

THE LEGACY OF MUSIC LESSONS

Elaine Schmidt

With some exceptions, the craft of playing an instrument and the art of musical expression are taught one-on-one—one teacher working with one student. This is the way music has been taught for centuries, and it's the way it's taught today.

One can draw lines through the history of classical music, from generation to generation, and from musician to musician. Great musicians taught other great musicians, who taught other great musicians. Johann Sebastian Bach taught Johann Christian Bach, who was a great mentor to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Another big influence on Mozart, Franz Joseph Haydn, was one of Ludwig von Beethoven's teachers. Beethoven, in turn, was one of Franz Schubert's teachers, and the connections go on and on.

In each case, one teacher worked with one student in a teaching/mentoring environment that developed the student's technical skills and individual strengths, deepening their understanding of the very personal art of making expressive music. Private teachers rely on the instruction they were given as students and the lessons learned in their own musical experiences and they mentor on a new generation of music students.

You have to apprentice with older musicians of all kinds. Not just to study with them, but also to hang out with them and hear their stories so you can continue the traditions.

~Matt Wilson, jazz drummer, bandleader, teaching artist

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

There are a few exceptions to the rule of one-on-one teaching, particularly in various types of folk or traditional music where lessons are often taught in groups of like-instruments, or sometimes even in groups of mixed instruments. In traditional music from around the world, tunes, style, and cultural knowledge are handed from generation to generation “by ear” without the use of written or published music, and without the printed method books and solos that are used in school music programs or private lessons.

Traditional music is mostly an aural art form. It’s handed down from generation to generation in that way. There is a great story about the wonderful Irish accordion player Joe Madden who learned a tune one night at a house party—this was back before anyone had tape recorders or anything. He and his friend got on a bike, one on the front and one on the back, and decided one of them would remember the A part of the tune and one would remember the B part. So they didn’t talk all the way home until they could play the tune on their instruments.

~Eileen Ivers, American Celtic-fiddle player and recording artist

A MODERN-DAY LEGACY

Eileen Ivers studied with Irish musician Martin Mulvihill in group lessons that included young fiddle players, button accordionists, piano accordionists, tin-whistle players, and flutists.

Sometimes I wonder how he got the music into us. There were thirty kids in a two-hour window in the small back room of a Bronx bar or the Shamrock Club. He had all the instruments lined up in two rows and he would chat about the music and play tunes for us. He’d tell us to practice our tunes. I really cherish the moments at the end of class. If you were progressing well, you would have to get some new tunes ready for competitions. So he would lean over and play a little tune into my tape recorder. I could see him enjoying that so much and I could feel the passion and history of the music. Because the music came to me in that way, the feel of it was more real than if it had come to me through the dots [written music].

That’s still the way it’s taught today. If I do master classes of twenty to fifty fiddlers in a room, I insist they bring some kind of recording device. Even though I provide them with some sheet music, I still insist that they learn the tunes by ear. I start with a two-bar and repeat, repeat, repeat. I do this so they get the feel and swing of the music. Then they can take the dots [written music] home.

~Eileen Ivers, American Celtic-fiddle player and recording artist

No matter what sort of group lessons your school or cultural center may offer, private lessons are the only way for your child to master the fine points of playing an instrument.

COMPLEX LAYERS

Playing music is more than just connecting fingerings, hand positions, or pitches to printed musical notes, and learning to read rhythms—it's a process of layering complex, detailed skills, one on top of another, over the course of years. If some of those skills aren't mastered, or aren't addressed, the following skills can't possibly be mastered. A teacher who spends a half-hour for beginning students, or an hour for more advanced students, with a young musician every week sees the strengths and weaknesses in that particular student's playing and can assign exercises or pieces to work on weaker skills. The teacher will be able to select solo repertoire that's both accessible and challenging to the student, moving them along to new levels while allowing them to not only excel during the process, but enjoy the process as well.