

What is 'music education'?

In recent years much has been said about the universal benefits to children of a music education programme. Despite being an often-quoted remark, it has been my experience that many of those who talk about the value of music education, including, unfortunately, many music teachers, will struggle to explain exactly why music is so good; they simply know that it is. They are right, of course, but if one is going to take on the role of advocating for music education it is important to be able to state in at least a little detail what it is and what it isn't and what the benefits to children are going to be if it is done well.

The fact is, there are tangible benefits (benefits that can be described in words) to all children who receive quality music instruction as a component of their overall education. Moreover, many of these benefits are unique to music education and simply don't come from other academic school subjects.

There are, of course, additional benefits for a small percentage of children who discover a particular musical aptitude (what music teachers recognise as a high level of musical talent) through their initial classroom music study.

However, what is often put forward as examples of music education fits more into the category of one-off entertainment events. Activities such as a massed choir singing an easy-to-memorize song in unison at a one-off event should not be confused with a genuine music education programme. This is not to say that a choral programme doesn't make a good basis for music education; quite the contrary. However, whether choral or instrumental, a music programme needs to be comprehensive and thorough, with a solid plan of specific musical outcomes in mind. This, of course, requires a specialist teacher. A well-constructed music programme will aim to teach children a range of specific music skills, knowledge and attitudes through regular instruction over a period several years. We should not confuse one off musical events – for example, annual spectacles - with music education. They are not and fall far short of what is possible in teaching music to children. We should not settle for one in preference to the other.

The ideal age for a comprehensive music education programme is from kindergarten to the end of primary school.

The language of music:

Interestingly, music is the only language in the world that can be understood by everyone. This is because its components are both abstract (non-specific and non-verbal in meaning) but at the same time highly logical and organised. This musical understanding transcends race and ethnicity; all music, no matter where in the world it comes from, is logically organised and this is apparent to all who listen to and/or perform it. Without this logic of design and construction it is simply noise. Therefore, at a fundamental level, music can be easily appreciated and understood, often much more quickly and easily than material presented in other school curriculum areas. While music can be easily understood at a fundamental level, for example, on first hearing, good music will also reward deep and thorough study.

So, in addition to specific musical techniques what do children get from music study? Here is a list of some important skills that are addressed through regular music study and participation:

Problem solving:

A piece of music is a kind of abstract problem that can be addressed and solved through personal or group performance, listening and experience. Learning a piece of music results in a tangible and enjoyable solution to the problem(s) that piece presents. A piece of music has a beginning, middle and end and is usually sufficiently short in duration to provide an ideal scenario from a problem-solving perspective. When a music teacher gives a class a group of songs or instrumental pieces to perform, they are giving them a set of problems to solve from which every participant will derive large personal and academic benefits. Through the use of music, problem solving becomes a personal habit for each child.

Leadership and Cooperation:

Music teaches a group to take individual responsibility as well as to behave cooperatively. Through music, children learn to work effectively with one another under the guidance of their leader (ideally, a specialist

teacher). Music can also offer the possibility of children taking leadership roles themselves. In addition, they learn the value of their individual input and how their small part (and other small parts) can make a big difference to the outcome.

Listening:

In order to understand and know they are correct in what they are doing, children have to learn to listen critically to themselves and to one another. Listening requires a calm brain; music teaches this skill. It also teaches the discipline of being quiet and calm in order to listen to others.

Enjoyment of performing for others:

There are big personal rewards to be found through public performing. Confidence is the most obvious of these. This confidence can easily be applied to other learning activities.

Mathematics and Design:

Music teaches us to understand aurally and visually the patterns which occur within it. Repetition and variation (variation is most often embodied within repetition) occur far more frequently in music than in spoken or written word. Because of this, music enhances one's understanding of the relationships that patterns can have to one another. Therefore, music gives us a type of sonic and visual understanding of the principles of architecture and design.

Other School Subjects:

Music can be used to help teach other curriculum areas. History, mathematics, science and geography, among others, can benefit in very meaningful ways from a musical orientation. Music adds an extra dimension to these curriculum areas, and because it is so enjoyable in and of itself, it can often provide the best means of achieving engagement of students with other school subjects.

Other cultures:

The study of cultures and countries other than our own can most easily be facilitated through learning a wide variety of ethnic music and dance.

Transfer of Skills:

Music is abstract and largely non-specific in meaning. Because of this, its techniques and benefits can more easily be transferred and applied to other curriculum activities and study.

Music Education Research:

Much research has been carried out in recent years on the subject of enhancing a child's development through music education. The topic is too vast to canvas here but a good starting point would be to read the articles referred to in Australia's Loudmouth e-magazine. Good examples are:

<https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/creativity-in-schools-essential-to-preparing-young-people-for-future-uncertainty-and-change/>

<https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/good-music-education-is-not-the-recorder/>

<https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/the-music-advantage-how-learning-music-helps-your-childs-brain-and-wellbeing/>

What types of Music?

While I would not want to show undue prejudice by favouring one type of music over any other, music education is most effective when it exposes children to good quality music. By 'good quality' I mean types and styles of music which allow and promote the skills I have listed above. In addition, a good quality music education programme will teach children real music skills such as music reading, an understanding of rhythm and its relationship to pulse, pitch and harmonic relationships, musical understanding of design, leadership, cooperation, critical listening and many, many other skills. It is deeply enjoyable as well.

Not all children will become musicians, of course, but neither will the majority become outstanding mathematicians or scientists. For most children their school subjects are simply a means to an end, that is, they are part of their broad, basic education. From a good quality music curriculum each child will develop a range of positive attitudes, confidence, musical (and other) knowledge and high-level executive and

intellectual skills that are readily transferable and can therefore be applied elsewhere in their lives and learning.

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