

Music as a Second Language

How many times in our lives have we heard the expression that music is the universal or international language? How many of us know what that actually means? How many of us who have taken lessons in our instrument of choice actually treated music like a language. In this article I will attempt to open your mind to the possibility that there might just be another approach to this venerable subject we call music.

I'd like to take you back to the language classes of our youth if I may. Think of all the steps we took to gain a mastery over the language we speak. Certainly we realize that there are varying degrees of mastery but the different levels of proficiency are a subject of another article. What did we do in kindergarten or first grade or second? How did the study of language progress in a logical fashion to allow us to learn to read and write and speak? The study of language is certainly important because it allows us to effectively communicate with each other. The study of music is no less rewarding if approached correctly.

Like the study of any subject we must start at the beginning and progress one step at a time building knowledge and skill along the way. When in kindergarten we learned the alphabet. During our early time studying music we usually learn notes. Like in language studies this is usually dual in that we must learn it not only on paper reading and writing it but also how to play or speak it as well. Therefore we need to gain knowledge of the musical clefs and where each note lies in the musical scale. How many of us remember the (E)very (G)ood (B)oy (D)oes (F)ine for the lines on the treble clef and F.A.C.E. for the spaces? There are similar phrases for the bass clef as well. Can you see the direct comparison between music and language?

In first and second grades we began to learn to recognize and even spell words and put them together in rudimentary sentences. Now stay with me here. The same things exist in music referred to as motives or phrases. Along the way we weave in the three basic elements of music in general namely melody, rhythm, and chords. Our language classes have now come to the point where we must gain a little from the trial by fire method. How many remember the terrifying event of standing up next to your desk and reading page 34 paragraph 3 aloud to the class? Well, if we weren't already very good at speaking and reading we had to get good pretty quickly or suffer the teasing of our classmates. In music the direct correlation is sight reading. For those who might never have heard this term before imagine putting a piece of music in front of you that is at your current level of ability and playing it as best you can without ever seeing it before. If this is not part of your instruction ... why not? Can you see the parallel to language?

After a fashion we have developed some rudimentary skills in both language and, hopefully, music. Now it's time to put them to work. Yes, you guessed it. It's time for the dreaded book reports. What can you tell me about that piece of music your playing? What is the key it's played in? The meter? The main theme or phrase? How about the chord progression? The composer? The style or era? It's all there you know. You just have to know how to look for it.

Time goes on and we are now responsible for putting our own thoughts and ideas together. How many of you have had to, as part of your lessons, compose some music of your own? Why after all did we have to write those essays and short stories and term papers, etc.? Was it not to show a mastery of the language and point out where we needed work or greater understanding? Think of all the various things that we must apply correctly in order for us to have OUR music conveyed properly to someone else. Is this not communication? Is this not language? Is this not exciting?

This has been a very brief walk through of a very involved subject. I think that the reader can begin to see just how much of a parallel there actually is between the study of spoken and written word and the study of music. Take the time to analyze all of the things that are involved in the study of language and seek to apply them to your own musical experience. I assure you that a parallel exists if your only willing to look for it.