

## The Value of Music Education

Just a few days ago our Primary School took delivery of a modern upright piano. This came about when local residents of many year's standing reluctantly decided they could not take their treasured instrument with them when they move away from Kangaroo Valley later this year. This opportunity led to a small number of local residents plus arts organisation, Arts in the Valley, combining to obtain the piano for the school.

The new piano will open up all sorts of possibilities for our children: individual lessons, of course, but also group music-making accompanied by piano, recitals, visiting artists, choir and a complete music programme for every child. In the hands of a trained teacher a piano is a most valuable tool and is central to any meaningful and effective music programme. So many musical activities can begin to happen simply because of this single acquisition.

A lot is often said about the universal benefits to children of a music education programme. But despite being an often-quoted remark, many of those who talk about the value of music education often struggle to explain why music is so good, particularly as part of a school curriculum. They simply know that it is valuable. They are right, of course, to say that music education is invaluable to children, but advocating for music education requires in depth knowledge of the benefits and an ability to describe them in some detail. The fact is, there are many 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 subjects. And there are additional and enhanced benefits for those children who discover a particular musical aptitude (what we often call 'talent') through their initial classroom music study.

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. This musical understanding transcends race and ethnicity; all music, no matter where in the world it comes from, is logically organised and this logic is apparent to all who listen to and perform it, otherwise it's just noise. Therefore, music can be widely appreciated and understood, much more obviously so than other school curriculum areas. Unlike most other school subjects most music can be understood at considerable depth at the first hearing. It is therefore an ideal starting point for understanding, not just of music itself, but of a wide variety of subject areas children encounter at school.

So, what do children get from music study? Here is a list of some important skills that are addressed through music study and participation:

**Problem solving:** a piece of music is a kind of abstract problem that can be addressed and solved through personal performance, listening and experience. Learning a piece of music results in a tangible and enjoyable solutions to a range of problems. To explain this phenomenon further, aside from offering specific music skills, from the outset, the study of music provides a parallel mode of learning in which broader problem-solving skills are developed outside of the pure music experience itself. For example, a piece of music has a

natural shape: a beginning, a middle and an end and is usually short in duration. It is architectural, even in the simplest examples. This provides an ideal scenario from a problem-solving perspective. In addition to addressing obvious musical problems such as rhythms, melodic accuracy, ensemble and listening problems, solving a set of musical problems simultaneously develops a range of broader, transferable skills which serve multiple applications in every other learning area children encounter, including social interaction. When a music teacher gives a class a group of songs to perform, they are giving them a set of problems to solve from which every child will derive personal satisfaction as well as a vast array of more broadly defined academic benefits.

**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. 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 can make a big difference to an outcome.

**Listening:** In order to 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 large and obvious personal rewards to be found in performing with confidence in front of one's peers.

**Mathematics and Design:** Music teaches us to understand aurally and visually the patterns which occur within it; it also teaches us to be able to relate those patterns to one another. Therefore, music teaches us about architecture and design.

**Other School Subjects:** Music can be used to help teach history, mathematics, science and geography in very meaningful ways. Music adds an extra dimension to these curriculum areas; because it is so enjoyable in and of itself, it can 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.

**Transfer of Skills:** music is abstract and often non-specific in meaning. Accordingly, its benefits are such that they can more easily be transferred and applied to other activities and study.

**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 music which allows and promotes the skills I have listed in this article. A good quality music education programme will teach children real music skills such as music reading, musical understanding of design, leadership and cooperation, critical listening and so on.

Not all children will become musicians, of course, but each will take from their music study a range of skills that can be applied elsewhere in their lives and their learning.

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