Music Lessons for Adults Acknowledged as Therapy

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I have been teaching the piano in the Pittsburgh area for over a decade. Most of my students are children (K-12), but I have had the chance to also teach adults. These adult students had overcome a certain shyness that comes with the thought of being a bit too late to learn and further develop long forgotten or neglected music skills. They had voiced their willingness to dedicate precious time and effort to “getting back into it.” Some wanted to do it out of pure ambition; others wanted to play piano duets together with their children or accompany them during their studies of other instruments; and I also had a student who wanted to prove that even in his late 40s he was still capable to learn new things, and challenge himself beyond his comfort zone.

Based on my experience, the common denominator with adult students is their previous experience: they either took lessons as children and would like to continue, or never took music lessons, but always had the desire to do so. Without an exception, the ones that discontinued music lessons for one reason or another, had deep regrets about their past decision, and quite often I heard they wished their parents did not let them give up music lessons. Understandably, life happens, and music (or art and dance) lessons are the first to get scrapped. The desires and needs to create and to express inner thoughts and emotions are deeply rooted in who we are, whether we like to acknowledge it or not. The adults who simply wish to learn the fundamentals of playing the piano possess an indispensable joy, and most of all the necessary patience, which young children lack for the obvious reason. As a teacher, I rarely expect young children (K-4) to have more than 15 to 25 minutes of a continuous focus on the material of any given lesson. With adults, the lesson planning and teaching process is much more fluid and consistent, accompanied with constructive questions, witty humor, and great life metaphors and stories.

After a couple of months into teaching adults, and thankfully witnessing steady progress, they started sharing that music and our lessons had a healing quality. Some benefits they listed include, but are not limited to the following:

- lessons provide the much-needed break from a mundane monotonous work day
- the rhythmic exercises help gym routines/runs
- counting meter exercises help work-related stress
- singing the melodic line of a piece helps maintain focus and makes the daily drive shorter and pleasant
- the learning process provides much needed peace in tumultuous times

Almost all of my current and former students have demanding, high-stress jobs in the medical and law fields, which result in hectic and inconsistent schedules. Usually, they work more than
60 hours a week, including weekends. Some have families and children; others are caregivers for elderly parents, or both. The pressure and responsibilities these learners carry on their shoulders would mentally and emotionally exhaust even the strongest person. Even then, these students rarely canceled or postponed a lesson. I was constantly astounded at their abilities to do it all.

Recently, I approached one of these students, a medical doctor, with a suggestion to skip a week, since I witnessed her exhaustion. She looked at me intensely and refused with the words: “Anoush, this is what I need to get me through. Here I have my music. This is all I want at this very moment. It is a therapy-like for me. Instead of going to the shrink, I am heading here and am smiling, because I know that at the end I will be able to play this song that I love so much, and share it with my kid.” I won’t forget her words, or similar comments that I have heard over the years. It was a moving and humbling experience for me, as well.

I do my best to not overlook the therapeutic side of music. Teachers are often concerned with theory, improving reading skills, developing healthy hand/body positions, cultivating great sound quality, convenient fingering, artistry, etc. – all valid and necessary. But sometimes, we overlook the very reason these adults seek and desire music lessons. They are most likely not here to become concert pianists. We are here to help these adults achieve their goals, no matter how small or big these are. Music can be therapeutic indeed; I am witnessing first-hand the healing power of music regardless of the level of skill or preparation. Next time when a student comes without completed theory exercises I will ignore it, and we will play a duet while singing along, without being afraid of being judged of our voices or correct pitch. We will let it go.