

Music In Our Lives

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What impact does the music in students' lives have on their musical journey? How do teachers determine what's important for students' musical development? Is it possible – Times have changed?

This essay is the third in a series devoted to the theme: Times have changed. My goal is to use the theme – times have changed – to inspire music teachers in transforming their teaching. Ultimately I hope these essays will encourage teachers to think outside the box, to anchor their teaching with the compassion, joy, and creativity of an open mind.

Music in Our Lives – There can be no denying that music is a primary characteristic of how we live as individuals and in communities. Through the music in our lives, we get to know ourselves and the world around us. Bold statements, to be sure, but think about how often music acts as confirmation of who we are. How every person performs and hears music with their own ears, qualified by the individual variants of experience, temperament, timing, energy, and mindset regardless of age, education, or socioeconomic position. Think also about how music functions as a primary feature of how we live in communities. Music brings people together within and beyond borders, transmitting culture and tradition from the past, defining and transforming society for the future. We use music as the glue for social interaction, as the momentum for dancing, singing, celebrating, and moving with others.

What I find fascinating is how the music that's part of students' everyday living – the music in their lives – is typically missing across a wide range of curriculum samples. (See RCM exam materials, Alfred method books, Suzuki Method, Faber & Faber, etc.) Why is this so? From a historical perspective, teachers developed standardized or formal music curriculum for several reasons: 1. To assist students in progressing from one level to another; 2. To engage students in established repertoire; and 3. To fulfill the music in students' lives. In this final point, a prominent purpose of the music curriculum was to

become the music in students' lives. The music curriculum functioned as the primary ongoing resource for music in students' lives.

Times have Changed – Today's music students attend lessons with a huge backdrop of musical experiences generated by their own musical interests and stimulated by their surrounding culture/environment. For them, a formal musical curriculum will most likely not serve as the primary source of music in their lives. That's already underway. Students make connections to music through their families, the internet, TV, radio, schools, movies, friends, community groups, sports, recreation, video games, and more.

The challenge for today's teachers is that when they don't include the music in students' lives in their lessons, students' commitment to formal music studies may suffer. Students may interpret music study as something separate from their daily lives. Because such explorations lack substantial connection to their own heartfelt musical impulses, it may be difficult for students to maintain interest. As antidote to students' declining interest, music teachers have increasingly focused on motivational techniques. However, recognizing how students' journeys are driven by their own heartfelt musical impulses, it seems unlikely that motivational techniques are sufficient remedy to this situation.

What seems desirable is for today's teachers to be inclusive and considerate of the music in our students' lives. Of course, it's easy to think music teaching should remain the same as it always has been and that students should adapt accordingly. Effective music teachers acknowledge how times have changed and willingly adapt their modus operandi. They achieve successful results through support and engagement by ensuring that music lessons are reflective of their students' musical world. After all, the more often teachers value the music in students' lives, the more opportunities students have to grow their musicianship, the more students may feel empowered to continue their music-making journey well beyond the years of formal instruction.

Now that I've got you thinking about how Times have Changed regarding music in our lives, here are a few questions for your attention:

1. Which aspects of your teaching are based on a formal or standardized music curriculum?
2. How much of your teaching is devoted to the music in students' lives?
3. What are the benefits of tapping into the music in students' lives?
4. How do you feel about change?
5. What makes you nervous about tapping into the music in students' lives?
6. What makes you excited about tapping into the music in students' lives?