

7 vital things they never told you about music lessons

1. What happens when the music lessons eventually stop?

Are you motivated enough to be your own teacher as well as the student? 5 skills of a great music teacher: Knowledge, Sequence, Communication, Understanding and Empathy.

Knowledge: Music teachers come from many different musical backgrounds. Trying to learn pop/rock music from a teacher who has a purely classical music background or classical music from a teacher who considers traditional music a waste of time is equally frustrating. You need to interview every potential music teacher as they can inspire or suppress your musical future so, hire the teacher that can *show you* that they have the knowledge in those musical styles that interest you.

Sequence: In some ways sequence is even more important than knowledge when it comes to music lessons. In my 50 years of teaching I have encountered hundreds of music students who gave up because they were told to remember information without being given an immediate application of that knowledge. It overwhelms the music student when they are told to hold onto data they cannot use while more data is being forced in. Other applications can be given for that data later but it is important to give at least one application with that data if the student is expected to retain it.

Communication: Some music teachers are fabulous technical musicians while others are not. Why are you going to a music teacher? Not to hear them demonstrate their musical skills but to develop *your own*. I have been lucky enough to play with some of the top musicians in the world but avoid name-dropping because it often has the adverse effect of making the student feel my lessons would be too advanced for them, which could not be further from the truth! A great communicator is someone who knows how to listen and find what that specific student actually wants and needs.

Understanding: The key to understanding what a specific student actually wants and needs is learning to engage with that student, communicate in simple language without using musical terms that have not yet been studied and ensuring that the student can

repeat and demonstrate what has been communicated in their own words. Music teachers often assume something they have said will be fully understood by the student and students can often be embarrassed to admit they did not really understand it. Empathy: this is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Far too often music teachers can be focused on demonstrating their own knowledge and abilities without spotting the confusions, misunderstandings and frustrations of their students. How does that student feel? Are they happy, motivated, interested, focused, attentive, bored, distracted, frustrated and so on? The skill of being empathetic to students during their music lessons is not taught in any college or university yet it is the single most important aspect of being a music teacher after grasping the concept of *sequence* in teaching music. How well do you connect with your music teacher? If this is not someone you would invite to join you at a celebration or barbecue then you are probably looking at just a business relationship which may be okay for you but it is far from ideal when you intend to share with that person your most sensitive creative abilities. A music teacher does not need to be your friend but should be someone you feel comfortable around.

2. *Repetition is more important than the amount of time.*

The standard concept taught by many music teachers is that the more time you invest in practice the speedier your progression as a musician will be. I have had the great fortune to help facilitate over 42,000 musicians over the years in their musical journeys and took a very scientific approach to the subject of practice. I created what is known as a bell curve showing the amount of focus people can maintain while practicing. This bell curve showed something very interesting; for approximately 8 minutes the level of focus gradually increases then levels off until the 10 minute mark and drops dramatically after that point. This led me to conduct experiments where one group of music students was encouraged to do an average of 4 hours practice each week often in two sessions of 2 hours each or 1 hour on 4 different days while another group was told to do only *10 minutes every day*. In each experiment the group doing only 10 minutes each day made way more progress than the group averaging a total of 240 minutes a week. This proved that repetition is the key to

successful practice! This is why I only ask my students to do 10 minutes in their Daily Practice Schedule after the seminars as it produces quicker and easier musical progress!

3. *One size does not fit all; everyone is an individual.*

We are not mass produced as identical human beings. Treating each music student to the same information presented in the same sequence in each music lesson may be easy for a music teacher, even if it is somewhat boring. The problem with this approach is that we all tend to focus on different aspects of information that we are given in any subject such as music so we will have different mental walls to break through and will reach realizations at different times in our studies. Many music teachers find themselves repeating concepts they have taught over and over again with lessening amounts of enthusiasm. How many times can anyone watch someone learning basic scales without showing them just how bored you are with this action! Creating music lessons for each individual is extremely time-consuming so many teachers just fall into the same routine with the same patter. In every lesson and students can sense that teacher's boredom.

4. *Hesitations are just mistakes waiting to happen.*

When you make an obvious mistake when playing music the choice is clear, either you ignore it and hope you will never repeat it; not a good idea, or you stop and work out what you are doing wrong so you can correct it. However, when you hesitate or slow down to avoid making a mistake you actually create a far bigger problem. When will that problem evolve from a hesitation to a fully-fledged mistake? The first time you try to play that piece of music in front of the family at Christmas or maybe the first time you are playing it in front of 20,000 people at a concert in a stadium! Hesitations are often treated by both beginners and even professionals as problems that are not quite as bad as a obvious mistakes. This is a big trap for any musician. If you have ever had the experience of coming to a point in a piece of music where you made a mistake or a hesitation which you avoid only to then subsequently make another mistake or hesitation one or two seconds later you should begin to see the logic of what is happening. You are extroverted until you come to the "danger area" where you introvert and then extrovert again with the

sudden “relief” of getting through it! You need to train to be mentally comfortable *all the time* so music lessons must teach students that mistakes or hesitations can be opportunities to grow as a musician. Focus on slowing everything down to correct a mistake or hesitation not just on wanting to play and hear the music and your mistakes and hesitations can actually help you become a much better musician!

5. *Reading music is not the same as reading and playing.*

What is the purpose of reading a book? Information. What is the purpose of reading music? The same thing, information! Although this may sound obvious, many music students when asked what is the purpose of reading music would answer “so you can play music”. That is *reading and playing* music, not *reading* music! If you cannot take a piece of music to bed with you and read it like you would read a novel then your are *not reading music*! Of course, you should learn to read and play music but you *also* need to practice reading music just for the *joy of reading* it, not necessarily with the purpose of reading and playing that music. Always practice reading music for at least 2 minutes a day, not with the intention of playing it but simply with the intention to understand each symbol and word it contains and your music lessons and practice will become so much easier and fun.

6. *Control not speed shows when an exercise is completed.*

Many music lessons let students focus on developing speed not control with their playing of exercises and pieces of music. This is mainly because only the aural memory is being used by a student. However, when visual memory and tactile memory are also trained the music student progresses much, much faster. You can train this by using a practice keyboard or electronic keyboard with the volume off or an acoustic piano with a blanket between the hammers and strings. Practice fretboards are great for training in the same way on a guitar. The focus then shifts from aural to visual and tactile. Do this for at least a few minutes every day because it helps accuracy that builds confidence and leads to speed. Practice needs to incorporate aural, visual and tactile memory.

7. *Choose a music goal that provides you with motivation.*

Many students approach their music lessons with enthusiasm only to have it dampened by repetitive exercises and playing pieces of music they have no interest in. I always encourage students to pick a piece of music they dream of playing and add it to their music goals from the first day of practice. The student can be set anything else that a music teacher wishes them to do if they are allowed to spend a little time each day focusing on a musical goal that provides them with motivation. They should play a very small section of their chosen motivational piece of music which can be added to incrementally each week. This keeps the student motivated until the next motivational piece of music is chosen.

If you set out to do 10 minutes every day and then one day of the week you are able to invest an extra 10 minutes your statistics are up. If you set out to do 60 minutes every day and then one day of the week you are so busy that you miss your daily practice altogether then your statistics are down. So, set realistic targets for your daily practice that you can stick to; 10 minutes every day has worked for tens of thousands of students!