

The Non-Musical Outcomes of Casual Music Participation

A Research in Progress

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Rudolf Steiner's later lectures on education are a treasure trove for any teacher in a Waldorf school, as they represent the ideals of anthroposophical education as refined and distilled by those first years of actual implementation. The lecture series GA 302a, known as Education for Adolescents, has many such insights; at one point Steiner makes some comments about participation in music that hint at the distinctive benefits of both singing and playing instruments: "Playing musical instruments is recommended for children with poor imagination and memory... Singing is more suitable for children with a vivid imagination... It would be ideal—if we had the necessary rooms—to teach both groups simultaneously, one in singing, the other in instrumental music." In these statements, among others, Steiner makes it clear that music is a part of the Waldorf curriculum not because of some aim toward developing future orchestral musicians or stars of the opera stage, but because music develops and balances key human capacities.

Unfortunately, much of the modern research into the benefits of participation in music is written in support of music education as it exists in the United States today, in other words, as an elective for those dedicated and driven students who passionately study and practice music in a disciplined, focused way. Waldorf schools offer a different approach. Inspired by Steiner's original interest in the qualities that music can develop, Waldorf music educators continue to provide experiences in both singing and instrumental music for all students. In providing a broad and universal music education for all students, Waldorf schools often do not offer what is available in more intensive, exclusive music programs found in some other schools. Although some Waldorf alumni do go on to conservatory and distinguish themselves in music, most Waldorf students are what could be called "casual" or participatory musicians. They most likely do not pursue music after graduating and may not continue to participate in any way.

Regardless, is there still some benefit to casual music participation? What does the research show about its benefits? Are the extra-musical benefits limited only to the disciplined, rigorous students of music, or are there still benefits to informal, participatory, and community-oriented musicianship?

What is the significance of Steiner's comments on the differences between instrumental music making and singing?

Here is a brief summary of some findings in the literature so far. Each bullet point represents the findings of a study (or one of the findings). The research consulted so far mainly represents meta-analyses, although there are some intervention studies included.

I. Cognitive Benefits

1. Rigorous instrumental training improves memory and cognition (but not general intelligence).
2. Instrumental vs. vocal music: studies suggest instrumental training may have stronger effects on cognitive development.
3. Casual music participation is linked to higher reading achievement, improved attention, memory, and executive functions (if enjoyable and engaging).

II. Social and Emotional Benefits

1. Sense of belonging and teamwork: Group music activities foster collaboration and social connection.
2. Emotional well-being: Music provides a means for self-expression and emotional regulation.
3. Essential life skills: Music participation teaches children cooperation, respect, empathy, and self-discipline.
4. Inclusivity and acceptance: Exposure to diverse cultures and abilities through music.

Works Reviewed

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