

#8 Music

A young woman was dying. Her baby had died at birth a few weeks previously, and since that time the mother had steadily failed. The doctor had just left her room saying emphatically that there was no hope and to give her anything she wanted.

She looked up at her agonized husband and said: Music. I want music. I know that will cure me.” The nurse thought it to be a foolhardy and useless errand, but the husband went in search of it.

The first day old familiar tunes and some of the Chopin that she had always loved, were played softly to her. Her body relaxed under the soothing influence, her nerves became less tense, her breathing deeper and more rhythmical, increasing the circulation. That night she slept. With the shutting out of the senses to the outside world the harmonic reaction brought about by the music continued its work of healing all through the night. The next day she was visibly stronger.

Halfway through World War I, music began to be used on a large scale ‘to help organize victory’. How the men craved music. A victrola was carried lovingly from front lines to hospital. Music was used in every conceivable form as a comfort, as a relaxation from the horrors of war, and as a stimulus to the morale of the men. It acquired all the sacredness of a ministering angel.

Music was used to unite the soldiers in the Civil War. Isn’t it telling that both sides were singing the Battle Hymn of Freedom?

Florence Nightingale requested music for hospitals in the Crimean War. The mind blurre by contact with unspeakable horrors was quieted and made normal again.

“There is something wonderful in music. Words are wonderful enough, but music is more wonderful. It speaks not to our thoughts as words do; it speaks straight to our hearts and spirits, to the very core and root of our souls. Music soothes, us, stirs us up, it puts noble feelings into us; it melts us to tears, we know not how. It is language by itself, just as perfect in its way as speech, as words, just as divine, just as blessed.”

Music requires no middle man to explain it as demonstrated by an experience shared by Dr. Karl Paulnack, Director of Music at Boston Conservatory. He and a violinist friend opened a performance at a nursing home in Fargo ND with a piece written by Aaron Copland who had dedicated it to young friend of his, a young pilot, who was shot down during World War II. They played the number with no explanation. Midway through the piece, an elderly man in a wheelchair near the front of the hall began to weep.

Before they started to play their second number, they stopped to tell a little about the piece they had just played and explained the circumstances under which Copland wrote the music and how he had dedicated it to a downed pilot. At the mention of this, the elderly man broke down in sobs and needed to be taken out of the hall.

Later the man was brought backstage, tears and all, to explain himself, as he shared:

‘During World War II, I was a pilot, and I was in an aerial combat situation where one of my team’s planes was hit. I watched my friend bail out, and watched his parachute open, but the Japanese planes that had engaged us returned and machine gunned across the parachute chords so as to separate the parachute from the pilot, and I watched my friend drop away into the ocean, realizing that he was lost. I have not thought about this for many years, but during that first piece of music you played, this memory returned to me so vividly that it was as though I was reliving it. I didn’t understand why this was happening, why now, but then when you came out to explain that this piece of music was written to commemorate a lost pilot, it was a little more than I could handle.’

This is the powerful language of music.

This ‘heavenly Maid’ is a chief restorer of our mental and physical equilibrium. Music has the power to solve many of our problems for us.

Sadly, it is being mis-used. Music has become a performing art. Ask someone if he or she is musical, and if that person does not play a musical instrument or sing, the answer will be no. Yet, every one of us is deeply and profoundly musical. If you don’t believe me, try walking to your next class out of rhythm. Try saying something a-rhythmically—it’s practically impossible. We involuntarily sense the home or keynote of music. I’m going to sing a series of notes and when I stop, you fill in the last one. Here we go: Without the last note, we would feel incomplete, almost like we’re left dangling out there. We long for home.

God is its author, and not man; he laid
 The keynote of all harmonies; he planned
 All perfect combinations, and he made
Us so we could hear and understand.

Certain combinations of notes make us feel sad, others hopeful, others give us longing. Music cheers, comforts, refines and elevates. Music is a means by which we can turn chaos into calm. Think of that next time the noise level of your home climbs to an unbearable level. Music can instantly change our moods.

One of the heart educators wrote: It seems extravagant to claim that, if everyone could be shown how to follow a tune and remember it, the world’s unrest would be ameliorated, but this would seem to be a fact, nevertheless. Because, by doing so, each individual would become conscious of the harmony within himself.

“Yet we have worked many centuries to squeeze all the joy out of listening to music by making the means of enjoyment more and more complex, until now, when we find ourselves starving in spite of the abundance about us...After starving our music sense, and trying our best, by wrong methods, to transform our reaction to it into a lifeless, analytical and empty thing, instead of the warm, glowing healthful reaction it should be, it is time we start working to put it all back again

into its rightful place as a joygiver.”

“Through music, the mind is stilled to outside influences and becomes a reflector for the inner light which comes only through stillness. Faith comes when the chaotic thoughts of the outside world are stilled. Music can do that.”

But not all music. Some music relies so heavily on beat, that while it may get our toes tapping and our heels dancing, it does not have the power to stir our souls and in its coarseness, causes us to dull those refined sensitivities that bridge heaven and earth. Music is made up of melody, rhythm and harmonies and causes us to feel things deeply. But repetitive beat without melody has the opposite effect—it shuts down thought and feeling. I read the story of a young boy who was forced to become a child soldier in the Sierra Leone conflict a few years ago. He described how they blasted loud rock music over the speakers in their camp twenty-four hours a day because it kept them from thinking or feeling anything. That’s the only way they could stir them up to kill which they never would have done in their right minds. You see the same thing happening among primitive tribes on the warpath who worked themselves up to a frenzy with the steady strong beat of their war dance.

An interesting experiment was done with plants. One group of plants were placed in a room filled with classical music. The other group of plants were placed with heavy rock. Go google it and you can see the outcome. Show it to your kids.

Music is vibration. It effects us at a deep level, because at our deepest level, we are vibration. Helen Keller loved listening to music even though she was completely deaf. She felt it through the vibration.. She was being interviewed for a magazine article in her home and Helen took her interviewer into the room where her radio was. She turned it on and placed her hand on it and smiled—Ahh.. Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. And she said, isn’t that interesting that a man who was deaf composed this music so a blind woman could see the moonlight.

The intention of many of the great music masters was to reveal the very glory of God to the human heart—but many of our youth—and adults—have closed their ears. May I offer a couple of suggestions for opening those ears as illustrated in an article that appeared in the Reader’s Digest over 50 years ago. It was written by a young journalist who had been invited to the home of a wealthy philanthropist. After dinner, the guests retired to a large room for an evening of chamber music. This young man said he was tone deaf and music meant nothing to him. It was almost painful. So, as the music started to play, he closed his ears and thought about other things.

After the first number, the man next to him asked, “You are fond of Bach?” He hadn’t noticed that he was sitting next to Albert Einstein himself! He admitted he knew nothing of him upon which Einstein took him by the arm, led him out of the room, upstairs to a study. “Now then,” he said. “Tell me a song you love.” He named a Bing Crosby song and Einstein found the song on a record which he played and when it was done, said, “Now. Sing it back to me,” which he did to the best of his ability and Einstein’s warm eyes lit up. He continued doing the same with song after song until Einstein played a record of music without words and told his young friend to hum it back, which he did. Einstein smiled and said, “Now we’re ready for Bach.” He led him back

down to the hall and whispered, “Just allow yourself to listen. That’s all.”

The writer said to this day, Bach’s Sheep May Safely Graze is one of his favorite pieces of music as he heard it for the first time that night, and which became the gateway to a great love of music.

Notice the two take away lessons here: # Familiarity with music helps us love it. And #2: If the realm of music is to be entered through hearing, one must begin by being able to focus on the melody. One way is to draw a pitch picture, either in the air or on paper. As you practice paying attention to melody—the habit of attention—it will be etched in the memory and can be recalled and reimagined at will, protecting us from feelings and thoughts that are destructive.

Afterwards, the hostess apologized that Einstein had missed so much of the evening’s performance. Einstein replied, “My young friend and I were engaged in the greatest activity of which man is capable. We were opening up yet another fragment on the frontier of beauty.”

You can open up yet another fragment on the frontier of beauty by engaging in the same activities. Make classical music familiar to your children by playing it in your homes from the days of their birth. Play it because you want to hear it. And then, find those moments to help them practice focusing on the melody. I included a lot of classical music children will love in the Enrichment sections. And you will see some that has a story with it. Most of these stories are linked to old North Carolina Symphony Children’s Concerts notes. It’s just paragraph or two of something interesting about the composer or the piece that will add delight to the music as your children listen to it. You’ll find other books to further music appreciation on the Music Appreciation page. And I love Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts. Many of them are available as free youtubes and I’ve linked them in the Music section of the Mother’s University.

I often hear moms regret that they can’t afford music lessons for their children. To them I say music is a free art. Your children are gifted with their first and most important instrument—their voices. Don’t underestimate the blessing that song will add to their lives. It’s that connection between mind and emotion. It will open pathways to the heart. The hard heart can’t sing. Remember Captain Von Trapp in the Sound of Music? When he discovered his song again, he reconnected with the joys all around him, especially his family. But maybe the reverse is also true—singing keeps us from growing hard hearts. You can plant so many of the lessons you want your children to know through singing with them. Jesus said love everyone, treat them kindly, too. When your heart is filled with love, others will love you. Whenever I hear the song of the bird or look at the blue, blue sky, whenever I touch a velvet rose or walk by a lilac tree, I know Heavenly Father loves me.

Don’t make it a lesson—be a singing mother. Be a singing family. How many activities can people join together at once? Not many! But singing is one of them. It will bind family hearts together.

I just need to say something here about the singing of hymns. If ever there was something to bridge heaven and earth, it’s a hymn. As you read the stories behind many of the most favorite hymns, which I’ve included in Stories of Hymns, you’ll learn how often hymns came as a gift; that composers hurried to write down the words and melody that flowed through them. A couple

of our daughters had a friend who passed away as a young husband and father. Before he died, he requested that a particular hymn be sung by the congregation at his funeral. At the services, his widow explained that he told her this was the hymn the angels sang to comfort him as they surrounded his hospital bed in his final days. On the tragic night the Titanic sank, the ship's musicians tried to calm the panicked passengers by playing hymns. They volunteered to remain on board, playing their music to the end. It is said 'Nearer My God to Thee' was their final offering just before they sank with the ship. And as Jesus led his disciples to Gethsemane, they sang a hymn. Hymns can bring great comfort, courage, hope and strength to the hearts of our children, if they know them.

When you're ready for another instrument, start looking around for a piano. I have probably one or two free or practically free pianos show up in my Facebook market page almost every single week. There are millions of pianos out there that no one is playing anymore. They're heavy to move and almost impossible to sell, so owners are happy if someone will haul it away for them. Seriously. Let people know you are looking for one. In my little church congregation, three families have given their pianos away in just the last year because they didn't want to move them.

And then, don't jump into piano lessons too fast. The way we have been teaching the piano for decades has a huge failure rate. Ask any group of people how many took piano as a child, and the majority will raise their hands. But practically none of them ever became proficient enough for piano playing to be a joyful part of their lives. And I've talked to plenty of people whose experience with piano has scarred them for life.

The heart educators encouraged learning to play the piano by playing. Not by learning, in the beginning, the rules and the key signatures and the lines on the staff. Those are all mind things and extremely complex. When I play the piano, I'm not saying to myself, let's see, that note is on the F space and that note is on the B line. No, I'm looking at a pattern of how the notes are arranged on the page and because my brain has seen that pattern so many times and my fingers have played them so many times, I can sit down and sight read a piece of music. The patterns are all very familiar. And my fingers recognize them.

I trained as a Simply Music teacher and I would unfold patterns in the hands of students as young as five years old who would leave their very first lesson playing a complex, satisfying two handed piece that would have taken them probably two years to learn how to play by reading. The majority of piano students would have given up before getting to that point. We've got it backwards. If we first let them play, the reading will give meaning to something their fingers already recognize.

So pick up a piano and let your children pick out the melodies on the piano of the songs they are singing. And then let them play around and experiment with harmonies in the left hand. Or better yet, just let them play—experiment with creating music. There's not time to go into detail, but there are some books on the Music Appreciation page you can access through the Others Category that will guide you in helping your children create their own music if you want music to be a lifelong friend.

Light a fire of desire to learn an instrument by inviting musicians to come perform in your home. If you have a college or university nearby with a music department, visit the department and see if they would be willing to recommend students who may be willing to come to your home and give mini-performances. Or ask some local music teachers if they have some advanced students who would like an opportunity to perform. Invite a couple of other families over and have a pot-luck dinner. Warm home-cooked meals can be pretty enticing to college students! Have your performers keep it relatively short so your children don't get bored and ask them to play selections with children in mind. It's better to have your kids ask for more than to wonder when it is ever going to end. Over time, invite singers, violinists, harpists, trumpet players, guitarists and flutists and combinations of all the above. Show your children that music is shared among friends and not always performed on a stage. Keep it informal and friendly. Chances are, one of them will ignite a passion for an instrument. And who knows...maybe in some future day you will find you've entertained a future performing star unawares.

Or you can contact local music teachers and find out when their recitals are.

Music is such a beautiful gift to the world. Dr. Paulnack who I told you about earlier, in welcoming a new class to the Boston Conservatory, counseled the students:

“Someone is going to walk into your concert hall and bring you a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again will depend partly on how well you do your craft.” Let that be the right-use of music from the beginning as your children learn to play an instrument—using it to serve and to be a cultural uplift to our world. Musicians are heart healers.

And now I'll close with some wisdom from Confucius: “Harmony has the power to draw Heaven downwards to the earth. It inspires men to love the good, and to do their duty. If one should desire to know whether a kingdom is well governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music shall furnish forth the answers.”

How do you think we're doing?

