

MusicLink

Lessons Learned After Two Decades

As the teacher leaned over to sign up her new MusicLink student at the convention booth, she did not realize that this was a momentous occasion for the MusicLink Foundation. This was student number 5,000 in a program that has brought ongoing music lessons to promising students in need across the country. She described how the young student arrived at her home studio with his mother and grandmother. The mother's sweater was pinned together haphazardly, and she spoke very little English. She simply said, "My son loves music—help him." After a brief conversation with the shy boy, who arrived with no music, she asked him if he would play something for her, expecting a lopsided version of a simple song. To her surprise, he comfortably played a Chopin waltz quite well, which was self-taught. With a knowing smile and a nod from the teacher, the mother hugged the grandmother. A simple "link" was made that would impact this child's life. MusicLink teachers and coordinators who have seen similar links made across the country know how valuable ongoing music instruction can be to disadvantaged youth, reaching well beyond performance skills.

The MusicLink program began in 1992 as an outreach program of the Virginia Music Teachers Association and reached the national level through support from the Music Teachers National Association Foundation. In 2001, MusicLink grew into the MusicLink Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization to expand its teacher recruitment base and provide more opportunities to its students. As of March 1, 2014, MusicLink had reached more than 5,750 students in 50 states and 3 Canadian provinces. MusicLink teachers have provided more than 370,000 hours of instruction, equivalent to more than \$9 million of in-kind scholarship donation. Major publishers supply free or discounted music to the program; additional business partners provide discounts on instruments and software; and local music dealers offer ongoing discounts to MusicLink teachers. The foundation has provided more than \$200,000 worth of instruments to students and more than \$30,000 in camp scholarships. The foundation also provides Grass Roots Grants to start new programs, Teacher Reimbursement Grants to assist teachers who pay for music and event fees for their students, and a number of \$1,000 student achievement awards for graduating seniors.

These numbers speak for themselves as far as growth is concerned; however, what have we learned about the effectiveness of the program in the development of musical talent? What can we learn from examining the learning trends of how students progress in lessons after one, three, five or more years of lessons? What do teachers recognize in student growth in areas beyond performance skills, such as self-discipline through practice, creative expression and persistence to reach challenging goals? How do difficulties in their home-life impact their musical training? How is the program changing the lives of students and their families through music? At a time when the presence of arts is withering in U.S. schools¹ and differentiated programming for talented students in general is in decline,² a program that can meet the needs of promising disadvantaged students through community support provides a pragmatic solution for long-term musical talent development.

MusicLink Program Basics

The simple idea of linking a promising student with an independent music teacher as a way to promote musical talent development remains at the core of the MusicLink program. This idea grew from research on the identification and development of potential talent conducted through the University of Virginia that was the impetus for the program.³ Suitable programming in the gifted field is always a complex issue; however, in music, this can be done easily by simply connecting a student with an independent teacher and “leaving them to their own devices.”⁴ The literature abounds with assertions of the importance of seeking individualized instruction beyond the school environment for students showing potential musical talent. Linking a young promising student with an independent teacher early on nurtures musical development from the start.⁵

The MusicLink program links a student in need, (determined by eligibility for the free/reduced lunch program) with a professional



Violinist and MusicLink student Wiliana Lundy practices.

music teacher who provides lessons for little to no cost for as long as the child wishes to learn. Students are nominated for the program by a school music teacher or other school personnel, community and church organizations serving youth, parents or private music teachers. Nominators provide basic information concerning student demographics and financial need, and they complete the *Indicators of Potential Talent Rating Scale*, which includes ratings on 10 basic characteristics of potential talent developed through the University of Virginia research. The ratings are used as guidance on strengths and weaknesses as students enter the program and are not used for screening purposes.

Teachers offer lessons at a reduced rate, with a starting point of a 50 percent discount from their normal fee; however, most MusicLink teachers teach these students for a nominal fee (\$10 or less) and sometimes free. The program encourages a small payment to instill commitment and the importance of lessons to the family. The teachers are not paid by the foundation, but receive information providing contacts for discounts or free music packets from publishers and other business partners. If teachers pay for music or events for the student, they can apply for a teacher reimbursement grant for these expenses.

One of the strengths of the program is its reliance on the volunteerism of professional teachers who are genuinely seeking a way to reach out to help a deserving student. Teachers are continually writing thank you notes to the national office, expounding on the value of the MusicLink teaching experience. Teachers describe how they just “feel good” every time they teach these students because they know the lessons are truly appreciated. The MusicLink Foundation has recognized more than 50 teachers who have taught through the program for 10 years or more as “Teachers of Distinction.”⁶ A few comments from several of these teachers represent their rationale for volunteering for the program:

I am committed to MusicLink because of a life-long belief in equality. The idea that one might lose out for economic reasons is entirely unacceptable. We all should be eligible for the deep sense of joy and wonder that comes with expressing ourselves through music. Financial wellbeing should have no bearing on an individual’s opportunity to study music. The greatest reward for me has been to observe the excitement and engagement of my students, and the pleasure of knowing they would never have had the opportunity to study and enjoy music without MusicLink.

Teaching MusicLink students enables me to convey the musical heritage I received growing up to a new generation of eager learners. Accepting less than half my usual rate for MusicLink students reminds me of all the teachers who were generous with me. I love seeing students discover the joy of making music. As they learn skills and pieces and perform in public, their confidence in other areas grows significantly. Among my former MusicLink students are an epidemiologist, an architecture student and a nurse—all of whom still play the piano.

The MusicLink Foundation serves as a network of coordinators at regional, state and local levels that facilitate each link, work with families and students as needed, and recruit teachers and businesses to the program. The past decade has seen the foundation’s network grow to provide easy access to documentation through our website, which serves as a hub for communication, nomination and recruitment. The foundation provides support for students as they progress through lessons, with camp scholarships, performance opportunities and assistance acquiring instruments as needed. The foundation offers a Senior Achievement Award at the national level for an outstanding high school senior who has been in the program for four or more years. State-level senior scholarships are also available.

In the fall of 2013, a survey of 75 MusicLink students who are now 18 years or older and took lessons for 5 years or more showed that 99 percent attended college (including Juilliard, MIT, Stanford, Yale and Berklee) with 39 percent receiving partial to full scholarships to college. Many MusicLink students progress to an advanced level through their years of training, which is the goal of the foundation—“to create musicians, one student at a time.”

The Identification Of Potential Musical Talent

The identification of musical potential begins with the recognition of the characteristic basic underpinnings of musical talent that does not rely on training. These talent criteria include elements of music aptitude—discrimination of melodies, rhythms, tempi—paired with creative elements in listening, experimenting and performing music. As in general gifted and talented (G/T) identification procedures, recognition of task commitment and perseverance reflect the behaviors of children showing potential musical talent.⁷ The MusicLink program incorporates these procedures as it seeks out students who show musical potential through a

nomination process that gathers information from schools, community organizations, independent music teachers, and parents or guardians.

Over the course of the program's inception, The MusicLink Foundation has acquired data from approximately 5,000 students. The foundation data include nomination forms from parents and teachers that contain the *Indicators of Potential Talent* rating scale as well as student evaluation forms completed by MusicLink teachers annually assessing student progress through years of lessons. The data presented in this article are from a subset of 2,370 students who have participated in MusicLink and have a complete set of records. The data represent more than 40 states, including Hawaii, Alaska and three Canadian provinces. States not represented in the present analysis include Rhode Island, West Virginia and Wyoming.

Statistical data shows the average student age at program initiation is 10.5 years old, with a ratio of 61 percent female students and 39 percent male students. Ethnic information provided on forms indicates 38 percent of students are Caucasian with minority students totaling 62 percent (20 percent Hispanic, 20 percent African American, 11 percent Asian, 2 percent Native American with "other" indicated for the remainder).

MusicLink's nomination process, from school music teachers, parents and private instructors, includes nomination forms that with demographic information, financial status specifics, interest areas of the student, and a rating scale to gauge student strengths and weaknesses in basic capacities of musical talent. The importance of reaching beyond school nomination data is especially pertinent in the arts because students are usually engaged in community arts activities or private instruction beyond school offerings.



The *Indicators of Potential Talent Rating Scale* (Figure 1) has been used within the MusicLink program for the past 20 years as a form in the nomination process and is the focus of




Peggy Newhall (teacher), with student Yolanda Corado.

the first part of our analysis. This scale for identifying musical talent was developed based on content analysis of existing forms, reviews of the literature, surveys of experts within the gifted and music fields, and a series of interviews with experts and teachers who work with musically talented students to improve validity of the measure.⁸ The rating form is completed by school music teachers and private instructors. There is also a parallel form for parents to complete that includes terminology suitable for observing musical characteristics in a home setting. Parent forms are also available in Spanish.

Items on the form correspond to the three basic categories of potential talent: (1) *music aptitude and ability*, (2) *creative interpretation* and (3) *commitment*. Each corresponds to a subscale score and is added to provide a total score (maximum score = 40). Example items for each of the three subscales (respectively) include "can remember and repeat melodies and rhythms," "enjoys experimenting with sounds" and "strives to refine musical ideas: sets high goals, constructively critiques musical work of others and self." Frequencies of musical behaviors are rated on a 4-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *seldom or never*; 2 = *occasionally*; 3 = *frequently*; and 4 = *almost always*).

FORM B



School Music Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
Classroom Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
Private Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>

Potential Talent Profile

Student Name _____ Age _____ Instrument _____ Grade _____
 Student Address _____ Phone _____
 School _____ Type of Class _____
 Person Completing Form _____ Title _____
 You have known student _____ years _____ months Today's Date _____

The following information is used to determine a student talent profile that will be helpful for MusicLink research and documentation. Complete to the best of your ability, indicating how often the child listed above has shown the following behaviors by circling the appropriate number.

	1	2	3	4
	seldom or never	occasionally	frequently	almost always

Aptitude and Ability

1. can remember and repeat melodies and rhythms.	1	2	3	4
2. keeps a steady pulse and responds to changes in rhythm and tempo of music	1	2	3	4
3. can hear small differences in melodies, rhythms and sounds	1	2	3	4
4. can differentiate individual sounds in context: identifies patterns, melodies, instruments in a musical composition or specific environmental sounds	1	2	3	4
5. performs with accuracy and ease	1	2	3	4

Creative Interpretation

6. enjoys experimenting with sounds: making up songs and manipulating melodies and rhythms	1	2	3	4
7. is aware of slight changes in mood, loudness or softness and sounds of different instruments in music	1	2	3	4
8. performs and reacts to music with personal expression: shows a personal involvement with the music	1	2	3	4

Commitment

9. shows perseverance in musical activities: works with focused concentration, energy and internal motivation	1	2	3	4
10. strives to refine musical ideas: sets high goals, constructively critiques musical work of others and self	1	2	3	4

Total Rating: _____

Please provide further comments describing specific strengths or weaknesses of this child that would be helpful to the MusicLink teacher. Use the back of this form if necessary.

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Figure 1: Indicators of Potential Talent Rating Scale.

The foundation realizes the importance of using a reliable measure for the recognition of potential talent for student nomination. For this purpose, Cronbach's *alpha* for internal consistency reliability and descriptive statistics were calculated for the Music Teacher, Private Music Instructor and Parent ratings of the *Indicators of Potential Talent Rating Scale* to allow for comparison. These results are presented in Table 1.

	Private Music Instructor (N = 356)			School Music Teacher (N = 252)			Parent (N = 785)		
	a	M	(SD)	a	M	(SD)	a	M	(SD)
Aptitude & Ability	.87	-	-	.85	-	-	.72	-	-
Creative Interpretation	.75	-	-	.77	-	-	.55	-	-
Commitment	.86	-	-	.77	-	-	.45	-	-
Composite	.91	32.29	(6.51)	.89	34.08	(5.74)	.86	29.36	7.84

Table 1: Reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics for rating forms completed by Private Music Instructor, Music Teacher and Parent.

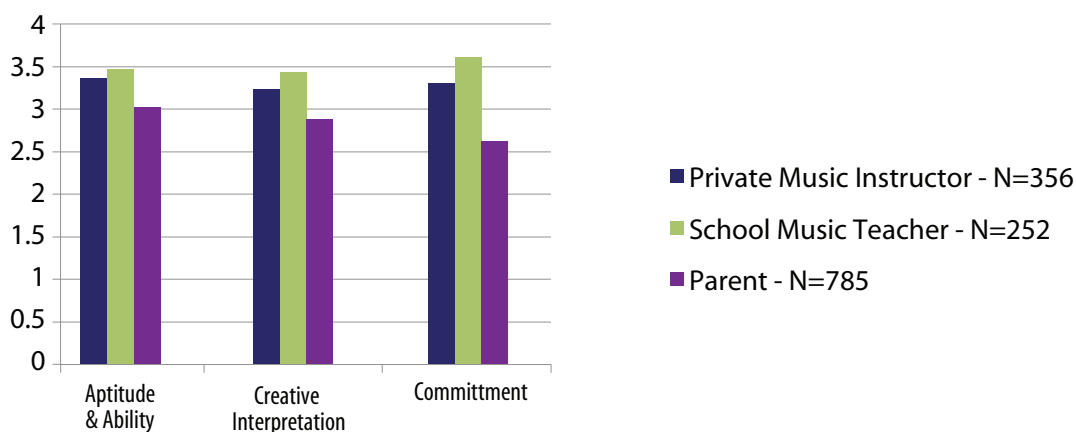
The aptitude and ability subscale consists of 5 items (α range = .72–.87), the creative interpretation subscale consists of 3 items (α range = .55–.77) and the commitment subscale consists of 2 items (α range = .45–.86). This indicates a generally high level and broad range of internal consistency reliability for the present data obtained from *Indicators of Potential Talent Rating Scale*. This broad range of reliability coefficients is due to the relatively low reliability of the parent ratings, which is likely due to the fact that a large portion of parents are unacquainted with the key markers of musical talent in comparison to teachers and private instructors who frequently provide informal evaluations of student potential musical talent. However, composite internal consistency reliability coefficients were acceptably high for each rater (α range = .86–.91).

Analysis of the *Indicators of Potential Talent* rating scale reveal interesting differences between parents and teachers in rating the three categories of potential musical talent as shown in Table 2 and Graph 2, with the range of ratings from 0 to 4 on a Likert Scale. We see that school music teachers rate students the highest in all three categories with exceptionally high ratings (3.61) for behaviors showing “commitment” and lowest ratings (3.44) for “creative interpretation.” Private music instructor ratings lie a bit below these, with the highest ratings (3.36) in “aptitude and ability,” which reflect the basic capacities of music aptitude. They also rated “creative interpretation” with the lowest rating (3.24). However, these ratings all lie above 3.2, which indicate generally high levels of potential talent observed by these music teachers in their work with MusicLink students.

We see that parents rate students lower than private music and school music teachers, with highest ratings (3.03) in “aptitude and ability” and lowest ratings (2.63) in commitment and perseverance. This lower scoring by parents is interesting because it does not reflect exaggerated ratings to instill acceptance of their children into the program—rather possibly a realistic appraisal of their children’s abilities. Again, parents will not have a teacher’s experience in talent recognition, but most of the characteristics use generalized behavior easily observable in the home (for example, remembers and sings tunes from television, radio, recordings and the like; enjoys performing for family and friends; shows focused concentration when listening or reacting to music). The overall average of teacher and parent ratings across these categories rate “aptitude and ability” higher (3.28) than “creative interpretation” and “commitment,” which both have an average of 3.19.

	Private MI	School MT	Parent	Overall
Subscale				
Aptitude & Ability	3.36	3.47	3.03	3.28
Creative Interpretation	3.24	3.44	2.88	3.19
Commitment	3.31	3.61	2.63	3.19

Table 2: Average subscale scores for each rater category.



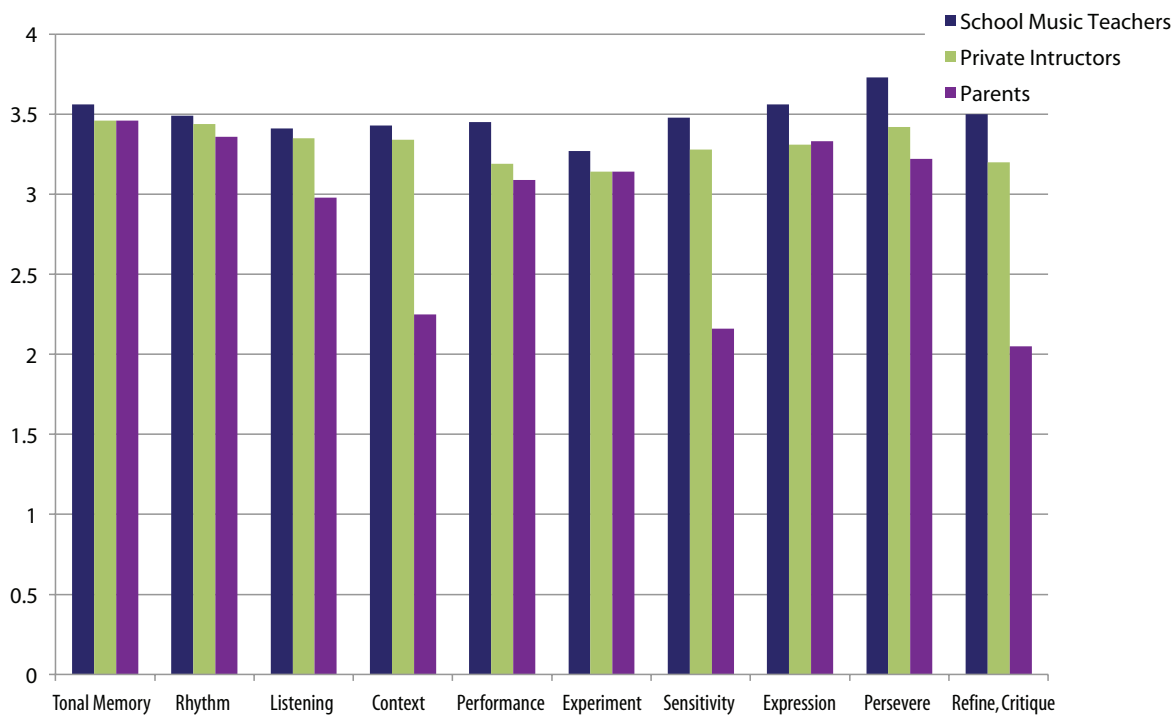
Graph 2: Average subscale scores for each rater category.

To provide statistical evidence of these differences, a one-way between subjects independent samples ANOVA was conducted to compare differences between private instructor, music teacher and parent ratings. There was a significant difference between ratings at the $p < .05$ level for the three raters scores ($F(2,44) = 50.60, p = 0.000$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction to adjust for multiple comparisons indicated the mean score for the private instructor ratings ($M = 32.29, SD = 6.51$) was significantly lower than the music teacher ratings ($M = 34.07, SD = 5.73$) and higher than the parent ratings ($M = 29.52, SD = 6.00$). Further, the parent ratings were significantly lower than the music teacher ratings. Taken together, these results suggest that raters judged students differently and ratings must be interpreted with this in mind. Specifically, the results of the ANOVA suggest that parents rate children the most stringently, while music teachers are more generous in their ratings.

If we look at ratings of each specific talent characteristic on the scale, we can further define differences between teachers and parents and their abilities to discern musical talent in a child's behavior. A quick glance at Graph 3 surprisingly shows that parents fare similar to teachers in ratings in 7 of the 10 characteristics on the graph. Some of these behaviors are the basic capacities of music aptitude and are readily observable in the home. They include tonal memory (column 1), which describes the ability to remember and repeat melodies or songs; a sense of rhythm (column 2) or the ability to keep a steady beat; and sensitive to sounds in listening (column 3), which describes perceptual aural discrimination or "audiation."⁹ These behaviors reflect the basic underpinnings of potential talent, with parents able to discern these behaviors in their children similar to professional music teachers.

Similarities in ratings between parents and teachers in the areas of performance (column 5), experimenting (column 6) and expression (column 8) reflect observance of behavior while students are engaged in musical activities in the home, classroom, or studio. These students are exhibiting potential talent through their expressive creative behavior while performing or creating music. The characteristic of perseverance (column 9) is not music-specific; however, parents and teachers share similar ratings as they observe students engaged in musical tasks.

The three areas of wider discrepancies between parents and teachers are characteristics that require a more discriminative “eye and ear” awareness of student behavior while engaged in music. These areas on the parent form include context (column 4) “small differences within a musical selection or environmental sounds; sensitivity (column 7) “is aware of slight changes in mood, loudness or softness, and sounds of different instruments in music”; and refine, critique (column 10) “enjoys reworking musical ideas.” This more detailed look at the individual criteria within the scale provides information that may explain the rationale for parent overall lower ratings. This more detailed analysis also explains the value of parent input in identification procedures because of their ability to discern the basics of potential talent in their children.



Graph 3: Rating Comparison of Talent Criteria—Indicators of Potential Talent.

The qualitative comments written by parents on these nomination forms also provide rich information that reveals student musical activities in the home, at church and sharing music with family members. An analysis of more than 1,500 parent nomination forms show 78 percent include specific comments about their children that reveal an awareness of music capabilities and focused commitment of their children as well as an array of musical activities that are helpful for prospective MusicLink teachers to know and realize the breadth of student musical abilities. The awareness that these children enjoy the “play” of musical experimenting at home may inspire MusicLink teachers to include improvisatory activities in lessons. A few examples from these comments include:

My daughter likes the science and application of music. Experimenting with sound and method, she can spend extended lengths of time in her room on her keyboard. You can find her in the front rows of church in awe when anyone is performing musically. Her musical interests vary, from Puccini to Ragtime to Gospel. My fear is that time will erode her passion for music if her interest in music is not continuously challenged and nurtured.

Tyler¹⁰ has a gift for music that I have seen from a very young age. For the last 2–3 years I have noticed that he has started to use improvisation. Frequently I will hear him playing a beautiful piece that I had never heard before, and when I go to see what he is playing he has no music. He has also begun to take simple (intermediate) pieces and improv/modify the music that already exists.

Playing the piano for family and friends and sings good and clear when riding in the van. When Grandpa plays the guitar and sings, she sings right along, asks Grandpa to play her piano songs with her. She seems to really enjoy her lessons, and is even enjoying practice time at home. It is the first thing she wants to do when getting up in the morning and even before going to bed.

When you pair these parent comments with the financial status comments (understanding that eligibility for free/reduced lunch is a requirement for program entry), you realize many families are faced with medical complications, minimal incomes and disability, yet are seeking musical instruction for their children. The support of the family in music lessons is a vital factor in long-term musical talent development.¹¹

Musical Talent Development

“Creating a musician, one student at a time” requires a team effort from the start. Students arrive into the program with no instrument, no music and no teacher—so the foundation links opportunities to begin lessons, help acquire an instrument and provide music through publisher and music dealer connections. Parents complete a form at the start of lessons that explains their responsibility to oversee practice, provide transportation and support, and make sure there is regular attendance at lessons. Teachers provide studio recitals, theory and/or composition activities and other performance opportunities that reach into the community. Once linked, the student grows through the triangle of student-teacher-parent cooperation and support.

Developing Talent in Young People (Bloom, 1985) describes three stages of talent development stemming from a comprehensive study of talent in the areas of music, athletics, math and science.¹² These include the stage of “play and romance” where teachers encourage “a freedom to explore and immediate rewards.”¹³ This describes the beginning student in music, where school activities paired with private instruction can bring a sense of joy and fun to lessons. This stage usually involves the first two years of private instruction, depending on the age of the child at the start of lessons.

The second intermediate stage, “precision and discipline,” usually occurs after three years of private instruction, when the student is faced with more challenging repertoire and seeks to gain technique and accuracy in performing. This stage can extend for three or more years depending on the level of practice commitment of the student. The final advanced stage is one of “individuality and insight,” where the student is expressing himself or herself as a musician. The student embraces the rigor of practice, focus and interpretive decision making that comes with this role. Students at this level realize the significant role of music in their lives. An explanation of these different stages of development sets the stage as we present the findings from an analysis of 1,892 student evaluation forms.

Student Evaluation Over Five Years

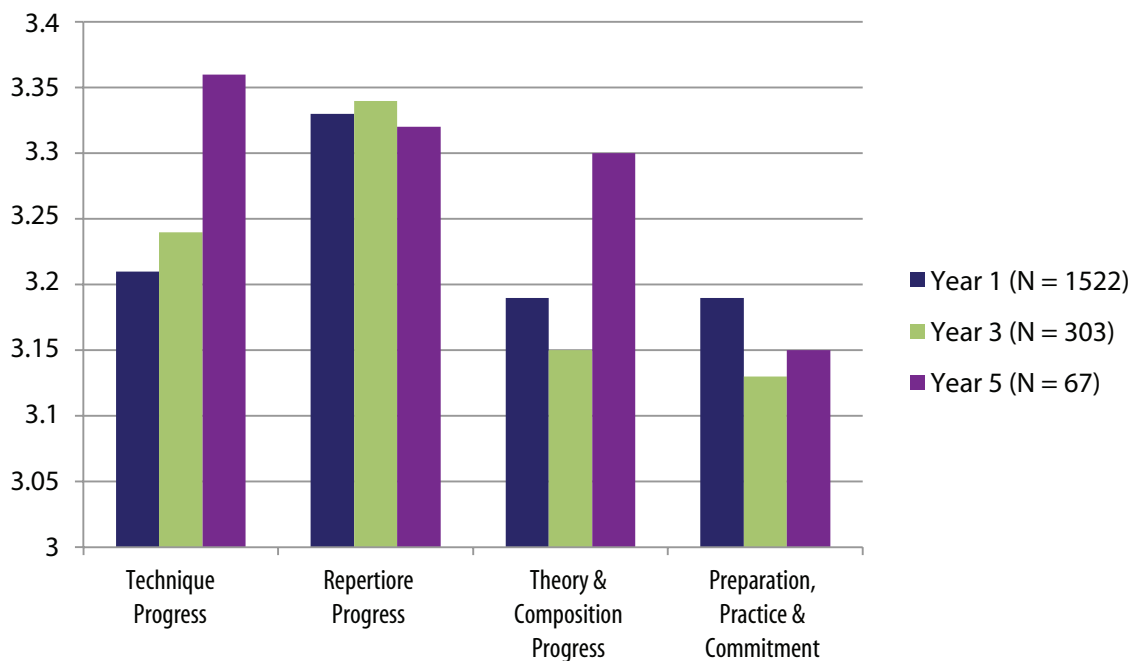
To ensure ongoing assessment of student progress, MusicLink teachers complete a *Student Evaluation Form* at the close of each school year, which are included in the MusicLink database. This one-page form includes four ratings:

- ▶ Technique: Progress in scales, exercises, and other technical assignments.
- ▶ Repertoire: Progress in performance of literature, method books, solos, ensemble work.
- ▶ Theory and Composition: Progress in written work.
- ▶ Preparation for Lessons: Practice Habits, responsibility, follow-through and commitment.

The teachers score each student on a Likert-type scale with four options (1–Unsatisfactory; 2–Needs Improvement; 3–Satisfactory; 4–Outstanding). Further, qualitative responses and the description of specifics within each category are encouraged with free-response sections on the evaluation report.

Analysis of these *Student Evaluation Forms* included a comparison of progress in each area between year 1, year 3 and year 5, using a subset of forms of students who had these forms completed annually by their teachers. Graph 4 depicts these results. It is evident by the range of the scores that there is low variability in the rating scores across all time points and criteria. That is, the y-axis values range from 3 to 3.4 whereas the scale ranges from 1 to 4. This low variability shows that ratings are relatively high in general for these students, across five years of study. This may be because students in the program were nominated because they showed potential talent at the start of lessons and are doing well in lessons. Further research in this area will be helpful to show what characteristics of the *Indicators of Potential Talent* may factor into high achievement in lessons over years of study.

Also noteworthy is the difference in student totals used for this study. A total of 1,522 students are taking lessons for one year, 303 for three years, and 67 students continuing lessons through five years. An overview of statistics for the full range of students involved in the MusicLink program show 349 students taking lessons for from 5 to 11 years through the program.



Graph 4: Scores on each component of evaluation across five years of study.



From left to right are; Corey McGraw, Dominique Lewis, Chris Sharp (MusicLink teacher), Kiara Brooks and Kayla Brooks

Taking the liberty of using the three stages of talent development described earlier as a backdrop to consider, let us examine what occurs in ongoing musical training as we look over the results of the statistical analysis shown in Graph 4. In the first year of lessons, students are learning the basic skills of technique ($M = 3.21$) as a starting point to lessons. The repertoire at the beginning stages is quite easy to inspire success and “immediate rewards” in performance ($M = 3.33$). Theory and composition training is largely dependent on teachers including these aspects in private instruction. However, most beginning music methods include some basic theory ($M = 3.19$) and youngsters are encouraged to have “freedom to explore” through simple composition at this first stage of development.

The intermediate stage of “precision and discipline” usually arrives during the third year of instruction. Many students will drop lessons once the challenges of repertoire require the discipline of practice. The average length of time for lessons for current MusicLink students is 2 years and 4 months. An examination of past student statistics shows a 32 percent drop in student enrollment from year 3 to 4, and a 45 percent drop from year 4 to 5. This may reflect the normal trend in musical development, but we also need to factor in

students dropping out because of moving or other factors that readily affect our MusicLink student population.

Graph 4 shows a higher evaluation for technique during this challenging period ($M = 3.24$) than in year 1. Repertoire evaluation ratings ($M = 3.34$) take a leap ahead, with teachers recognizing student interest in “accuracy and precision” in performance at this stage of development. There is a notable drop in theory and composition evaluation ratings at this stage ($M = 3.15$). This drop may stem from students reaching repertoire beyond the methods that include theory (in piano training) or more emphasis on performance training at this point. The drop in practice and preparation ($M = 3.13$) does not coincide with the idea of “discipline and practice” that arrives at this stage of development. However, these low ratings may stem from a higher expectation from teachers in what is expected of the student at this stage of development—more practice and preparation.

The fifth year of study may or may not signal the arrival of the advanced stage of development because we would need to factor in the age of the student upon starting lessons. However, the evaluation ratings show that there is an increase in ratings for technique ($M = 3.36$), which definitely mirrors musical development at the advanced level. The repertoire evaluation ($M = 3.32$) is a bit lower than year 1 and 3; however, students at this level are working on advanced repertoire and teachers will be more critical of performance details. The overall similar high levels of repertoire evaluation may also reflect the emphasis of repertoire and performance in private music instruction. Again, the surprising lower evaluation levels of preparation and commitment ($M = 3.15$) do not coincide with the work ethic that is required to attain “individuality and insight” as an advanced musician. Students reaching 5 years of musical training are usually in high school, with academic demands that often compete with practice time. Analysis of the qualitative comments within these student evaluation forms flush out the rationale behind the quantitative ratings.

Qualitative Analysis—Teacher Comments

A content analysis of the comments found on 3,165 student evaluation forms used qualitative methods of constant comparison, linear notes, leading to codification of prevalent content. Emerging categories included *practice*, *talent/potential*, *creative interpretation and expression*, *commitment/challenge/persistence*, and *relationships with students and parents*. Analysis included qualitative comments that were more than a single sentence (although there were an abundance of “a joy to teach” and “fantastic student” comments). The areas of *relationships with students and parents* and *commitment/challenge/persistence* had the most comments, both present in 45 percent of the forms. This was followed by comments about *creative interpretation and expression* (40 percent), *practice* (37 percent) and *talent/potential* (34 percent).

The student evaluation forms are the basic assessment tools MusicLink uses to gauge the progress of the student as well as the status of the teacher/student relationship in lessons. Comments concerning their *relationship with the student and parents* often reveal how music is a vital emotional resource in an often problematic home-life with the music teacher serving as a long-lasting mentor providing support beyond music instruction:¹⁴

Chantelle’s mother has an incurable form of bone cancer and has been in a slow state of decline. I try to make her cello lessons fun and musically fulfilling! We laugh a lot and play duets together for pure enjoyment.

Matt’s mother is his chief advocate (as am I) and he is very involved and challenged in all his activities. His dad is apparently unstable and irresponsible, but continues to support him in music. When he is not in the home, it is very hard on Matt. But he tells me about it and we talk it out together. I treasure this young man and I’m so grateful for the MusicLink program that allows his lessons to continue. It is my joy to teach him.

Morris lives in Section 8 housing in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city and attends a middle school that has one music teacher for 900 students. He could practice more (he averages 4–5 days a week) but when he practices, he often does an hour or more. I just think, given his everyday life, he is amazing, as is his grandmother, who is raising him. It would be great to get him into a youth orchestra but he has no transportation in the evening.

Other comments concerning student/teacher/relationships relay the teachers’ joy at bringing music into the lives of these children:

Leanne and I have formed a genuine respect and affection for one another because we both love music and want to learn more. I’m willing to teach her as long as she’s willing to learn. I couldn’t ask for a nicer student.

I enjoy working with Ann, especially because the introduction of piano into her home is helping to motivate her whole family to a love for music. Her parents have begun to realize the importance of music in the learning process and they are very supportive of her continuing lessons.

Don is still enthused about music and gave me a big hug when he left his first lesson this September after a summer break. His grandmother is a delight and sees that he gets his practicing in.

Ongoing progress in musical training relies heavily on the student’s commitment to learn and challenge oneself. Teachers recognize the importance of this *commitment* in their comments:

John is an excellent student and a joy to teach. He is very conscientious in school as well as piano, which made it difficult for him when schoolwork was overwhelming. However, he always comes through with an open mind for

learning. High school will present new challenges, but I think piano will always be a part of his life.

Susan has superior practice habits, often amidst chaos in her home-life. Her sense of commitment and responsibility are always obvious by her continuous preparation.

This child is an independent thinker and a talker. He LOVED his piano recital piece and learned and memorized it in three weeks. He then asked for another one. It is a challenge to keep him on task because of his personality and learning differences. A delightful child.

Practice goes hand-in-hand with the role of commitment in the development of musical talent. MusicLink students share the normal problems of balancing practice with academic demands at the advanced level of training. However, these students often show extra diligence in seeking ways to practice and continue lessons. Some comments concerning *practice* from MusicLink teachers in their student evaluations:

Susan practices 3–6 hours daily. Entirely self-motivated, she teaches nine students in order to pay for her lessons, music and other musical activities such as summer camp and master classes.

Since Rita lives in a very tiny two-room house with her mother, her older sister, and a younger brother, she has her little keyboard in the kitchen—not the ideal situation, but she manages.

Ellen regularly practices one to two hours daily and sometimes she puts in four hours (on her own initiative). Her mother has indicated that she sometimes has to limit her practicing so that she will complete her school assignments.

John is autistic and has help from his mother and two sisters at home. He is doing very well and loves coming to

lessons. He practices every day and loves doing his theory work, which is always very neatly done.

Teachers recognize the growth of talent in these students, whose potential was observed early on. Comments often begin with a simple statement of *talent or potential*, with an explanation of how this emanates in musical behavior observed in lessons:

Maria has a great deal of musical potential—creative ideas, good sense of rhythm, ability to listen closely and make technical adjustments quickly for the sounds she can imagine.

Joan has tremendous potential. She loves music and piano and has won several competitions in her school. She has a great attitude towards learning—her mom stands behind her—a “dream student.” I am impressed with how musically she plays—the “soul” to play that not many students have, especially at age 11.

Timothy is an extremely talented 14-year-old young man. MusicLink is making possible the development of a career in music. When he has learned a piece well, his innate musicality and vitality shine through and he does a spectacular job.

Mary is an extremely gifted student who recently has struggled with her music. I believe that she has never had to work this hard at anything. Lately she has begun to understand what it will take to learn music that isn’t easy enough for her to perfect in a short practice. If she continues this practice attitude, she will amaze everyone.

The ability to communicate a personal expression through music or composition—*creative interpretation*—describes the “spark” that is recognized and carefully nurtured by an astute music teacher in an intimate one-on-one lesson:

Juanita is a much more inspired pianist than I was as a child. Though I am

sometimes tempted to “rein her in,” I am impressed by her spirit and independence and try not to be too rigid to encourage her efforts at self-direction. I hope for her to be able to pursue this musical independence at the conclusion of my teaching, whenever that may be.

This student shows much creative ability. She improvises and forms pieces that are unique and appealing to listeners. She has had many difficulties such as illness in her family so attendance has been limited. She has a good start on music theory and reading skills even though they not come as naturally as her improvising.

Sam often composes beautiful pieces and improvises beautifully. He performs for his school and at nursing homes. Whenever he is near a piano, he can sit and play for hours on end. He’s a genius of a child in every way. I feel he may have Asperger’s syndrome and have suggested this to his mother and have spoken to the school principal about it, with her permission.

Miguel is a special talent. Not only does he have a natural musicality, be he is blessed with wonderful hands and the dedication to train them. Sometimes he wants to play music he’s not quite ready to do so I must rein him in, but that’s a fault I can deal with! He has sophisticated taste and when we do choose an appropriate piece of big stature, he practices wisely as he does everything in life. I am lucky to teach him.

What We Have Learned

Those who have worked with MusicLink since its inception in 1992 realize the mission at the heart of the organization—*any child who has musical potential deserves the opportunity to nurture this talent to its full extent*. We have uniquely provided ongoing music lessons with professional teachers to disadvantaged children and youth for the past 20 years. This analysis provided an

impetus to step back and statistically examine the data accumulated through years of nomination/identification procedures and student evaluations to see what information may be deemed valuable in realizing the importance of long-term musical training in the lives of disadvantaged youth.

What have we learned over the past decades about recognizing musical potential and nurturing it through ongoing lessons?

Keep it simple: The beauty of the MusicLink philosophy lies in a single link between a student showing musical potential and a teacher seeking ways to nurture this potential. The teacher volunteers to take on the student for whatever the student can pay for as long as the student wants to learn. This simple dynamic creates a lasting bond between teacher and student. Content analysis of teacher comments on Student Evaluation Forms covering from one to five years of study reinforced awareness of the importance of these relationships.

Use identification instruments with valid and pertinent arts criteria: The *Indicators of Potential Talent* used in the MusicLink identification/nomination procedure was developed through comprehensive research to ensure content validity of talent criteria. The criteria extend beyond the basics of music aptitude (tonal memory and sense of rhythm) to include areas of creative experimentation and interpretation as well as student commitment and critique.

Potential talent can be recognized beyond the school classroom—include parents and private instructors: The MusicLink program began as a program asking school music teachers to nominate students they recognized in their classrooms as having potential talent to link with private teachers from local music organizations for lessons. From the outset, parents were involved in the nomination process, realizing that the earliest signs of potential occur in the home. Private instructors readily came on board nominating students they identified themselves for the program. The completion

of the *Indicators of Potential Talent* rating scale by all of these individuals provided a breadth of information for the student talent profile.

An analysis of the data completed by school music teachers, private instructors and parents on the *Indicators of Potential Talent* rating scale show that school music teachers rate students the highest, followed by private instructors, with parents having the lowest ratings. Further analysis of the 10 characteristics on the rating scale reveal that parents actually are observing and rating the basic capacities of music aptitude (tonal memory, rhythmic sense) almost equal to the teachers (SM 3.56, 3.49; PI 3.46, 3.44; P 3.46, 3.36). In addition, parent ratings are almost identical to those of private instructors in “creative experimentation” (both 3.14) and “expression or creative interpretation” (PI 3.31, P 3.33).

These findings show that parents are capable of recognizing the basic capacities of musical talent in their children comparable to school and private music teachers. Parents are not as adept at recognizing talent characteristics that require a more discriminative eye and ear (contextual details in listening, aesthetic sensitivity to mood and refinement of musical ideas).

The qualitative comments from parents on these identification forms provide rich background information about the student’s family life and involvement in the child’s musical development.

Ongoing training of talented disadvantaged youth reflects overall excellence with fluctuations reflecting developmental stages: Analysis of the *Student Evaluation Form* ratings from year 1, 3 and 5 found that ratings were quite high overall—ranging from 3.21 to 3.35 (highest rating = 4), which indicates the students are doing well in lessons, not unusual for talented students. Fluctuations in progress reflect the three stages of talent development (Sosniak, 1985), with early training having ease in basic technique and theory and enjoyable repertoire. The challenges faced in year three, when the intermediate stage comes into play, reflect lower grading in areas of theory/

composition and practice. Once reaching year five and the advanced stage, students excel in technique, repertoire and theory/composition, but face the difficulty of practice that often occurs at the high school level.

Talent development of disadvantaged youth requires understanding of home-life difficulties and strategies to continue training: The content analysis of comments from teachers on the *Student Evaluation Form* revealed the importance of establishing a close relationship with the student and family to provide support to continue lessons amidst an often-chaotic home life. These circumstances are worlds-apart from the students most teachers see enter their private studio doors. This may be one of the reasons MusicLink teachers truly cherish teaching these students because they realize the genuine difference they are making in their lives.

Teacher comments also reveal the commitment of students who are faced with major obstacles in practice and the role of the teacher in establishing a love of music and nurturing the potential recognized in each student, “reining them in” gently as needed.

There is nothing more valuable than nurturing a young talented student through music and the arts. Those working in arts education know this viscerally. Those working in the MusicLink Foundation have seen the joy of students developing into professional musicians, bringing music into their homes, their churches, and even teaching others, reflecting the philosophy of MusicLink. We challenge those reading this article to take the initiative to develop a MusicLink program in their communities, joining us to create musicians, one student at a time.



Notes

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6. Read comments from MusicLink Teachers of Distinction—www.musiclinkfoundation.org—click on Profiles.

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10. Pseudonyms are used in this narrative to secure anonymity of student names.

11. J. Haroutounian (2002). *Kindling the Spark: Recognizing and Developing Musical Talent*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002); L. Sosniak, "Phases of Learning," in *Developing Talent in Young People*, ed. B. Bloom (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 19-67; J. Sloboda & M. Howe, "Biographical Precursors of Musical Excellence: An Interview Study." *Psychology of Music* 19 (1991): 3-21.

12. L. Sosniak, "Phases of Learning," in *Developing Talent in Young People*, ed. B. Bloom (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 19-67.

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14. Pseudonyms are used in this narrative to secure anonymity of student names.

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