

“Process of Learning Music”

- ❖ **Most teachers teach the way they were taught and seldom question traditional methods and techniques in regards to current research and knowledge of learning.**
- ❖ **The overriding cause for inefficient music teaching is the reliance on printed materials (methods books) and the order in which material is presented.**
- ❖ **Teaching therefore becomes a series of favorite techniques that keep students occupied and working.**

Johann Henrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827). Considerable influence on general education and school music teaching. He believed the purpose of education was the development of the whole person rather than the mastery of individual skills.

Three general concepts:

1. Concepts must be taught by experiencing whole objects, pictures, or thing before names of symbols are associated. Learning occurs by moving from the known to the unknown.
2. After experiencing the whole, its parts are analyzed and then labeled.
3. The parts of the whole are synthesized, and the concept is considered as an abstract.

In the United States Lowell Mason (1792-1872) adapted the principles of Pestalozzi when developing the “Singing Schools.” He began a quest to have music taught in the Boston public schools in 1830. During these early years he taught for free and furnished his own supplies. By 1838 music was included in the Boston Public School system and paid for by the city.

Instrumental music prior to the Revolutionary War was attached to military units. The first band associated with a school was established in 1859 at the Farm and Trades School in Boston. Many began to appear with their instruction modeling that of the Singing Schools.

WWI had a huge impact on Instrumental Music in the public schools.

Orchestras were also prominent in schools. One of the earliest H.S. orchestras was in Middletown, Ohio (1863).

First instrumental class instruction was violin classes in 1911 in Boston by Albert Mitchell modeled after the Maidstone England model.

James L. Mursell (1893-1963) influenced many music teachers during the first half of the 20th Century. His book “The Psychology of School Music Teaching” (1931) was an early work that covered objectives, curriculum, implementation techniques, measurement, etc. Although dated the principles are still valid today.

Three Mursell tenets:

1. Technique should be an outgrowth of musical expression
2. Familiarity with musical sounds should precede music reading
3. Music should be taught in a cyclical sequence (concepts appear again and again in new settings with added meaning) i.e.; *dynamics first introduced as loud or soft are revisited with greater meaning and understanding over a period of years as stylistic and expressive performance demands increase.*

Mursell’s beliefs:

- ✓ Technical skills should be a means to an end rather than the goal itself
- ✓ Musicianship should be of primary importance
- ✓ Musical symbols must be taught always in terms of their musical meaning and in application to musical situations and experiences, never merely in terms of verbal definitions and mathematical designations.

In line with Pestalozzi findings “*concepts should be experienced before labels and symbols are applied.*”

A cyclical approach to teaching music is appropriate but if a logical sequence of content is not determined by us then meaning is not transferred.

The writings of Jerome S. Bruner have had considerable impact on the public school education process. In his book “The Process of Education,” he sites four things we must consider when structuring a curriculum:

1. The role of structure in learning
2. Readiness for learning
3. The nature of intuition
4. Motivation to learn

His discussions are not specific to any particular subject and may be generalized to music teaching.

Basic premise: *comprehension and recall are possible when fundamentals are understood and details are presented within structured patterns.*

Example: *students who have gradually acquired and experienced a rhythmic vocabulary can recognize and apply learned patterns in new situations.*

Bruner is the first to use the term “Spiral Curriculum” in explanation to how fundamentals of subject matter gradually expand in depth and complexity as the learner proceeds through various grade levels and continues to study and apply the same concepts.

Benjamin Bloom determined additional factors that have an influence on the teaching and learning process such as; commitment, discipline and parent support.

Howard Gardner and his theory of Multiple Intelligences (“*Frames of Mind*” 1983) have had a huge impact on how we approach teaching. These findings are great for the continued justification of teaching music in our schools.

Applying the Psychology to Music

Emil Holz and Roger Jacobi in their book “*Teaching Band Instruments to Beginners*” (1966) have applied the findings of various psychologists and educators to music instruction. (See “Five Principles of Instrumental Instruction”)

Useful analogy to learning music is the sequence of events by which we acquire language facility as children.

Acquiring verbal skills is dependent on the ability to hear sounds and then attach meaning to them. Acquiring musical skills and understanding is also dependent on the ability to hear and discriminate sounds and attach meaning to them.

(See “Speech and Music Correlation”)

Instrumental music could be taught by rote. We all know musicians that play by ear and can't read music.

A primary purpose for development of efficient music learning sequences is to produce functional musicians with music reading skills. But this does not mean we should only be able to perform what we see. We must constantly encourage and learn to trust and rely on our ears. As a music society we are to "eye driven."

Playing by ear and improvising should be a continuing part of performance practices. After all we still talk after learning to read. The developments of audiation skills are vital to independent musicians.

Many problems occur in instrumental music instruction because of the common practice of beginning with the symbols rather than the sounds and omitting enough aural/oral practice and efficient verbal association of patterns.

We hand a beginner an instrument and a book and we expect them to learn to read music concurrently with the instrument. This is somewhat like learning to read as you learn to talk.

Most beginning instrumentalists do not have sufficient music reading skills. It is best to begin by singing and performing without written music. Technique of the instrument is acquired to express musical ideas, not learned for its own sake with a forced application of musical expression added later. Why not start with simple familiar songs from general music class and folk songs.

McPherson (Dissertation 1993) in a landmark study of instrumental students in Australian high schools proposes five essential performance skills for success on a musical instrument:

1. Playing by ear
2. Sight reading
3. Playing from memory
4. Performing rehearsed music proficiently
5. Improvising

He found that playing by ear relates highly to improvisation skills and influences sight-reading skills. Sight-reading relates highly to performing rehearsed music proficiently. Both playing by ear and sight-reading influence playing from memory. McPherson also points out that "students exposed to a traditional, visually oriented approach to learning a musical instrument are typically inefficient

in their ability to audiate music from notation. These results show the extent to which a visually oriented system of training fails to develop the important capacity to “think in sound” which is essential to all musical performance.