

Music is part of my life

By Marina Connelly, an adult with albinism.



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Music has been a part of my life since long before I have any clear memory of music-making myself. My parents are great listeners, and learning to sing for me was an integral part of learning literacy, mobility.

I learnt the piano and the violin as a child, but my primary instrument was and is the voice. And it certainly wasn't my vision impairment that stopped me from pursuing a career in music, rather a terrible fear of solo performance!

But I've sung as an adult in operas and semi-professional choral groups in the United States, as well as choirs here in Melbourne, and gain so much from the experience of singing with others. Collaborative music-making is one of the most soul-supportive enterprises a person can engage in – there are

friends to be made, and a community that can create something beautiful together is a strong one; there is the feeling of mastery at accomplishing your part in a challenging piece; and then the simple fact that music itself is good for body and soul, can keep them together. All this is true, whether or not a person has a vision impairment, but perhaps music really is one of the mediums most accessible to the vision impaired.

There are more means of adapting a text or musical score for the vision impaired than there are vision impaired people, and we all have our own ways of approaching a print disability. With regard to reading music, mine is quite low-tech: I memorize most music I have to perform, and use a handheld loupe magnifier to read the beginnings of lines, or words as an aide-memoir. Music is (often, mostly) quite logical, so it's possible to break things into separate, memorize-able components, and a little knowledge of music theory can help in this, too.

I can't see far enough ahead of me to see a conductor, but I can listen for the people around me – when the players in the orchestra are lifting their bows, or other singers are taking a breath. I have to be alert, perhaps more alert than a sighted musician, but I find it's possible to take my cues from those around who can see more than me. At times, if the music being performed is particularly complex in places, or an entry is really exposed, someone next to me will tap what the conductor is gesturing on my hand, so that I can 'feel' the conducting, too.

When I've sung in operas, where movement is also a part of a performance, and there is sometimes the hazard of an orchestra pit to fall into, or piece of set to walk into under bright lights, I've worked with directors to choreograph less extensive movement. Or, we make sure that I am always accompanied by another performer. Sometimes, this can add, not detract, from a staging.

Others will have different tricks. Braille music is a wonderful option for some, and so are the new apps that make it possible for others to view a score on an iPad. Bright lights are more or less of a problem for each of us – but sunglasses are another solution. What's really important is a can-do attitude and a flexible approach. And, I think, at the end of the day, the rewards of music-making are so great as to make some fuss entirely worthwhile.

To vision-impaired students of music – my message to you is to persevere, because it is possible to participate in such a sustaining experience, as anyone else can, just with some extra tricks up your sleeve. To parents of vision-impaired children – there is every reason your child will be able to participate in music, and it is likely to bring a huge benefit. I would say, first and foremost, get your child singing – it promotes friendship, community, knowledge of the body and the body in space, and a sense of mastery. And singing is perhaps the most accessible instrument of all!