

Music: Children, Teens, & Beyond



By Dr Barbara Williams PhD.



Musical experience is good for all children, but especially for blind and low vision children, since it depends on our hearing. We need to use and develop hearing to the max, to keep ourselves safe when moving around, and for general learning about the world. To learn to play an instrument well enough to be wanted in groups is a life-long advantage for enjoyable activity and friendship. Nearly all albinos see well enough to read a single line of printed music at the playing speed for their accomplishment level and we

are usually good memorizers - much safer for performances.

Folk instruments are often learnt first from hearing: tin whistle, guitar, banjo, mandolin, small harp, bodhran, accordion. Their players are often hi-skill, but may not even read music. It is a great advantage if your family sings, at home, in the car, at church etc. It is a feel-good way to learn about expressing emotions, social reciprocity, and it incidentally trains memory for words, tunes and harmony.

Rhythm and movement are the drivers for life and health: so when making music, like learning an instrument, rhythmic vitality is crucial. When I was teaching, I liked to be sure students were encouraged to play by ear - to copy and invent, to put stuff together - as well as to know how to read music. Then we can play our own versions of popular music etc in the way that suits us best, and shows us off! Admiration of our efforts can be a great confidence-booster. It is good to find a teacher who supports/encourages this aural competence. I have some materials, eg sets of known tunes with good rhythm, to give ideas; and I am always happy to talk to teachers & students.

Doing things from our own hearts, making up tunes, working out riffs, exploring the myriad sounds instruments will make, not just the standard ones - such things can while away hours of satisfying productive creativity.

Choice of instrument

Piano: this is a good beginner all-rounder, big range, stays still, is in tune already, easy to operate: combines melody, rhythm & harmony. Also most of its sounds are acceptable to listeners/family. (Some instruments are a bit rugged at the start.) But it can be lonely, if taught more as a solo instrument: and unwieldy, can't be taken with you: also expensive if there is not already one in the

family. Seeing both staves at once may not be possible, especially if one wears magnifying spectacles. Then memorizing is necessary.

However, to get started, any available instrument is good. If a relative plays one, so much the better; that can be very encouraging & educative.

A single-line instrument - flute, clarinet, sax - may have more group potential in the teen years, classical, band, or jazz, and be much easier for us to see the music. Especially when standing to play, it is easy to keep the copy close. In popular music or jazz, the pianist (or anyone) may not need music, so can participate freely, as long as they know the tune.

Classical strings are always in fashion: they usually take consistent effort over a good many years to really master, and are best begun young. (eg. The Suzuki violin method works first from listening, even parents with their pre-schoolers learning together.) They can also be enjoyed starting later though - anything melodic can sound beautiful and be satisfying to play.

Guitars and bass guitars are often prized possessions of teens. It is likely that they will experiment with their mates, write songs and form bands. Watching Videos of their favourite pop stars and copying them will be their lessons. They will still have more power if they have already had some music education.

Singing is always good, especially if the person does have a pleasant voice. There are always choirs and informal groups who like to sing and welcome someone who 'has a good ear'. Better still if you can hold a part and read music.

One down-side is that the words are almost always too small to read in classical scores.

I have had enormous pleasure from recorder consorts, playing both old and new music. **Viols** have necessitated a modified stand, bringing the music rack 4" forward so I don't bow the stand! (One sits to play viol, like a cello.) The same stand (higher) works for the **harpsichord** (virginal) if I stand to play. One has to be a bit inventive. But that is ok, as we usually are!

There is a myth that if you have bad sight you will automatically 'be musical': not true. But if there is any talent and interest, it is worth nurturing.