but hard to measure and value.*

Music is different to many other essential subjects like maths, reading and writing because of its artistic value. Many subjects require more intellectual understanding and seem to have a more obvious purpose in practical areas of everyday life. We must know how to read, write and use numbers. It is easier to identify rights and wrongs in numbers, spelling and grammar. However, music is more spiritual, artistic and creative but still essential to our whole being. It is harder to assess and value and is easily pushed aside.

My father had no interest in my music lessons and gave no support because he saw no financial purpose in it. When I was music director at a Technical School, music was optional and less important. However the principal still wanted the annual musical production to advertise how good the music department was. Music was seen as the subject students could misbehave in and pass without putting in much effort.

6. *Music is an intricate and vital part of God's design of man.*

He designed us with body, soul and spirit, not just body and intelligence. He designed us in His image therefore we are creative. Music operates mostly from the spirit and is one of the

features that makes man different to animals, plants and rocks. None of our three cats can play a musical piece on the piano or paint a work of art. There is something about music which really touches the heart/spirit and brings a desire for beauty, art and truth.

7. *God designed music to be an intrinsic part of our lives.*

Many parents want a musical experience for their children without fully understanding why. When I was a teenager my mother drove me nearly 200 miles to the nearest capital city once a month for piano lessons. She was not musically inclined but saw something valuable in music as well as some ability in me. She wanted to do her best to help develop that ability. My family was not financially well off and my mother sacrificed a great deal for me. Her heart's desire for music was far greater than her musical skills.

My family was not Christian despite the odd church visit, wedding, funeral and decision to send me to an Anglican boarding school for two years so I could have weekly lessons. Music was more important for entertainment than worship. My husband also had some music training so we instinctively made music an important part of our two children's lives. Something kept me persevering through lessons and practices despite frustrations, tears and battles. We stopped several times but always came back. I began to fully appreciate what my mother had done

for me. Our God-designed intuition kept us both motivated for our children.

8. *Music is basically an extension of our spoken language and designed to part of our worship and communication with God.*

When we speak we naturally have inflections, rises and falls and accents in our voice. Without these, our voice is a monotone and extremely uninteresting. Our spoken words are the basis of melody, harmony and rhythm. In singing we simply exaggerate the distances between pitches of words. Melody comes from this greater range of higher and lower sounds/notes. Harmony is when two voices sing different melodies with notes which agree with each other. When we speak we accent or emphasise certain words and make some syllables longer or shorter. This is the basis of rhythm.

Unlike animals, God designed man to communicate with Him through language. Music is a beautiful, creative, artistic and spiritual extension of our speech and prayers.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MUSIC IN EDUCATION

There are enormous rewards in learning a musical instrument but we need to put them in perspective so that the creation, the music god, does not take over and we end up caught in the worldly trap of exams, performance, competitions,

feeding the music industry and humanism. If your child is already studying an instrument a few challenging questions may help give perspective.

1. How much time and effort is spent practising an instrument compared with praying and memorising scripture?
2. Which does your child fear the most? The exam, the examiner and making a mistake in front of the teacher?
Or God, knowing that every thought and deed from our entire life is accountable to Him?

We need to understand where our motivation comes from and to have a desire to glorify God and know Him more. These are more important than wanting the child to play as fast and well as little Johnny down the road, or wanting to put the child in an exam box labelled Grade Two or Seven. Performance is impressive because it is so visible and audible. The world judges success based on the outward appearance of performance. But we know that God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

Let's put music education in perspective with other subjects. The study of any area of knowledge, whether it be music, art, maths, science, history, is not a prerequisite for salvation. Without acknowledging the basic fact that God is the Author of all knowledge, we are lost. Education is a consequential blessing from God, a bonus and an opportunity to know Him more. God created our brains, intelligence, sensitivity

and creativity to use so we can appreciate and love Him all the more. Peter Frogley's definition of education is the best I have come across. 'Education is the unfolding of God — His character and His creation.' I have been working on The Gift of Music program for over ten years and am still learning as layers unfold. God still has much to reveal even to the most learned. Education is ongoing and we will never know everything in our lifetime.

I believe music, including a music instrument is just as important a subject as all others in the sense that they are all tools to understand the world and to know God more. We can learn much about an author or composer or painter through their writings, compositions and pictures. Likewise, much can be learned about the Maker Himself through studying His creation whether it be the plants, animals, planets or music elements. But the subject or music instrument should not become more important than knowing God.

There is the danger of the instrument becoming an idol. Habbakuk 2:18–20 warns,

Of what value is an idol, since man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak.

Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver, there is no breath in it.

But the Lord is in his holy temple, Let all the earth be silent before Him.

SHOULD MY CHILD LEARN A MUSIC INSTRUMENT? FIVE POSSIBLE ANSWERS

So — what is the answer to the question 'Should my child learn a music instrument?' Ultimately it is the parents' decision — after all, you control the purse strings and know your budget. Weigh up the justifications and facts presented here. They are things I have learned over time. It took me many years of worldly judgement and human effort to discover the real reason I learned several instruments and became a music teacher.

The answer was simple but depended on me first having a relationship with God through Christ. It took me over thirty years to understand about God's will for me and that I am doing what I am now, simply because He wants me to. It all comes down to knowing God and obedience to His will.

Answer 1

The first basic answer to the above question that is needed, is a firm belief and conviction that *God wants you to*.

Weigh up the pros and cons presented. If you go down the music path, save and prepare for a long expensive journey. We plan for at least twelve years for a basic education. Music is no different.

Answer 2

If you can afford it, commit yourself long term and go for it.

Be prepared for a lot of expense in time, effort, discipline of daily practice, weekly taxi-driving for ten or more years,

expenses of one-to-one lessons, books and instruments. The blessings and rewards will outweigh all of the above. The Gift of Music has a Biblical piano course which can be done with teachers trained in this method. More details can be found on the website — www.thegiftofmusic.com.au

Answer 3

If you cannot afford it, don't feel guilty. Your children are not missing out. They can still have a relationship with Christ and go to heaven without music lessons. Encourage them to sing, sing, sing and use the free instrument God has given them.

Answer 4

If you cannot afford it but have a very strong desire, then keep praying and God will open doors. Where there's a will, there's a way and when it's in accordance with God's will, it WILL happen.

Answer 5

If you are still not sure, about instrumental lessons but would like your child to have a Biblical perspective of music, then consider doing The Elements of Music (EM) course. At the end of the first volume ask the question again. You will know whether or not your child is interested and willing to commit to instrumental lessons.

The EM course is a do-it-yourself complete music course with Biblical perspective, spiritual foundations for each music element, basic keyboard skills, theory and history. If your child is already learning an instrument of any kind, EM can be used as

the supporting theory course to fill in what instrument lessons sometimes lack. Instrumental lessons often focus on merely learning pieces. EM can be part of a homeschooling program and no previous music knowledge is required. A more detailed description can be found on The Gift of Music website **www.thegiftofmusic.com.au**.

There is no guarantee your child will get to heaven if this course is done. However, if all four volumes are completed, it WILL do all of the following.

1. Relate the subject of music to God
2. Help build faith in Him.
3. Develop an awareness of how music is evidence of God's creativity and design.
4. Teach what each of the fourteen music elements reveals about their Maker with simple definitions and supporting scriptures.
5. Develop an understanding of how composers and hymn-writers use their God-given music gifts to organise the elements.
6. Teach basic skills in keyboard, theory, ear-training and simple composition.
7. Teach history of music from Creation to present day including church and general world history.
8. Not focus on performance but present a balanced coverage of all areas of music held together by a Biblical perspective.

We live in a world of specialists and this includes the field of music. Many teachers focus primarily on learning pieces. Some teach theory and others don't. Some teach technique while others do very little in that area. Some encourage learning by ear others by reading.

The Biblical perspective of music is of prime importance. The course sets the foundation for all other music studies and gives a big picture from a Godly perspective before going into details. It is primarily designed to build faith in God using music as a tool. The course is very economical compared with one-to-one instrumental lessons, about \$3.50–4.00 AUS per week depending on the volume.

In closing, I would like to share a quotation from the *Encyclopedia of Bible Truths for School Subjects* by Ruth Haycock:

If we actually believe that the Bible is authoritative in every area in which it speaks, in history and science as well as salvation and prayer, we are obligated to find out what it says about every topic we teach. If we fail to present what God says but teach other aspects of the subject, we shelter pupils from the truth and give them only part of the story. [If we only teach instrumental skills, students are missing out on most of the music story. My addition] What we do teach may be purely humanistic and opposed to the truth in the Bible, or it may be true as far as it goes but is incomplete. In either case, pupil thinking is being shaped according to the world's pattern. God asks for transformed lives, not conformed to the world, but based on renewed minds able to prove what is good and acceptable and the perfect will of God.

More music articles are available at www.thegiftofmusic.com.au.



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

Website: www.thegiftofmusic.com.au



200 Florey Drive, Charnwood, ACT 2615, Australia

Phone: +61 2 6259 3944 Email: asklem@lem.com.au

Website: www.lem.com.au