

SOME INTERESTING STATISTICS FOR PARENTS

In 1966 there were an estimated 15,400,000 music students in the United States.¹ Rarely since the days of Ancient Greece have parents been so aware of the importance of music-making in the lives of their off-spring. And never before in the history of music teaching have teachers been so interested in the art and science of reaching those with average ability.

The statistics show that in the 1920's, 30's and 40's approximately three out of four music students were early drop-outs and were never able to play as adults.² Hopefully, by learning from the latest data on children and music education and by taking advantage of the mistakes made by parents in the past, this ratio will not repeat itself today.

Sixty-nine percent of parents today—of all economic levels—give their children music lessons because they are convinced knowing how to play a musical instrument is a necessary part of educational development.³ Their reasoning appears to be that children require guidance and that such important decisions as to whether or not to take lessons cannot be left to them. Indications are that the children of these parents stand a substantially better chance than in years past to continue to play their instruments as grownups. A large percentage of these parents, significantly, were themselves early drop-outs as children.

About thirty percent of parents today give their children music lessons solely on the grounds that the children "showed interest" in music and asked for lessons. Their reasoning appears to be that every one "deserves a trial at music to see if he will take to it."⁴ According to this rationale, music is not for everyone and therefore a trial is necessary. However, this policy is precarious, because it invites and even encourages early impulsive dropping out, and thus the child never has the chance to acquire skills. The evidence is that every child will take to music once it has become part of him (as his language becomes part of him).⁵

FOOTNOTES:

1. American Music Conference, Report, 1966.
 2. 3. 4. Journal of Research in Music Education: "Factors Relating to Carryover of Music Training Into Adult Life" — Lawrence, Dachinger. Spring Issue, 1967.
 5. Observations from Research Division of the Harbor Conservatory For Musical Growth, N.Y.
-

WORKSHOP MUSIC TEACHING PUBLICATIONS
P.O. Box 414, West Hempstead, NY 11552

Parental Education in Music

*This Business
of
Music Practicing*
or

HOW SIX WORDS PREVENTED A DROP-OUT

by
Sidney J. Lawrence

9th Printing

TO THE PARENT OF THE MUSIC STUDENT:



THIS PAMPHLET is for you, whether your child is just beginning the journey or is already traveling along the road to musical accomplishment. Read it and reread it and refer to it in the future; in these pages you will discover the key to handling practice problems which perennially plague the parents of music students.

The writer is widely known for his work in this field. Dr. Lawrence has spent his lifetime studying children's practice habits, their learning problems and the parent-child relationship as it pertains to music study. He has authored several textbooks and research documentation on the subject. He has served as Problem Consultant and Parent Advisor to the Neighborhood Music School, the Metropolitan Music School, both of New York City, and the Harbor Conservatory For Musical Growth, of Long Island, over a span of thirty years.

The PUBLISHERS

9th Printing
Copyright, 1967, U.S.A., by the
WORKSHOP MUSIC TEACHING PUBLICATIONS
P.O. Box 414, West Hempstead, NY 11552

Sidney J. Lawrence

This Business of Music Practicing

or

HOW SIX WORDS PREVENTED A DROP-OUT



DOES YOUR child give you trouble with his music practicing? Does he play so fast that you wait with baited breath to see which hand will win the race? Does he practice so carelessly that you are ready to throw in the sponge and abandon your noble project of a musical education for Jimmy? Or does he simply refuse to practice, period?

Right off, it may surprise you to learn that your Jimmy is no different than most other children you know and that you are far from alone in your predicament. As a matter of fact, the child who *always* practices willingly and enthusiastically is the exception, the rarity among music students.

How can you cope with his "poor" or skimpy or non-existent practicing? What attitude should you take? How can you get him to practice more? And more carefully? With more interest?

Let me tell you the story, based on actual incidents from my files, of a mother who solved her child's practice problems, and prevented her from becoming a musical drop-out with the help of six words. The names of the persons involved have been changed. Here is Mrs. Brant's story in her own words.



I AM PROUD of the way my daughter Lucy plays the piano. She is twenty now and engaged to be married, and although she isn't a virtuoso at the piano, we do enjoy her playing. Most of all, she gets so much pleasure from her music! I know now that she has music to enjoy all of her life.

It wasn't always this way. There were a number of times when Lucy might have dropped out of music altogether and known nothing about playing the piano. If it hadn't been for those six words . . . but I'm getting ahead of my story. Let me start from the beginning. . . .

First, about myself. When I was a child I also took piano lessons. Of course this was many, many years ago. In those days we had to play boring scales and exercises. For me, practicing became tedious and hateful . . . and I didn't practice much or willingly. At first my mother was patient, and then she said, "Don't you want to take piano lessons?" I said, "Yes, I do." "Then why don't you practice?" "It's boring." "You really can't want piano lessons very much," my mother concluded, and she terminated them. That was the last of music lessons for me. To this day, I cannot play anything on the piano. Since becoming an adult I have regretted this. I felt envy toward every person I have met who could play an instrument. Inwardly, I blamed my mother for poor judgment, allowing me to control a decision at that age. And I determined that with my child it would be different. I would see to it that she learned to play the piano, and enjoy it when she was grown up!

When Lucy was nine she had her first lesson on the piano. She had a perfectly wonderful teacher — a Mrs. Holland — much different from the one I had as a child. She was warm and friendly and gave Lucy little pieces out of a book. Scales were given in a very interesting way and she even learned to transpose after her fourth lesson! It was all wonderful, exciting and joyous for about a year.

But then, for no apparent reason, something went wrong.

Somewhere along the line, Lucy seemed to lose her enthusiasm. She began to practice in a listless, routine, dutiful fashion, playing everything very fast and impatiently — and worse still, at times, she avoided practicing altogether — and this happened more and more frequently.

I became nervous and distraught. In spite of the progressive

teaching approach, in spite of my determination that Lucy would have her music, she was repeating what I had done as a little girl. But I wasn't going to let her stop. It seems silly to me now when I think of all the things I did to make Lucy practice. I would scold and threaten. I would scream at her and nag and create scenes. I'm ashamed to admit it but there were occasions when I slapped her in anger over her practicing.

At the end of her second year, I became convinced that it was all hopeless. I felt, in what I thought was justifiable anger, that Lucy was simply a lazy, ungrateful child — and I let her know it often.

I was just about to give it all up in disgust when I encountered a simple thought which was to stop me short in my path and cause me to change my entire attitude and approach toward Lucy's practicing.

It was at a lecture given by Mrs. Holland, Lucy's music teacher, to parents in our community. She was explaining that in music training, as in all other areas of child development, children go through various stages before they reach maturity. Nature, she said, has its own schedule for music development, just as it has for everything else that grows. She pointed out that parents sometimes hindered that schedule by the unrealistic kind of demands they made. Then she made this statement: *allow your child to grow naturally.*

Those six words struck me. They wouldn't let go. Over and over they repeated in my mind, allow your child to grow naturally.



MRS. HOLLAND went on. She applied the thought to music practicing: "Nothing in a child's development moves in a straight or even direction. Music progress is no different. It moves some steps forward, some steps sideways, coasts on some hills and sometimes comes to a dead halt. There are high points of enthusiasm and low points of lethargy. This, as you are all aware, is true of living itself. Yet life goes on, whether the points are high or low. When we find it necessary to spur the child on, we must guide him, *teach* him — not *police* him — within nature's limits!"

Certain other related facts which Mrs. Holland pointed out impressed themselves on my mind:

Children usually start lessons with great enthusiasm, and this

lasts anywhere from six months to a year or so. Then each child settles down to his own natural schedule.

Each child learns in a different way.

Each child progresses at his own special pace. For example, one child is quick to learn, but his concentration span is short and tires easily. Another child is methodical and deliberate and accomplishes the same progress with much longer practice periods. Another child has learning problems because of poor physical or mental coordination. Another child simply needs guidance in work habits and work discipline.

Children do not come into the world knowing how to practice, any more than they come into the world knowing how to talk, walk, read or write. They *learn* these skills after much guidance, trial and error, spurts and regressions. So with music and practicing.

The parent's major contribution to his child's practicing is in stressing that the *how* of practicing — not the *how much* — is what counts for real progress.

It takes about six years of training to acquire basic music making skills. Talented pupils who practice well may achieve such skills in four years. On the other hand, a slower child with many growing pain periods may take as long as eight.

Mrs. Holland closed her talk by adding an observation about her own childhood. "When I was a little girl, and I had practice problems — yes, believe it or not, this happens to those who later become professionals, too — my parents always talked to me about the particular problem in a gentle way. They listened carefully to what I had to say and considered it seriously. They always let me share in the final decision — though *they* guided the direction it took. I think I will never stop being grateful for this, because had they handled things differently, I'm sure I would not be a musician and music teacher today."



WHEN I LEFT MRS. HOLLAND'S lecture, I had much food for thought. Suddenly things were clearer for me. Now I realized it was I who was wrong! I was expecting something from Lucy she was not capable of doing. I probably even forced the situation by demanding practice periods too long for her concentration. I was forcing her musical growth, instead of helping it along. I was hurting her musical growth with the tensions and scenes I was creating.

I realized, as I reflected, that Lucy *had* made considerable progress in this last year, in spite of her erratic practicing. Mrs. Holland had always been pleased with her lessons. Certainly, Lucy was now able to do many things she was not capable of doing on the piano a year before. It was clear to me now that I was making much ado about nothing, that Lucy's poor practicing was merely a musical learning stage she was going through, and I wasn't helping her one iota with my approach! I determined then and there to *help* her grow out of this plateau of learning, to get over this hurdle!



SO THE LESSONS went on, after all. I changed my approach completely. I stopped making a big issue about practicing. I relaxed about it. Oh, I would remind her to practice, but I no longer felt that she should practice of her *own* accord. And suddenly I found that I wasn't getting angry about it any more, there were no scenes! Instead I found that a humorous or bantering approach was much more effective in getting Lucy to work at her practicing, than the nagging of before.

I helped when she requested it or I felt she needed it. We initiated family recital nights once a week, when Lucy played the lesson assignment she had prepared for the family, and it was a serious evening, with "bravo's" and "please, play that again!" On another evening during the week the family had a songfest of folk tunes, with Lucy as accompanist (I always made sure that the music was easy for Lucy).

In general, practicing became easier and more enjoyable to Lucy. She skipped days here and there. She had "blue" weeks, or very busy weeks, yet on the whole my new approach had made a different, relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere.

There were "growing pain" snags, of course, but this time I was ready for them: she "hated" music during one period. Keeping those six words in mind, *allow your child to grow naturally*, I did not take her words literally, but I realized she was protesting about *something*. We discussed it together and with Mrs. Holland — and sure enough found that with a change of practice time (it was interfering with a new program of special interest on television) and a change of material (the pieces had become "boring") she "loved" music again.

The most difficult moment came when Lucy said she wanted to

quit lessons altogether. She was past twelve and was beginning to assert her independence in many areas. I recognized this as the adolescent rebelling stage. This also was part of growing naturally. I didn't take the easy way out like my mother did. Again I refused to take her words literally. If I permitted her to quit now, she would lose what she had learned up to now and there would be no opportunity for growing at all. I knew that deep down she really didn't want this to happen. On the other hand, she was in a state of conflict. Asking me to let her quit was another way of rebelling. It was the thing to do as all of her friends were quitting music (their parents didn't know what I knew!) and like them, she was testing her parent. This was the big test for me, the moment when I had to find a way to help direct Lucy to stay with it!

We had a heart to heart talk again. I listened very intently and with respect to Lucy's arguments and expressions of her feelings. Once more we brought the discussion to Mrs. Holland. The three of us went over the situation in a friendly, sympathetic and searching way. Mrs. Holland even compared the problems with her own difficulties at the same age. Finally, we settled for playing popular show music and freedom to practice whenever she could.

The lessons went on. During the following two years Lucy practiced very little and for some stretches not at all. But I stayed patiently with it, remembering this was all a long growing pain in music education. It wasn't easy.



WHEN SHE was fifteen, Lucy seemed to awaken musically. She seemed to be suddenly aware of what music making meant to her. I began to hear more and more playing for pleasure, and more serious practicing. And she was, of her own accord, adding serious compositions she now found she enjoyed. She sightread music for pleasure. I was astonished at how much better she was able to play than two years earlier — and this with very little practicing in that interim! Evidently, all the work put in at the lessons themselves had taken root and was now beginning to pay off.

Now that she is an adult, about to be married, I have a feeling of great satisfaction in myself and in Lucy. I think that my job has been pretty well done. Music-making has become part of Lucy — she can use it like a language, whenever she wants to enjoy or express herself — and all thanks to six words which opened my eyes.

IN BRIEF, FOR REFERRAL

TEN WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD IN NATURE'S MUSIC SCHEDULE

1. Make clear to your child at the very outset of lessons — in manner enthusiastic, of course — that music training is a long term program — just as schooling is. And that there are many high points of pleasure along the way.
2. Your child has his own pace to follow, so avoid comparing him with siblings or neighbor's children who appear to be playing better than he. Anticipate "ups and downs" in his attitudes and practicing — and a number of "growing pain" periods, besides.
3. Make a study of how to help your child. Deciding when to help, when to be supportive and when to withdraw to the background permitting him to help himself, is a parental art in itself.
4. Remember to stress that the quality — not the quantity — of practicing is what counts for real progress.
5. "Music comes to the child more naturally when there is music in his mother's speaking voice," says the distinguished violin educator, Suzuki. So be pleasant and encouraging about your child's practicing. Of course there will be occasions when you will need to be firm. But remember — "music in your voice" — *teach* him, *guide* him, but don't *police* him!
6. When you help your child, be at his side — not at the other end of the room, or in the next room. Teach him to treat the practice session with the same respect he gives to his lesson period.
7. Don't despair if practicing becomes non-existent for a while, your child will make progress anyhow at the lesson itself — though it will be slower.
8. During a "crisis," always "talk it out" with your child on the basis of *mutual respect*. Be sure, if it's real serious, to discuss it with the teacher first. Allow your child a voice in the final decision, though be sure it is a constructive one.
9. A sense of humor is a powerful weapon with which to dispel clashes over practicing.
10. Always let your child feel you are proud of his achievements, even if they are small.

AVOID THESE TRAPS!

Don't ever belittle your child's efforts. Don't threaten to stop his lessons if he doesn't practice. This threat may work during periods of high interest in music, but it is likely to boomerang during a "growing pain" period. The day may come when he will remind you of it and insist that you make good your threat.

Don't criticize your child for "lack" of interest or poor or no practicing in the presence of others, especially his music teacher. The teacher has skillfully built up a fine relationship with your child, and "losing face" tends to undermine it. Speak to the teacher privately about problems, and to others not at all.

Your financial investment in your child's music lessons pays its dividends by the skills he acquires over the years, not by the amount of daily practicing he does, or how much he plays for company or even for you. Always remember you are giving your child a music education for *his* use and for *his* self expression and pleasure. Don't expect him to be "grateful" for your sacrifices in giving him music lessons; his gratitude will come years later when he can play and enjoy himself as an adult.

GROWING PAINS IN NATURE'S MUSIC SCHEDULE

Each child is different and will react to nature's music schedule in his own way. In general, however, a large percentage of children tend to follow the patterns depicted below.

