

Why music?

Why should I, or my child, study music?

As a music teacher it always strikes me that it is very difficult to come up with a coherent answer for this question and I suspect many music teachers feel the same or are unable to reach a consensus with one another.

Sure enough, as music teachers we have gone through the work of mastering our instruments and understanding the inner workings of musicality, but what do we have to show for it? What benefit, if any, are we bestowing on our students?

Some possible reasons that people may want to learn music include:

- For fun
- To become a competent singer or instrumentalist
- To improve marks in school
- To improve cognitive abilities in some area (i.e. math, memory or concentration)
- A need to express oneself

Each of these reasons can be problematic in isolation:

Why would one want to do music for fun? It is hard work to master an instrument and the technical demands are unforgiving in the extreme. Surely fun can be had at a much lower price at the cinema?

What does being a competent singer or instrumentalist bring? In today's marketplace even a virtuoso is hard-pressed to make much of an impact without a substantial marketing budget, and some very incompetent musicians do make an impact mostly due to substantial marketing support.

Music is quite a difficult subject to undertake for school, in many ways it is by far the most difficult subject at this level, requiring not only individual teaching but hours of dedicated self-study, much more than is required for even "hard" subjects like math and science. It seems that a better way to improve marks would simply be to do some other subject instead of music.

As for cognitive abilities, it is certainly true that music does enhance cognitive ability by affecting moods, enhances brain mass in certain areas and indeed has a small but measurable effect on general intelligence as measured by I.Q. tests. But is this really enough, indeed other things (such as playing computer games and eating fish) have similar impacts.

Finally, the musicology profession is divided not just on what music expresses, but even on the issue of whether it expresses anything at all. Surely painting or drama is a better route to self-expression?

The answer, I would venture, is that learning music is all of the above and more. Music is not something we do, it is something we are. It is a fundamental part of our humanity, so by studying it we are not so much learning a skill as learning about ourselves.

In music we can find every possible aspect of life reflected and related to one another: The visual logic of notation is connected to the language of a certain musical style and enhanced

by social interaction and feedback as we play a piece for a teacher, and so we can continue. By mastering these skills we can learn what our strengths are, how to enhance them and how to use them to mitigate our weaknesses.

When we achieve this, music becomes fun, we become competent at our instrument, our confidence (and with it hopefully our marks) begin to improve, our cognitive abilities can be put to full effect and we can express ourselves not through music but by the very act of doing music.