

## On being musically gifted:

### For teachers, parents and their music-studying pupils

For The Three-Year Anniversary (2011) of The Bavarian Center for Gifted and Talented Children (<http://www.begabungszentrum-bayern.se>)

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People have wondered for thousands of years what it is to be gifted in music. While we can easily hear when someone actually is, it has been more difficult trying to understand what gifted musicians have in common in terms of skills and abilities.

Children who grow up to be great musicians often show a fascination for sounds even as babies. All children are interested in sounds, but most children quickly turn away after a short while finding something else in the environment of interest. Musically gifted children, however, tend to *relish* the sound and some sounds more than others! Let's say they are particularly sensitive and discerning of various musical sounds.

To express themselves musically is almost automatic to gifted children. They will imitate sounds and rhythms, and above all, also remember what they hear. It is very likely that they also have a so-called Perfect Pitch. It has been suggested, in fact, that all children are capable of such hearing for music but that not all develop it for lack of musical stimulation and an active musicianship. So, to listening to music and to practice it are important issues already from a young age. Children who do not are likely to *de-learn* some of the musical abilities that they were in all likelihood born with.

As scientists have studied famous musicians and their childhood it has become clear that when very young music the same as playing. It was fun and entertaining. It was *all* playful. At around 10 years of age their learning of music became more intentional, more formal and the degree of playfulness lessened. Somewhere around puberty they were quite intent on learning an instrument or to sing. As a result they practised a lot. Studies have shown that the very best musicians at 12 years of age had in all practised about 2000 hours since they were only five years old. They had increasingly learnt that practising is not always fun to do, but they also realised it was necessary to reach a certain desired goal in the future.



Also, all children who grew up to become famous musicians found one or two mentors; other musicians whom they admired and who often became their teachers before they finally became famous young musicians themselves.

However, musical giftedness is more than memory and having appropriate motor skills. It is also having an affective response to music and a will to generate an emotional response to the music one is playing. But note this is a skill that starts developing mainly around puberty. Before this time gifted musicians rely more on imitating what others do rather than finding personal expression through the music they like and play. It is also around this time that the automaticity by which the musically gifted behaved musically prior to puberty needs to be replaced by conscious and aware action. The young individual needs to develop an understanding of what he or she is doing in terms of skills and types of music and expression. Failure to obtain such understanding may result in the demise of their musical prowess. There are examples of musical wunderkinds who gained great fame as children but who never managed to transition from unreflected musical behaviour to an aware and knowledgeable musicianship and lost their standing. As adults they were not particularly outstanding anymore.



There are several kinds of musical giftedness; they are different because they rely on different sets of skills. Some musicians may be gifted musically in many

ways while others are gifted musically in only one way. You could for example be a performer or singer, a composer or arranger, or a conductor or any kind of musical leader. Needless to say, it is also irrelevant what kind of music you like and are interested in. To be a pop singer, an Indian Citar player or a Western classically trained violinist is not important. Giftedness does not follow a certain type of music, tradition or what kind of formal training you may or may not have.

Is everyone gifted in music? No, certainly not! But everyone has a musical mind. Evolution has provided the human species with the ability to process, appreciate and use musical behaviour for a variety of purposes. It has been suggested by scientists that human musical ability is related to bird's singing. So, everyone has a relationship to music, but not everyone has the capacity to develop the general ability into something more spectacular. Giftedness is the ability to develop further than most others. It is *also* the coincidence of several separate and concurrent abilities; all with the potential to develop farther than normal. Musical giftedness is not one single ability. It consists of several abilities.

So, what can you as a parent, teacher or a music-loving child learn from this? Well, I suggest the following:

- A small child showing particular delight in musical sounds, have a good memory for tunes and easily imitate what he or she hears, may well have important abilities in constituting musical giftedness
- When you suspect that a child really is gifted you must allow the child to train by playfulness. With increasing age training and practising becomes more formal and at about the onset of puberty the child needs to understand the significance of deliberate practise.

- The older child needs a musical mentor; someone they like and admire.
- The experience and indulgence in emotion as prompted by music should never be forgotten or overlooked.
- Musical giftedness is applicable to all music. Even if your musical interests as a parent lie with Western Classical music your gifted child might well be more interested in pop music or in any other music genre. Encourage and allow it!
- Everyone has a musical mind unless there is neurological dysfunction (which is very rare!), but not everyone is or can become musically gifted. Note that musical giftedness is not one single ability. It is a set of different abilities all of which need to be developed.
- If being musically gifted in whatever sense leads to a professional career something additional and important comes into the picture also, namely *marketability*. The agents of commercial music be it either in pop, Western classical or in some other genre, are never interested in degree of skill or kind of training,

or where you studied or your background. They define talent very differently as compared to educators and psychologists. To them marketability only defines the talent. He or she is a great talent who has the ability to sell a product that as many as possible would pay for to enjoy. Perhaps not always a desirable understanding of giftedness but in our day and time always one to consider for a professional career!

Famed British singer Janet Baker once told a journalist that “musicians’ business is emotion and sensitivity—to be the sensors of the human race.” While this certainly is an appealing thought, it is perhaps worth considering that just because someone is musically gifted, that is not to say that they also *must* have a professional career in music. They may well have other interests too, perhaps they are gifted in other fields also, which makes for an alternative career. The gifted individuals need to decide this for themselves. Parents as well as teachers and mentors should absolutely not force such a choice! They can present options and advice but must leave decisions for the gifted individual.

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