

Got Rhythm?

Part 2: Recreational Music-Making

by Barry Bittman, MD

After reminiscing about my early years of music-making in the first part of this series, I immediately felt somewhat frozen in contemplation upon exploring the issue of what “practice” used to mean.

The term, “practice,” especially for children, often brings back negative and sometimes painful memories of disciplined, repetitive, boring finger exercises. This was a far cry from the joyful noise we once celebrated.

As a child, there always seemed to be something else (anything else) I’d rather be doing. While practicing Bach and Schubert those hot summer evenings, my living room window adjacent to the Baby Grand revealed my friends frolicking and catching fireflies noisily outdoors. Frankly, it was more than I could handle.

My heart simply wasn’t in practicing.

The underlying problem wasn’t really practice; it was about what I played. Actually I would have welcomed anything other than classical music which I had great difficulty relating to as an 8-year old. Yet my level of understanding or personal enjoyment never seemed to take precedence to the way piano lessons were supposed to be. To this day, I’ve never figured out who made the rules.

As years passed, practice progressively became more of a sacrifice. It evolved into the process of correcting what I was doing wrong, rather than building upon what I was doing right. The joy of music-making drained rapidly from my soul, yet I continued to play.

A similar awareness often serves as the breaking point for many children. Those who survive the ordeal obviously continued, while others dropped out like flies. The kids who endured went on to try out for band or orchestra, activities that eventually served to delineate the successful or gifted students from the rest.

For playing in the band or orchestra was like “making the team.” Only the best were in. This of course is understandable when you consider there isn’t room for everyone. It’s obvious there can only be a limited number of drummers, tuba players or pianists in a band. Even if you were “good,” you might not have been good enough. Many wonderful musical experiences suddenly ended with the words, “Sorry you didn’t make it,” or “we couldn’t use another drummer!”

At a formidable age, not making the cut is a clear and devastating sign of failure. It is a principle deciding factor that undeniably heralds the return of the rental instrument or the amount of dust it collects in the closet. Failure predicts abandonmentæ imagine playing the tuba alone or for your friends? More dropped out than continued.

As years passed, few students actually continued to make music. Upon graduation from high school the numbers dwindled further. While some began their own bands, most accepted the fact they simply weren’t musical. College served the final surgical strikeæ it weeded out most of the remaining music survivors based upon performance selectivity. Only the most gifted and talented remained. Unfortunately a very limited number continue to make music today. I’ve recently been told by a college professor that one’s chances of becoming a professional athlete are greater than one’s odds of becoming a professional musician!

While you might be adamant that my descriptive analysis of music education does not pertain to everyone, I wouldn’t disagree. Infant and preschool music programs are becoming more prevalent, and not all music instruction is limiting for the less-than-talented. Extraordinary

programs like Suzuki and Orff do enrich the lives of many children at various levels of proficiency throughout the world.

Yet the failure of traditional music education to meet the needs of our society cannot and should not be underestimated. The system simply doesn't understand or respect the importance of music and the other arts. The typical argument overtly prioritizes the value of other academic endeavors. Yet while 12 years of mathematics exposure is typical, few people ever use higher math in their careers.

And unlike sports, there isn't a pick-up music league or an intramural college music activity for those who are unable to compete with the best. I've recently learned that some kindergartens do not even offer music. In fact, few places provide access to music-making for children or adults who didn't originally make the cut.

It's time we as a society establish a new perspective for recreational music-making, not as a frill, but as an integral tool for the maintenance and preservation of our health and well-being. It is our responsibility to expand music education, to enhance musical creativity at all levels, and to ensure opportunity and access for everyone who loves to express the heartfelt rhythms within them.

It's also time we learned from our societal mistakes.

Almost one hundred years ago, a ruffian from Brooklyn by the name of Jacob honed his skills by beating up his fellow students. If there was a school yard fight, he'd be pounding away with the best of them. A poor student who misbehaved often, he constantly challenged a system that couldn't seem to control his energy. Today he'd likely be on Ritalin.

Eventually he met Maxie Rosenzweig, a rather refined youngster who played the violin. Soon they became friends. Jacob became more and more captivated by Maxie's music, and as a result, provided free protection for his boyhood friend. One day with great pride, the disruptive hooligan revealed his future plans. He was intent on becoming a musician.

Maxie blatantly laughed and scoffed at the idea, explaining that a school bully without the slightest musical potential could never catch up to him or make it in music. That incident abruptly ended their longstanding boyhood relationship.

And Jacob never finished high school. I suppose the school system was glad to finally get rid of one of their most unproductive and disruptive students with little potential for success.

They were, however, wrong as we often are today.

The hoodlum who slipped through the cracks, who didn't have a chance at the cut, fell in love with music-making in his teens. In February 1924, Jacob Gershovitz gave the world a giftæ Rhapsody in Blue.

How many George Gershwins does our system destroy each day? When will we realize that ensuring musical opportunities and participation for everyone, young and old alike fosters meaning, self-worth and nurturing that we desperately need as a society? Given the chance, how many of us would discover a new resource for fostering health by expressing the music resounding from deep within that enables us to become whole again in mind, body and spirit?æ Mind Over Matter!

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