

## *Why should we teach instrumental music?*

Learning to play an instrument occurs within a learning environment which fosters the development of many abilities and skills. Throughout the process of learning to play an instrument, a student is challenged to respond to problems creatively by drawing upon an understanding and using this understanding in a reflective and analytical way. Instrumental music also fosters a learning environment which cultivates the development of values and interpersonal skills. Instrumental music does not only provide a student with musical abilities, it provides students with the opportunity to grow as an individual. By analysing the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Shinichi Suzuki we see that education can benefit the student through process rather than outcome. I believe that instrumental music is important because of this perspective of music as an art form concerned with the development of the individual.

‘The noblest work in education is to make a reasoning man, and we expect to train a young child by making him reason! This is beginning at the end; this is making an instrument of a result. If children understood how to reason they would not need to be educated.’ (Hendricks, 2011)

Here Rousseau recognises the benefits of creating a learning environment which is not focused on the final product, but rather sees the benefits of the skills attained throughout the learning process. The challenge for teachers here is to foster a learning environment which supports this notion. If a student is able to develop an ability to reason, that student then has the ability to excel in other learning areas and life in general. Learning to play an instrument draws upon and develops a student’s ability to reason. These are developed throughout the process of learning an instrument as well as the practice of the activity. Through the process of learning to play an instrument, a student is challenged to become a reflective, independent, and creative thinker. Such skills necessary in life.

The pursuit of musical excellence fosters a learning environment which encourages students to become reflective thinkers who have the ability to evaluate their own work, progress and those of others. Learning an instrument requires a student to formulate an ability to observe, to listen, to analyse, to reciprocate, to experiment, to consider alternatives and to solve problems. As a teacher I see great importance in modelling such reflective behaviour to my students.

Webster acknowledges the importance of facilitating students to be reflective learners in their own musical experience.

‘Teachers must teach for independent thought. The best music teachers are the ones that are not needed by the student when formal education has ended.’ (Webster, 2002)

A focus in my own teaching is to encourage students to answer their own questions by providing them with the tools and processes to resolve problems independently. I am constantly telling students that it is my job to make myself redundant. My intention is always to foster an independence of thought where students are no longer needing my solutions because they are able to create their own solutions to their own problems. I encourage this notion from the very first lesson. I am constantly asking students to evaluate their performance, to select sections in the music which they believe require improvement, to explain why these sections are difficult and to provide exercise ideas to improve these particular areas. By guiding students in this way I hope to provide students with a highly developed awareness of their strengths, weaknesses and most importantly, their ability to independently regulate and stimulate their own learning. This may apply to creative interpretation and musical expression or simply finding solutions to technical difficulties encountered within a piece of music.

The very nature of learning to play an instrument greatly relies upon self-direction and regulation of one’s own learning. Students are encouraged to become independent thinkers through their individual responsibility to practice and rehearse unaided. This system of learning inspires students to be self-regulated in their approach to learning processes and creating solutions to the problems they encounter within the week. By modelling reflective behaviour throughout each lesson, students are able to develop the ability to think analytically and independently in their own practice.

Importantly, the ability to be a reflective and independent thinker is a skill which is significant for the student in many other areas of life. Such skills produce an individual who is able to adapt to diverse circumstances and situations throughout life. Music is an excellent medium for developing and strengthening an ability to be an independent thinker because it relies on the development of reflective processes in order to progress musically.

Music is of course, a creative art form, but it does not just produce a creative musician, it inspires creative thinking. According to the Australian curriculum, critical and creative thinking can be considered as an ability to ‘generate and evaluate knowledge, clarify concepts and ideas, seek possibilities, consider alternatives and solve problems’ (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013). Final outcomes listed in the level 9-10 of AusVELS also recognise that the

ability to demonstrate creative or 'possibility' thinking in music should be a goal within mainstream music education.

"Students should be making informed personal choices by applying thinking strategies, aesthetic awareness, meaningful use of language, 'possibility' thinking and the use of knowledge to arrive at original ideas by linking unrelated ideas and concepts" (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013).

I believe that instrumental music also serves a purpose in inspiring students to think creatively. Learning to play an instrument encapsulates creative thinking intrinsically through its focus on applying musical understanding through composition and improvisation, and extrinsically through the reflective processes required when learning to play an instrument.

Improvisation, by nature requires a student to apply an understanding of material, technique and process in an innovative and exploratory way. Students apply their understanding of music in a forum which allows them to manipulate, imitate and respond to an understanding gained throughout their learning experience. This exploration process demands that a student seeks possibilities, considers alternative and solves problems through an understanding of music. Likewise composition provides a student with the opportunity to draw and reflect upon technique which has been consolidated throughout the learning process. The exploration of possibilities which occurs throughout these two processes harnesses an ability to think within and beyond boundaries.

Learning to play an instrument develops an ability to think creatively which is not limited to applications in music alone. Instrumental teaching develops a capacity to think critically and creatively through applying an extending an understanding. The ability to apply and adapt our understanding is valuable because it can be applied in any setting. An exposure to this form of creative thinking is therefore a valuable aspect of music education.

Education is moving towards equipping students with the thinking processes which are reflective, independent and creative in nature (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013). Learning to play an instrument provides an opportunity for students to develop such skills. As a music educator, I believe that it is my role to facilitate this way of thinking. I know that not all of my students will pursue forth in illustrious careers as performing artists, but I do know that every student I teach will be given the opportunity to develop thinking processes which will not only

benefit their musical abilities but will also serve them in any other capacities of life. I believe that music education can serve a great purpose in promoting these abilities.

Shinichi Suzuki also recognised the significance of music as a means of developing an ability to reflect, improve and aspire to a way of life. He puts forward a view of music as serving a purpose:

“..To have a superior model, to seek deeply, and to search while practicing every day; . . . to think about what and how to practice in order to enhance ourselves step by step toward superior ability, superior sensitivity; . . . in other words, to aspire toward a Way of life—this is also our path in music” (Hendricks, 2011).

Suzuki philosophy focuses on music as a reflective process which serves a purpose in character development. For Suzuki the purpose of music education was “...to develop a nurturing soul and a noble character.... “Music exists for the purpose of growing an admirable heart” (Hendricks, 2011). The fact that Suzuki taught such ideas through the violin is secondary. Suzuki used the violin as a medium because this was what he did and this was how he taught (Hendricks, 2011). He viewed his role as an educator and model of character and good values. The journey through the process surpassed the end means.

I believe instrumental music should be taught because it acts as a forum to develop character and establish values within the student. Although Suzuki philosophy specifically centres on the role of value acquisition in learning, I believe that all instrumental learning has the capability of developing character throughout learning. Like Suzuki, I like to consider myself as an educator who teaches through the flute, and not the flute exclusively. For me, the process of learning an instrument and the values attained throughout this process are more important than the final product.

I believe that the process of learning an instrument fosters a learning environment which nurtures the development of values such as diligence, respect, a sense of responsibility and an ability to relate to others. The very nature of learning to play an instrument relies upon commitment and hard work over a period of time. In this way music lessons provide students with the opportunity to develop diligence through persistence and conscientiousness within the task. The structure of instrumental lessons encourages a student to commit many hours of practice independently without the aid of their teacher. This independent approach music provides the student with the opportunity to develop a sense of responsibility in the task of learning. An awareness of others, and diverse cultures is gained throughout the exploration of musical styles, periods and cultures. This aspect of instrumental making can contribute to a sense of understanding and appreciation for others and a

sense of respect for diverse ideas and cultures which are different to one's own. These values whilst they may be fostered or developed throughout music lessons are qualities which are necessary and transferrable in any other part of life. Instrumental teaching is important because it is a medium which can purposefully work towards developing and reinforcing these values in a personal one-on-one setting between teacher and student.

Throughout the process of contemplating my philosophy on instrumental music education, I have discovered that as an educator my focus is concerned with process where the outcome is secondary to the lessons learnt throughout the learning journey. I believe that the process of learning to play an instrument develops many qualities which are valuable in the development of the learner as a thinker and as an individual. Instrumental music does this so well because of the way in which it is taught, through the use of the teacher, as model and facilitator throughout the learning process, and the reflective learning process which occurs.

## Reference List

Akinpelu, J. A. (1981). *An introduction to philosophy of education*. Great Britain, Surrey: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

Australian Curriculum: Critical and Creative thinking. (2013), Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. Retrieved June 7, 2013, from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Critical-and-creative-thinking/Introduction/Introduction>

Choksy, L., Abramson, R. M., Gillespie, A.E., & Woods, D. (1986). *Teaching Music in the Twentieth Century*. New Jersey, United States of America: Prentice-Hall.

Denac, O. (2000). The pedagogical value of art and music in past and the present. *US-China Education Review*, 6(10), 1-7.

Gregerson, M. B., Snyder, H.T., & Kaufman, J.C. (2013). *Teaching creatively and teaching creativity*. New York, United States of America: Springer Publishing.

Hendricks, K. S. (2011). The philosophy of Shinichi Suzuki: Music Education as Love Education. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 19(2), 1-20.

Rousseau, J. J. (1936). *The educational theory of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). United States of America: Russell and Russell.

Temmerman, N. (1991). The philosophical foundations of music education: The Case of Primary Music Education in Australia. *British Journal of Music Education*, 8(2), 149-159.

The AusVELS curriculum. (2013), Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Retrieved June 3, 2013, from <http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/>

The importance of music: A national plan for music education. (2011), Department of Education. Retrieved June 2, 2013, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-importance-of-music-a-national-plan-for-music-education>

Webster, P.R. (2002, April). *Creative Thinking in Music: Advancing a Model*. Paper presented at the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM): Musical Creativity, Belgium. Illinois: CMWA Biennial Series.