

Desire And Obligation: An in-depth view of musical literacy between musicians of passion Versus musicians of expectation

Introduction:

Music, and composing music is considered by most to be a form of entertainment or a hobby. I see music to be as fundamental as communication. Music exists to bring people together in different cultural settings. It allows freedom of expression in so many variations. Music exists as a part of our lives from early on when we are babies and listening to lullabies, to cheerful occasions like birthday songs until finally we have passed and our loved ones sing prayers. By this music is much more than the superficial definition most people see it as. Music is life. An analysis of all music compositions seems to be too broad, so in this paper I will focus on two groups of composers, those who play out of passion and those who play out of parental pressure and their musical literacy experience.

Musical literacy:

Literacy in a musical context is defined to be, knowledge of music theory, technical skills, and the ability to create or perform music (MacIntyre, 2012). Unlike other forms of literacy musical literacy is harder to measure as it requires a self awareness from the composer that arises through experience. Both groups of composers do achieve this literacy but at different speeds and some may strive for a more profound literacy level than others.

In recent years the number of children who play instruments has increased from 3.3 million in 1993 to 5.5 million in 2014 according to a study in the UK (see data tables in appendix). This increase is twofold as more children are genuinely interested in playing an instrument and because parents are providing more motivation. Even parents who don't force children to play instruments, have an active role in creating a playful environment that prime children to play music. To analyse the differences in musical literacy and composition I will compare these two groups with the help of primary and secondary sources.

Discrepancy between parenting methods:

Since there are many levels to how much a parent can be involved in the progression of their child's musical ability. I will differentiate by light involvement and intense involvement. Firstly looking into L. H. Koops paper who conducted interviews with mothers' of children placed in his musical program. The findings from the study show us that while parents encouraged musical abilities and aimed to be role model for the children, none of these parents 'forced' children to practice rigorously. The parents instead created playful environments that includes songs and chants and a general low pressure environment. As a result parents noted that children had increased enjoyment both in and out of music lessons. "enjoyment was the outcome mentioned most often by parents" (Koops, 2011). Although this study is limited by parents responses rather than children's, it still gives a good representation on the effect of light external motivation. The level of enjoyment encompasses both in and outside of class, showing that musical participation has merits to children's well being. We can conclude that light involvement was overall beneficial for all children.

More direct pressure:

While most parents provide a helping hand to children others can have a more aggressive approach. In a study by Kwang Suk Yoon, of determinants for children's motivation, parental pressure was voted to be second most important factor (just below gender). This emphasises how big of an effect pressure can have on children's motivation. "When Children's self motivation is not strong enough, some external motivation structure such as parental pressure may help children to start" (Yoon, 1997). Children will then incorporate this motivation and self regulation. The child may also feel the need to not let their parents down by quitting. It seems that from these results, increased parental pressure is beneficial, but there is a limit to this determinant. With increased pressure to practice and get more proficient at the instrument another determinant of stress arises. Stress for an extracurricular in addition to maintaining grades and being social prevents children from performing their best. Children miss out social gathering and replace that for a unaccompanied activity. This will no doubt increase stress and remove enjoyment from playing the instrument. From this model it can be concluded that an aggressive style has mixed results on performance and motivation, but it certainly has negative effects on the enjoyment aspect of performing.

How does an aggressive approach affect the composer?

To investigate the outlook, enjoyment and performance I interviewed my friend Yong-li on his experience with playing the piano.

Background information:

Yong-li was heavily influenced to play piano by his mother from/ the ages of 6-17 and now plays for enjoyment. He has received a grade 7 seven out of 8 on his musical proficiency and used to practice everyday for sessions of 1-2 hours

Data collection process:

To collect data for this interview I firstly tried to make sure the interviewee was comfortable and knew what kind of questions would be asked. I asked questions in which I could elaborate on to get more information and tried to be as clear as I could.

Data collection:

Starting at an early age of only 6 years old Yong-li has a lot of experience playing the piano. The experience throughout these years, however, has changed dramatically. Yong-li claims he enjoyed playing at younger ages because it was something new and enjoyable that he looked forward to improve. In addition his mother did not place as much pressure on him to play during this period. As time went by he describes his sessions to become more and more intense and stressful to the point where he described the experience to be “terrible”.

This unpleasant attitude towards the instrument can be attributed to many factors but most importantly is a result of a harsh environment. Growing up and playing in an environment that made playing less enjoyable day by day hindered Yong-lis musical proficiency. Starting with the family: Yong-li claims he could never be as good as his older brother who also played the piano. He claims that “while I was struggling with twinkle-twinkle little star, my brother was playing moonlight sonata”. This made it very stressful as Yong-li was constantly under his older brothers shadow. Moreover Yong-li also received criticism from his mother for not “taking piano seriously”. In addition pressure was given through his teacher who “used fear as a motivator”. Since the teacher knew Yong-li could achieve more, she threatened to tell his mother about the lack of attention he showed on some days. This would cause him to feel more anxious at times out of fear of messing up. Lastly Yong-li claims he could never truly appreciate the piano as a musical art form as he could only practice required pieces for the literacy test. Rarely being able to play from his heart or compose. This stress and unexcited approach to playing piano, from this environment translated into a negative association of practicing earlier.

Moving forward, Yong-li began to lack motivation and enjoyment out of his daily lessons, yet he continued to play for several reasons. The most noteworthy reason being that his mother had spent half a million baht (152005\$) on lessons and he felt he could not let the money go to waste and disappoint his mother. Along with this he knew that slowing down or stopping was not an option “Playing piano daily is a must to keep improving and having fluid movement”. He claims

that his fingers needed to undergo the stretch and exercise of reaching for keys in order to build the muscle memory. Taking all these into account Yong-li knew he couldn't quit.

At the age of 17 years Yong-li finally gave up practicing the piano. At this time there were A-level exams and his mother understood he did not want to pursue playing any further. Looking back Yong-li says he would “do it all over just to keep his mother happy” but if he had the choice would only play for fun once or twice a week. Today Yong-li only occasionally plays when he can and can play as he chooses.

Analysis:

While it is important for children to compose and enjoy the musical instrument they are playing, a key factor often overlooked is how they integrate this literacy into their life. By integrating, I refer to communicate with other members of the musical community and how well the composer see their longevity as a musical composer. Looking firstly at supportive and light involvement environment we see “Greater feelings of support from other people, as well as seeing the pragmatic value of music learning, were expected to predict higher levels of integrativeness” (Macintyre, 2012). This is to be expected as children not heavily pressured will enjoy playing more and as a result be more open to communicating and be constantly seek to improve. While the study does not explicitly say that more direct pressure leads to lower level of integrativeness it does say “The present results suggest that the measure of [anxiety significantly (negatively) predicted motivation] (MacIntyre, 2012). We can infer from this that lower motivation will directly affect the child's desire to interact with their community and improve their literacy.

As of now, all of the gathered evidence goes to show that most parental pressure is a detriment to the child's musical literacy and parental encouragement is the way to go. The suzuki method does not completely agree. This method created by japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki and involves “a system of pedagogy that is carefully designed to introduce young children to music and the violin so they can progress” (Brathwaite, 1988). This method also uses parents to be alongside the child and constantly encourage them. While Brathwaite does go over many benefits of this method, such as “advanced performing and musical skills” and leadership skills, many other musical programs without parental involvement do an equal job of this. The drawbacks of this program are that children “are sometimes deficient in reading” (Brathwaite, 1988). This would be due to the fact that music is taught as a language here and reading and understanding musical text is taught very late in the programme. Additionally Brathwaite mentions that children of suzuki movement, do not play well with other members of the orchestra. This could stem from being encouraged by parents constantly, translating into them feeling superior to other musicians. It seems like here a cheerful environment with nothing but support can also be defective.

Conclusion:

Through the multiple sources and investigations it is clear that there is no ultimate form of musical pedagogy. This still begs the question: Should parents play a role on their child's musical development and to what extent. Based of all the evidence it is fair to say that parents should try and encourage their children into starting musical instruments from a young age, because of all the benefits and enjoyment it could bring the child. With that being said, parents should also know when to ease up and let the child decide what path they want to take as not everyone is a musical prodigy. Most children only seek to play out of enjoyment and this is just fine. Music is supposed to be engaging and the composer should take pride in his work. Music can be so diverse and unique but to truly appreciate it the composer requires patience, acceptance and the right amount of practice.

Appendix:

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Fig 25. Instrumental playing (tracking): know how to play Population estimate based on child learners (5-14 years)

