

## MUSIC FOR MUSIC'S SAKE

Caleb Chapman

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When my wife, Alison and I began the Soundhouse Musician Training program 17 years ago, I don't think either of us understood the full impact of music education. Since that time we have watched hundreds of students' lives be transformed because of music, but not in the ways we typically discuss in music advocacy.

For the last several decades America has been enlightened to the benefits of music education like never before. Thanks to significant research we have proof that music positively impacts almost every aspect of our development. As a matter of fact, it's tempting to compare it to one of those magic cure-alls peddled in the 1800's – only this one actually works!

We now know that studying music improves test scores. It also enhances abstract reasoning skills and early cognitive development required for math, science, and engineering. It improves reading skills, fine motor skills, vocabulary and non-verbal reasoning, and enhances learning in other core subjects. Studying music has proven to increase graduation rates. It fosters teamwork, self-esteem, and leadership skills. It develops critical thinking skills and increases IQ. It improves memory. Studying music can even improve your health and increase your life span. It makes me wonder if there is anything studying music can't improve! It hasn't been tested yet but I would guess studying music could possibly improve your chances at love, and maybe even whiten your teeth.

So why - if we know so many of the benefits of music education - are we still trying to convince our legislature that we need to keep funding music in our schools? We have shared this information with them for years. They know the implications on math, science, and life skills. Are they waiting for us to find more benefits? Short of curing cancer or bringing about world peace, I'm not really sure what's left. In other words ... what is the problem?

May I propose what the problem could be? And perhaps even the solution?

I conducted an informal poll of many of my friends, ranging from hobbyist musicians to GRAMMY-winning artists. I wanted to know what motivated their love for music. Where did it come from? Here are just a few of the many responses I received.

My friend, Rodney Bliss said, "I've adopted kids from all over the world, China, Haiti, India, Colombia and the United States. My kids were everywhere from newborn to 11 years old when we adopted them. Music was the very first language we taught them. . . . It not only helped them learn, it helped them feel connected to us. Music fills my house and spills out the doors and windows. My children trail bits and pieces of it when they leave and bring new songs when they return. Music ties my family together."

That's the real power of music.

This response from Scott Iwasaki brought tears to my eyes as I read it. Scott covered music for the Salt Lake Tribune for many years before becoming the arts editor for the Park Record. He relates, "I was, and still am a small Japanese-American. When I was in the seventh grade, my family moved from Salt Lake City to Wichita, Kansas. Wichita was home to Boeing and Cessna, the same companies that manufactured planes for World War II. As a result, there was still some anti-Japanese sentiment at the time and I was teased and bullied constantly. During this period music comforted me and gave me an idea of what I wanted to do with my life. It also helped me become creative and get my frustrations out. And although I know this sounds cliché, playing music saved me from doing many stupid things out of anger, sadness and boredom. Music has been my constant companion through thick and thin. It has never betrayed me . . . For me, music equals life."

That's the real power of music.

I loved this response from my friend, Jeff Coffin, of the Dave Matthews Band. He said, "Music connects me to myself and to everyone and everything around me. Music is, quite possibly, the greatest thing ever."

These responses helped me reflect on my own life that has been packed with similar experiences. Just last year as I traveled to Cuba with several talented young musicians from our Utah Soundhouse location. Our flagship ensemble, the Crescent Super Band had been invited to be a featured act at the Fiesta Del Tambor, Cuba's national music and dance festival. While in Havana we visited Cuba's National School of Music, home to dozens of the country's most talented high school aged student musicians. At first, our Utah students were very timid in interacting with them. The language barrier made communication difficult, and they were reduced to sharing smiles and nods. This quickly changed as the Crescent Super Band began to play, and invited the Cuban students to join them in an impromptu jam session.

In a short time, these students who had no means of communication with spoken language, connected at a much deeper level. As the music making wrapped up, hugs, email addresses, and Facebook contacts were exchanged through very broken English and Spanish. I was absolutely stunned as I watched decades of isolation and mistrust between two countries crumble in a matter of minutes.

That's the real power of music.

Another experience that comes to mind involves one of my neighbors, Trevor Linderman, who was a lifelong musician. A few years back he became terminally ill and it was obvious in May of 2015 that his time on this earth was coming to a close. As his body began to seriously weaken, he moved back home for hospice care. At this time his loving wife, Chelsi, called our family and asked if we could find musicians willing to play for him at home. She was confident that music would provide comfort and relief that medicine simply could not. As the days passed, many musicians came into their home, each of whom later shared that they felt like it was Trevor who gave them the gift of music, instead of the other way around. Chelsi described those visits like this:

"Trevor could no longer talk to me or our children, but as we gathered to hear the musicians, we were able to communicate . . . and experience one another without words. We were having an emotional and common experience of beauty together, and there was no need to talk. It erased his anguish, if not being able to express himself, our anguish of not being able to talk to him. Our small children held still on his chest and listened. I held his hand. The music facilitated those moments of connection . . . When I think of those last incredibly difficult months, I don't think of Trevor being sick and deteriorating, I think of the music."

That's the real power of music.

All too quickly Trevor passed on. The morning after his passing we had the award-winning pianist, Kurt Bestor scheduled to come to the house to play for Trevor. On that day, it was Chelsi and her family who now needed the comfort of music. She timidly asked if Kurt might still consider visiting their home. He, of course did, and honored Trevor's life in song for the grieving family members gathered there. I had the pleasure sharing that experience with the family. It was awe inspiring to watch the mood in that home transition in dramatic fashion from total despair to a celebration of a life as music was shared.

That's the real power of music.

I noticed in the responses I received that when describing the impact of music, there was common verbiage. Some of the words that occurred frequently were "soul", "life", "heart", "family", "world", "culture", "hope", and "love". Interestingly enough, not one person used the words "science", "engineering", or "math" in their response.

In fact, not one single person mentioned academics or statistics of any kind as the root of their passion for music. Yet this is what we always lead with when justifying the existence of school music. As a parent, if my child is doing poorly in math, I'm not going to sign him up for music lessons. I'm going to hire a math tutor. And when the legislature sees dropping math scores in our K-12 students their first instinct is never "let's increase music funding for our schools".

Those of us involved in music already know the value of keeping music in our schools. I would propose that while many of us have experienced some or all of the benefits of studying music that I listed earlier, none of those are the reason we make music. We make music for the sake of making music, and the benefits of that should be enough to justify keeping music in our schools!

We are fighting to keep music in our schools because we have forgotten to tell our legislature why we love music. We have forgotten to tell them why our kids love music. And maybe most importantly we have forgotten to remind those legislators why they love music. And it has absolutely nothing to do with test scores.

So where would we be without music? I'm sure our kids would find some way to pass their math and science classes. And yes, if our child is struggling in school we will hire a tutor. But if I want to give her one of the most cherished experiences of her entire life, I am going to sign her up for music in her school.

Saying we should keep music in our schools because it helps increase IQ is like saying "I bought a car because I like air conditioning". True, a car has air-conditioning but that is not why we buy a car. We buy a car because it is a convenient way of traveling.

We do not have music in schools because it increases student IQ. We have music in schools because it gives purpose, enrichment, fulfillment and joy to our students with the added bonus of all the rest.

For those of us who love music education, it's fine to discuss the impact of music on academics and brain function, but let's make our rallying cry reflect what music is really about. Today we decide together to tell our lawmakers to preserve music in our schools for the reason that matters to all of us: the immense joy that comes with making music for the sake of making music.

Today we decide to let legislators know that bringing this level of enjoyment into the lives of our children, into our homes, into our communities, into our culture, is not something we are willing to live without. Not because it gives us a slew of secondary benefits, but because it gives us the biggest benefit of all: happiness. And I challenge any lawmaker to put a dollar figure on something as critical to our very existence as that.

Today we decide to stop minimizing the importance that music plays in the lives of all of us.

Today we decide together to acknowledge the real power of music and to save music for music's sake!

#ccsoundthinking