

MusicLink and Its 25-Year Legacy: How Long-Term Music Lessons Impact the Lives of Disadvantaged Students

The mission of the MusicLink Foundation is to provide ongoing music lessons to disadvantaged students who fall into the cracks, eager for music lessons but unable to afford them because of financial need, determined by their eligibility for the free/reduced lunch program. Professional teachers are eager to reach these students as well, sharing their expertise in music and offering opportunities for these students to grow musically. These teachers agree to reduce their rates by 50% and more to match what parents can afford. The Foundation does not reimburse this tuition; teachers simply want to help and express thanks for the opportunity. The Foundation provides discounts from its business partners as incentives and thanks. The small payment for lessons by parents/guardians establishes ongoing commitment to these lessons. This simple mutual dynamic works and “creates musicians, one student at a time.”

MusicLink begins with a single link between a disadvantaged child showing musical interest and a professional teacher seeking ways to nurture this potential. Every MusicLink teacher agrees to teach a MusicLink student

for whatever the student can pay for as long as the student wants to learn. This single dynamic creates a lasting bond between teacher and student.

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.

—teacher comment on a MusicLink evaluation form

The MusicLink Foundation has been expanding these single links over the past 25 years, spreading across the United States, reaching more than 7,000 students, with teachers donating in excess of 500,000 hours of in-kind instruction, equivalent to almost \$14 million. The dynamic continues with each of these links, as explained by a MusicLink teacher with more than 20 years of service to 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.

—teacher comment on a MusicLink evaluation form

What makes MusicLink unique to this formula of bringing music lessons to disadvantaged youth? Community music schools and programs inspired by the success of Venezuela's El Sistema program are providing lessons for disadvantaged youth across the U.S. However, unlike all of these site-based programs that require quite a bit of support from city budgets, MusicLink takes a grass-roots approach. The program relies on the volunteerism of its teachers, business support from the music community for essential music and materials, and community support through instrument donations and an annual giving fund. MusicLink is simple and flexible, adjusting to a rural small town with a single teacher or to a large city where local music organizations take MusicLink under their wing as a worthwhile outreach project.

The MusicLink Foundation statistics are impressive and indicate a solid program with continuous growth over several decades. During its 20th anniversary year, the Foundation decided to step back and take a comprehensive look at the data it had accumulated over the years. This research included a quantitative analysis of the different forms used in the full MusicLink process, from nomination forms

and rating scales to student evaluation forms on elements of instruction along with teacher comments. MusicLink research also included a qualitative inquiry incorporating interviews gathering viewpoints from teachers, students and parents of students who had been in the program for five years or more and were now young adults. After 25 years, an "Encore" survey and questionnaire was distributed to those same students, now adults established in careers, to see how long-term music study impacted their careers and adult lives.

Quantitative Analysis of Data

In 2012, during its 20th anniversary year, the MusicLink Foundation conducted quantitative research to examine the details of the program's growth as it pertains to talent identification and development as well as a profile of student learning over a period of five years. The research established reliability of the *Potential Talent Profile*¹ rating scale used for nomination and statistically analyzed comparative ratings of potential talent on this measure by school music teachers, private music teachers and parents. An examination of annual student evaluation forms revealed overall student progress and fluctuating learning trends over a 5-year period of lessons that reflect the stages of talent development described in Bloom's *Developing Talent in Young People*.² This quantitative research analysis was published as *MusicLink: Lessons Learned After Two Decades* in the April/May 2014 *American Music Teacher*.

The findings that grew from this research show:

- ▶▶ It is important to use valid and pertinent talent criteria in the nomination/identification process.³
- ▶▶ Potential talent can be recognized beyond the school classroom—include parents and private teachers in the nomination process.

- ▶▶ Ongoing training of talented youth reflects overall excellence with fluctuations reflecting the stages of talent development.⁴
- ▶▶ Talent development of disadvantaged youth requires understanding of home-life difficulties and strategies to continue training.
- ▶▶ Keep it simple—the single link between the teacher and student creates the dynamic that develops potential talent.

The research also included qualitative content analysis of teacher comments found on 3,165 student evaluation forms. The qualitative methods of constant comparison⁵ and linear notes led to codification of prevalent content. Analysis included comments that were more than a single sentence (“a joy to teach, a fantastic student”). The following major categories were an outgrowth of this analysis, showing the percentage of their prevalence on the analyzed forms:

- ▶▶ Relationship with students and parents 45%
- ▶▶ Commitment/challenge/persistence 45%
- ▶▶ Creative interpretation and expression 40%
- ▶▶ Practice 37%
- ▶▶ Talent/potential 34%

These comments revealed the complications in the lives of MusicLink students, with music playing a vital emotional resource in an often problematic home life.

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.

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.

Many comments expounded on student commitment in lessons through practice and the “spark” of talent that is recognized and nurtured through ongoing lessons.

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.

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.

These qualitative comments by teachers on evaluation forms balance the quantitative specifics and open the door to looking further into the impact ongoing lessons have on disadvantaged youth. The interview inquiry draws out comprehensive information about the viewpoints of teachers, students and parents.

Qualitative Inquiry

To balance and extend the analysis of the MusicLink process and its impact on the lives of promising students in need, the Foundation conducted a set of interviews with students, parents and teachers. The study set the parameters of interviewing a purposeful sample⁶ of MusicLink students who had been in the program for 5 or more years and were 18 years of age or older at the time of the interviews. The student participants reflected the various ethnicities, races and genders of students in the program.

The goal of this inquiry was to see what impact music plays in the lives of these students, currently and throughout their musical and school education. As explained in the introduction prior to each interview, "We simply want to know a bit more about what these students do in general, their interest or activities in music, and what people or experiences may have musically influenced them."

Reflecting qualitative inquiry procedures, the interviews were conducted with students, parents and teachers to secure triangulation.⁷ Each interviewer also had copies of student evaluation data from the five or more years of the student's MusicLink lessons. A total of 40 interviews were completed, including 15 students, 13 parents and 12 teachers. There were 2 sets of siblings. Several teachers were unable to participate because of family illness. Written permission was given by all interviewees prior to the study and the graduate students who conducted the interviews abided by George Mason University's Office of Research Subject Protections.

The interviews were conducted over a period of several semesters (2012–2013) by 15 graduate music students at George Mason University as part of a graduate music education course on musical talent identification and development.⁸ Prior to conducting the interviews, graduate students completed a bias statement explaining any effect their participation may play in their role as interviewer.

Interviews were done over the phone, with students recording each interview, taking field notes and member checking through the course of the interview. Each person interviewed was offered the opportunity to look over the completed interview and edit or add additional information. At the close of each interview, the graduate students spent about 10 minutes writing memos reflecting on things that come to mind concerning contextual ideas that extend beyond the words on the page (tone of voice, mood, personality, pauses).⁹

Interviews were transcribed using initial coding (line by line),¹⁰ adding notes to describe sections of the interview. Using constant comparison and focused coding,¹¹ the graduate students developed categories and subcategories that grew to interpret the data toward a narrative that synthesized common ideas and differences. Students were asked to pull quotes from the interviews that would highlight pertinent sections of the interview they felt were compelling.

As part of the curriculum of the graduate course, students shared the experience of peer debriefing¹² of the interview transcripts, coding and categories. A master list of overarching categories was developed after compiling all of the information gathered from all of the interviews.

The Interviewees

STUDENTS: The 15 students interviewed ranged from 21 to 33 years of age. Because MusicLink reaches across the country, students lived in 7 states stretching from California to Virginia. The interviewees included 5 males and 10 females, with the following student profiles indicating Student (S) and their initials, gender (M, F) and ethnicity for immigrant students. The listing also includes their age, instrument and any physical challenges they may have. The last column indicates their current role as a young adult.

ST	G	Age	Ethnicity	Instrument	Physical	Current
SYB	M	23	Russian	Violin, piano, Composition		Juilliard Composition major
SYC	F	23	Hispanic	piano		Preschool teacher
SDF	F	22	Chinese	piano		UVA senior Architecture major
SCG	F	29	Caucasian	piano		Andrology major
SKG	F	23	Caucasian	piano, Harp		Left college–work- ing
SAH	F	26	Caucasian	Cello, piano		In college
SMJ	F	23	Caucasian	flute		Un MN–Dentistry
SJK	M	26	Japanese	piano, violin, jazz Professional jazz artist	blind	Graduate–Jazz major
SDK	M	27	Korean	piano, violin, composi- tion, conducting		Graduate Cleveland Inst.–Piano, Composition, Conducting
SMM	F	23	Caucasian	piano		Visual artist
SJM	M	26	Afr. American	piano, violin		MIT Mechanical Engineering
SEM	F	33	Afr. American	piano, violin		PhD Columbia
SAS	F	32	Caucasian	piano, theory, comp.		Graduate–physics major
SJT	F	21	Caucasian	piano		Business major
SIY	M	21	Caucasian	piano, trumpet,	autism spectrum	Next Step Program

Figure 1: MusicLink Interviewees

PARENTS: There were 13 parents interviewed as part of the study, 3 fathers and 10 mothers. We were fortunate to have a Korean graduate student in the GMU class, who interviewed a Korean mother with limited English language skills, in her native language. This provided a more comfortable setting to share ideas about her son. Because of the requirement of financial need to be eligible for MusicLink, the interviews did not include details of family financial situations, but focused on the family involvement in guiding their child’s musical studies. Five of the students interviewed were homeschooled from kindergarten through high school.

TEACHERS: All of the 12 teachers interviewed were professional music teachers that belong to Music Teachers National Association, with teaching experience ranging from 25 to 50 years. Several teachers were not available for the interviews, and 1 student had several teachers as he progressed in his studies.

Framework of the Interviews—Basic Questions

The GMU class discussed and developed a set of 11 questions to frame the interview, with latitude to extend beyond these basics. Parent and student questions were basically parallel in construction, with variations to reflect their different roles. Parents were asked about how music affected the child’s character or behavior as well as if musical study influenced a career

choice beyond high school. All interviewees were sent the list of questions they would be asked prior to the interviews.

Here are the student questions as an example with parent questions expanding on music in the family through the child's musical development.

1. What was the earliest musical experience the you can remember in your life?
2. What were some early experiences that you had that made you want to study music?
3. When did you start formal lessons?
4. Tell me about your first teacher and your early training.
5. How did your musical training change as you got older?
6. What musical accomplishments are you most proud of?
7. How much did you practice—at first. How did this change as you advanced?
8. What role did your school musical activities or church play in your musical education?
9. How did your musical training help you in academic areas?
10. What other ways has music impacted your life?
11. What role did MusicLink play in your musical development?

Establishing the viewpoints of MusicLink teachers provides an understanding of the profile of teachers who work with students over years of study. Interviews established the teacher's experience and revealed the role of the teacher as mentor and confidant as the student developed through musical training. These questions included some specific MusicLink-related topic areas to gather opinions from those who are at the heart of the program.

1. How long have you taught? What are the age ranges of your students? Do you teach all levels of students?
2. How many years have you been a MusicLink teacher? What made you decide to be a MusicLink teacher?
3. How many MusicLink students have you taught? What has your experience been teaching these students?

4. When did you start teaching _____ (MusicLink student in the study)? Were you this child's first teacher? How long did you teach this student?
5. What were the strengths and weaknesses of this student?
6. How does working with a MusicLink student differ from working with other students, if at all?
7. Please expand on your relationship with the student through years of study.
8. What accomplishments of this student are you most proud of? Can you think of a noteworthy individual experience with the student you still remember?
9. In what general ways do you think music impacted this student's life?
10. In your opinion, what is the benefit of long-term musical training for students, in general?
11. Is there anything about the role of music in your life that occurred to you during this interview that you would like to include in the study?

Data Analysis and Results

Data coding and analysis were approached inductively using the constant comparison method between meaning units¹³ that created higher order themes.¹⁴ No predetermined categories guided the process. Data included the full transcripts, field notes, memos and student evaluation data, which supports triangulation. In addition, the format of interviews included all three of the key participants in each "link" (parent, student, teacher). To establish trustworthiness, the procedure for each interview included a member check.¹⁵

This analysis developed the following overarching categories, drawn from the focused coding of transcriptions of the interviews of students (S), parents (P) and teachers (T). The listing includes the number of times each category is mentioned in the interviews, from most to least with subcategories within each category indented. Factors that were mentioned more than 50 times in the interviews are in italics. The data is also shown in chart form in Figure 3.

Category	Interviews			Total
Personal traits and characteristics				
<i>Musical depth, passion, appreciation, love</i>	S 43	P 18	T 6	67
<i>Creativity, self-expression</i>	S 39	P 10	T 12	61
<i>Commitment/ self-discipline</i>	S 23	P 22	T 24	58
<i>Recognition of talent</i>	S 22	P 26	T 9	57
<i>Challenge, persistence</i>	S 23	P 16	T 18	57
Music as integral part of life	S 12	P 13	T 10	35
Self Confidence/ pride/self-esteem	S 11	P 2	T 4	17
Multiple talents	S 12	P 6	T 6	24
Music as stress reliever	S 2	P 13	T 1	16
TOTAL 392				
Lessons:				
<i>Relationship between teacher & student (& family)</i>	S 28	P 15	T 10	53
<i>Motivation/Inspiration</i>	S 24	P 19	T 5	50
Practice length, progress	S 18	P 10	T 3	31
Practice mental/ organizational strategies	S 14	P 6	T 7	27
Trust	S 5	P 8	T 7	20
Teaching strategies (theory, culture)	S 9	P 5	T 6	20
Teacher experience	S 2	P 4	T 9	15
Performance Skills	S 8	P 0	T 3	11
TOTAL 227				
Family & Environmental Influences				
<i>Social/Community/Church connections</i>	S 34	P 15	T 14	63
<i>Support, environment</i>	S 20	P 23	T 8	51
Family musical activities/background	S 2	P 13	T 4	19
School influence in musical growth	S 3	P 6	T 2	10
Academic achievement in school	S 3	P 6	T 1	10
TOTAL 153				
MusicLink				
<i>Lesson Scholarships (recognizing talent)</i>	S 24	P 25	T 15	64
Opportunities (camp, instruments)	S 15	P 7	T 8	30
Financial need	S 3	p 7	T 7	17
TOTAL 111				

Figure 2: Interview Data Analysis Categories and Totals

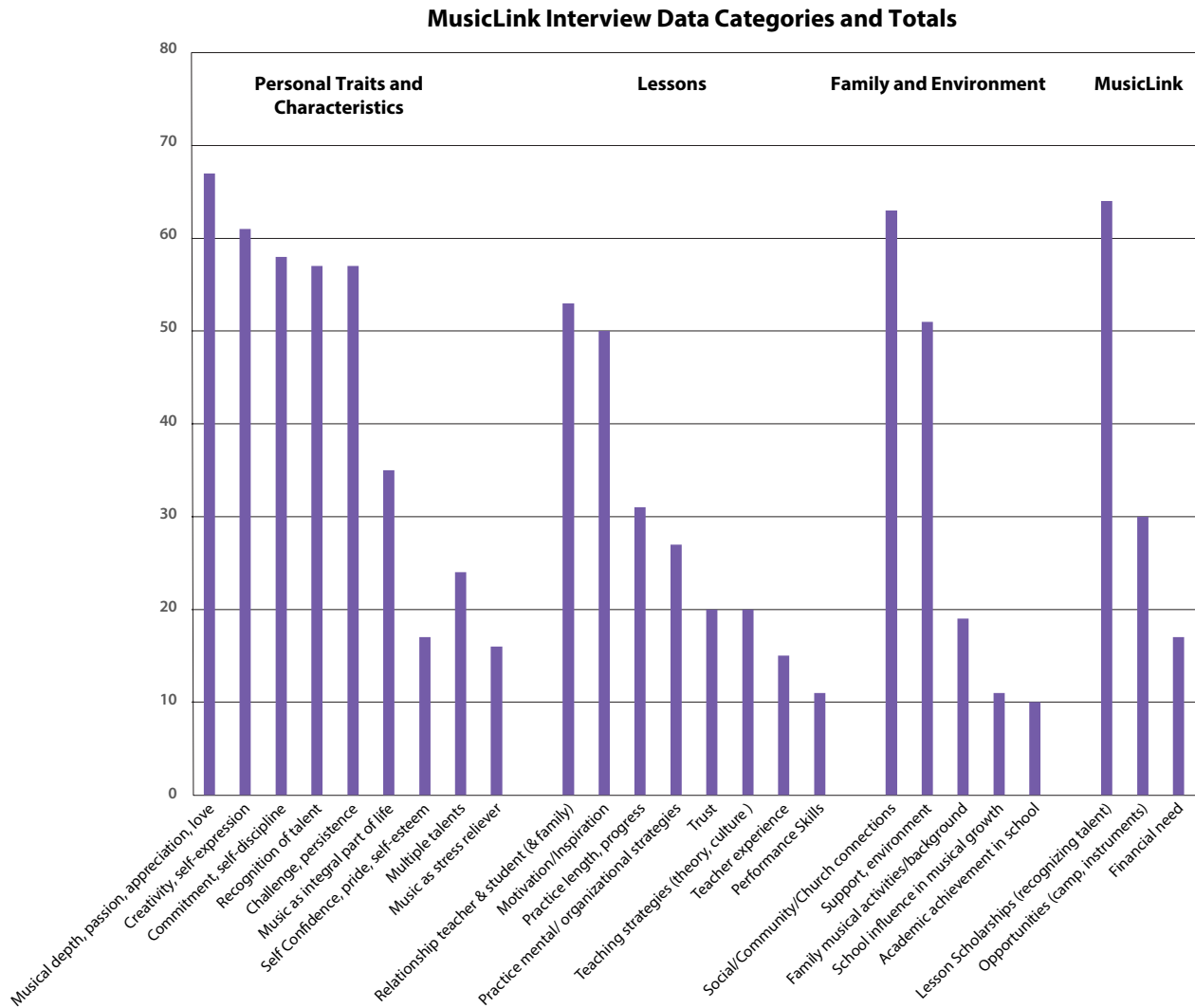


Figure 3: Interview Data Categories and Totals

The following narrative will present excerpts from interviews relating to the most prevalent italicized factors woven into the context of the role each individual played in the dynamic of teacher-parent-student interactions through the course of many years of musical training. Narratives include interviewee initials and location of the excerpt in the interview transcript (i.e. SDK, p. 30, line 9-18; TJT p 5, line 36-39).

Personal Traits and Characteristics

The interviews provided an opportunity to discover the factors that impact the lives of promising students in need as they develop their musical potential through ongoing lessons. The prevalence of the personal traits of *musical depth* and *creativity/self-expression* (mentioned 67 times) were shared by interviewees as they described their integral connection to music through their lives. They emphasized the importance of working in-depth through music:

Music makes you think a lot more and deeper. For instance, if I were to read a literary piece, I would be able to comprehend it a lot faster than most students. And just like I do with music, and probably as others who do music can too, I am able to draw a clear image of something. Probably everyone who studies music experiences this but in terms of comprehending and thinking? I think I can comprehend and think a lot faster and in more depth. (SDK p. 30, line 9–18)

I would encourage anybody out there to try and make music part of their lives and not just casual music listening but really getting into the knitty-gritty details of it and learning how it works. It's kind of like a subject that will boost your mental capacity and change the way you see things and hear things. (SDF p. 6, line 12–15)

Some people are happy with winning awards or performing well at competitions and I think what's more important is just to be able to think musically and think creatively and know how to interpret music and read it and listen to it. It's a really valuable skill that will carry with you for the rest of your life. (SDF p. 2, line 18–20).

Commitment, self-discipline (58 times) and self-esteem (17 times) were common topics in interviews across the participants—parent, teacher and student. Often this took the form of their description of practice.

I think maybe self-discipline. Because as long as she has the task she has to fulfill, she thinks the same way towards her academic study. So, even though she was in a very challenging high school, she stayed with, not only academic study, but her music skills on top of other kids. (PDF p. 5, line 30–33)

It gave her self-esteem and maybe a sense of identity among her peers when people would look at her and say, "Oh, you're the one who plays the piano so well." It taught her performance skills that will definitely serve her for the rest of her life. (TJT p. 5, line 36–39)

He just loved playing, you know, he loved practicing. When he was preparing for a recital, he would practice twice a day. When he was preparing for his senior recital, he practiced about two hours twice a day. (PJM p. 2, line 10–12)

Once you start to love music, practicing takes on a different kind of idea to me. Now, whenever I'm not doing anything, I just kind of gravitate towards the piano. I guess there are differences now. I spent a lot of time on the piano, but I wouldn't consider it "practice." And then, there are times where I need to sit down and work on specific things and those are times that I would consider "practice."—get the metronome out and actually hash out a bunch of stuff. (SJK p. 5, line 214–221)

The interview format included one question about *practice length, progress* (31 times) to see how these dedicated students would compare with the findings of talent development where it is proposed that expertise is achieved after 10,000 hours of practice over the course of 10 years.¹⁶ These interviews revealed that the early lessons began with practice averaging from 30 minutes to 1 hour. As lessons continued and their skills advanced, students practiced from 2 to 6 hours a day. That would equate to 120 to 180 hours of practice per month or 1,440 to 2,160 hours per year during their teenage years. This aligns with the idea of 10,000 hours or practice over the course of 10 years for advanced musicians who have dedicated practice habits.

The college interviewers shared their surprise of the level of *depth and personal passion* (67 times) these students showed when they talked about their involvement in music. Music provided them with a unique identity and impacted how they connect with others. Many students realized that how they think and make connections from their musical training extends to how they solve problems and realize connections in their current roles that differ from their colleagues.

Lessons

The *relationships between the teachers and students* (53 times) reflect a strong, personal commitment from students to do their best. Teachers realize the potential and *creative expressiveness* (61 times) they were developing in lessons and this creates a unique relationship over years of training.

Studying music nurtures intellectual discipline, the emotional quality of being able to express feelings through music. Of understanding the difference between just doing something mechanical like playing all the notes in a piece and understanding the composer's intent and beauty of the piece and being able to use yourself as the vehicle between the composer's idea and your listener's understanding. I think that enhances anybody's communication skills—just verbal skills. But the ability to express yourself emotionally I think has an enormous value in life. (TJM p. 13, line 16–25)

I have taught 5 MusicLink students. I get to see them experience the pleasure of making progress in the study of music. They are able to play pieces that they couldn't play before they started. They have motivation and want to study. They are conscientious and music lessons have added a dimension to their lives that they wouldn't have had otherwise. (TYC p. 5, line 14–16)

She was a very special student and I was so fortunate to have her. I know we

were both fortunate to find each other, and she was my first MusicLink student. She was a very focused, very disciplined student. She was always prepared and she loved the piano so much. She was driven to practice and I put her in competitions and all kinds of festivals. She did very, very well. We grew to be very close. I think she refers to me as her second mother. (TAS p. 2, line 38–53).

Long-term musical training demands *motivation from the student and inspiration from the teacher* (50 times) to succeed over years of lessons. The interviews revealed very personal revelations of the vital role music plays in the lives of these young adults.

It's opened up a world of opportunities for me. Artistically, personally, in communicating with those around me, especially in my workplace. It's carried over throughout every aspect of my life, just the skills that I learned through communicating with others through music. (SAS p. 1, line 14–20).

The funny thing is that music is not just beautiful in itself, but the beauty of music differs by who is actually performing the music and who is conducting it. I think looking for the different stories imbedded in each story is really fun. (SDK p. 22, line 5–9).

I don't think there was ever a time when I realized that I have great potential to do anything in music. It's just I've always loved, always had really a desire and necessity to do it. I've always felt I couldn't live unless I was either writing or playing music. (SYB p. 8, line 167–169).

A majority of the MusicLink students interviewed worked with a single teacher over most of their musical development through high school. The role of the teacher's support and motivation is well noted in research findings of talented teenage musicians.¹⁷ Students shared their close relationship with

these teachers and how they inspired them to do their best. Teachers were proud to list accomplishments and competitions; however, students mostly valued the overall musical experiences they learned in lessons. One interviewer “was surprised that the student never mentioned the competition experiences she had. I was astounded by the teacher’s description; however, it never came up in the student interview. Most of the performance memories she mentioned were pretty general.”

Family and Environmental Influence

The interviews unveiled how families first realized their child had potential talent and showed the role of music in the family, creating a naturally musical environment. Research on musical talent development shows that early signs of musical talent can be revealed before age 3 through activities similar to those described in the interviews.¹⁸

At the age of 2 he was just making up songs, like “oh mamma, I see you cooking soup and the fork is singing and here is the spoon” and he was singing and it was rhythmical. It was going on like this for an hour. I was so surprised. I looked at this child and I said “Oh my god, what do I do? I need to do something!” (PYB p. 1 line 12–16)

We would sing a familiar song and leave out the last word of each line and then this little 1 year old would fill in the blank. We were amazed because she could not only say the word, but sing it on the correct pitch. (PKG p. 3 lines 4–6).

We used to sing a lot so he played like Mary Had a Little Lamb and he played a praise and worship song called Father I Adore You. So he was playing that at 2 1/2 years old. He used to sing that too. That was kind of an indicator that he was musically inclined. (PJK p. 1, line 8–13).

She was always interested in music. We are a musical family. My husband plays

guitar. I had vocal training. My other daughter and son play the drums. She’s always been around music. We play music and we have music on all the time. When she was about 8 years old she showed more interest. And that is when she asked about piano lessons, but we couldn’t afford them. That is when we learned about the MusicLink from her teacher. (PAS p. 1, line 20–35).

In a majority of these families, *music was integrally part of their daily life (19 times), as was sharing music with the community or the church. (63 times)* “My family would sing each night at dinnertime for prayers and sing our prayers before bed time. I remember my dad and mom both playing a lot of music at home and at events. (SKG p. 1, line 4–7).

Parents shared their views on *how they supported their child (51 times)* through their musical training, realizing they played a pivotal role in the difficult stages of development in an arts field. “Music was just part of my life. My parents did a great job having us involved with these kinds of things. My parents knew that I had a gift for it. (SJK p. 1, line 23–27).

One interview with a parent revealed the very real dilemma when a child chooses music as a major in college against the wishes of the father. The mother explained that her son went to his room, crying uncontrollably until she encouraged him to tell his father that he couldn’t choose anything else. “The only way this child could be happy and passionate about something was when he was doing music. Because so many doors were opening for him in this field, the family decided that he HAD to do music. And so this is how he got to this day. (PDK p. 46, line 1–24)

MusicLink

All of the student participants had taken lessons with MusicLink for at least 5 years, so they naturally included this experience while sharing their musical training. Students, teachers and parents shared their perspectives on how the program impacted their lives.

I think the program has taught me that as long as you put everything into it, you will do well and succeed, and I really think I did ... over the past ten years. I definitely learned a lot. For that I have to thank MusicLink and my teacher so it was really a good experience. (SJT p. 7, line 294–304)

I just think MusicLink is such a wonderful program. As soon as I read about it, the whole notion of it, I just fell in love with it. It just makes so much sense and it can make such an impact—just one person. We always wonder what we can do, you know, just being one person, but here’s a perfect example of where you could make a big impact. And I think it’s a win-win for everyone involved. I really do. (TIY p. 1, line 37–40)

We received a great deal of help from MusicLink. I just really want to say a big thank you to MusicLink because this program really gives children who are of low financial standing hope. Even though they have dreams, more than half of these children don’t get to fulfill them. I believe MusicLink builds bridges for these kids to walk on so that they can really run towards bringing their dreams to reality. If you give them wings, it is then that these children can really start flying.... That is why what my son has been able to pull off was only because of the great amount of care and effort that his teachers have put forth. (PDK p. 48, line 4–6).

The narrative describing the content of these interviews cannot be complete without mentioning the experience of the 2 students with special needs. One young man on the autism spectrum describes his early perception of himself and the self-confidence he gained through music lessons:

I felt successful for myself. I remember when I was little, not a troubled kid, but just a weird kid in general. Maybe just out of the regular folks just being the weird guy. But anyway, I felt proud of myself to do something like that. (SIY p. 3, line 33–35).

So it kind of boosted my self-confidence as well. It gave me more to stand out more and try to listen to words of music as well as listen to them and rejoice in the proudness of music. And my creativity has grown from the music as well. I think music has reshaped my life from what I was to now. (SIY, p. 6, line 9–13)

His mother explains how music provides relief from stress for her son.

He uses music when he has a bad day at school or any kind of coping and he’s done this for years. He listens to music. He would bring his iPod on the bus so he wouldn’t have to listen to the garbage on the bus. (PIY p. 2, line 8–11)

One of MusicLink’s success stories describes the musical training of a young man who became blind at age 11. MusicLink was able to purchase a music transcriber for him to help him slow down music without the change of pitch. He explains how he used the device continuously when he was learning Bach fugues as well as in his jazz training. At the time of the interviews, he had graduated college, majoring in jazz and was performing internationally with Quincy Jones.

I’ve always loved music, but it never was all-encompassing for me. It’s been a part of me always. But when I lost my sight and I started learning how to play jazz, that’s when I thought, “I can do this. This can be a real career for me. I can earn money and compete on a level playing field with my peers.” I guess I was a freshman in high school when I really started to contemplate the reality of being a musician professionally. (SJK, p. 5, line 187-194).

When asked what his mother was most proud of in her son's achievements, she replied,

His overcoming. His determination. He never gave up. Continuing on with music and excelling and learning to love it. His way of adapting—that would be what I was amazed at actually. I think he is very courageous pursuing music and the fact that he has had success with it—I am thrilled with that. (MJK, p. 4, line 161–166)

Interview Inquiry Discussion

The interview inquiry of MusicLink students as young adults provided a comprehensive look into the lives and thoughts of talented students in need who were given the opportunity of ongoing music lessons through their school years. Including parents and teachers in this interview format provided a broader assessment of the impact of music lessons on these students.

Interviews revealed personal traits and characteristics that are indicative of talented students in the arts.¹⁹ Teacher comments found in the data analysis of student evaluations reflect these same characteristics as indicators of achievement in lessons. Personal characteristics that were found most often in these interviews included:

- ▶▶ musical depth, passion, appreciation, love
- ▶▶ creativity and self-expression
- ▶▶ commitment and self-discipline

Talent was recognized by parents, teachers and even students, realizing there was something different and special about their abilities and musical understanding in comparison with their peers. Parents recognized musical potential early on in simple musical games or activities enjoyed by the family. Teachers knew how to build upon these talent basics through technique and repertoire that grew as the student musically developed.

The triangle of parent/student/teacher in the interview format provided the opportu-

ity to realize the important role of the teacher in ongoing lessons. Not only does the teacher guide the student technically, but the close relationship between the “triangle” of persons involved in musical development was clearly apparent in each interview. Students would describe teachers as a second mother or aunt, with parents describing them as “awesome,” with obvious ongoing communication with one another, especially when the student advanced through training.

The role that MusicLink played in the lives of these young adults was significant because without the program, none of them would have been able to receive lessons. Interviews recognized the importance of reaching disadvantaged youth through music lessons. One teacher expressed her love for teaching young students and her thought on music education that should not be limited to “those who can afford lessons, but should be open to everyone who is qualified.” (TCG, p. 3, line 6–8)

The interview study provided a comprehensive look at how MusicLink works over many years and how musical training impacts the lives of talented students in need. The interview study could easily conclude our analysis of MusicLink. However, we had the opportunity to learn more about the MusicLink students who participated in these interviews after five more years through a survey and questionnaire.

Encore Survey and Questionnaire

In the summer of 2018, the MusicLink Foundation once again reached out to the students who were in the 2013 interview study for a final assessment of how music has impacted their lives as adults. We successfully reached 8 of the 15 students, unable to attain current contact information for the other interviewees.

The MusicLink Survey—The Significance of Musical Training in the Lives of MusicLink Students as Adults was completed by these eight former MusicLink students.²⁰ The contents of the survey mirrored the categories and subcategories that developed from the interviews. The survey asked the participants

to rate the significance of each item on a 5-point Likert Scale (total score, 8 X 5= 40) using the following ratings:

1. minimal importance
2. helpful
3. important
4. significant
5. very significant

The survey result totals are shown below, from highest to lowest in each category.

Personal traits and characteristics – Please assess the significance of the following qualities that personify you and your experiences in music:	
1. Realizing music as an integral part of my life (musical depth, passion, appreciation)	40
2. Realizing the importance of my musical talent	37
3. Creating and thinking “outside the box”	36
4. Having self-confidence, pride in accomplishments	36
5. Showing commitment, persistence, self-discipline	36
6. Enjoying multiple talents (different inst., composition, sports, other arts areas)	36
7. Using music as a stress reliever	32
Lessons: Please rate the significance of the following in your years of musical training	
1. Practice skills and methods (mental, physical)	39
2. Teacher experience	38
3. Motivation and Inspiration from lessons	38
4. Relationship between teacher and student	37
5. Performance skills and opportunities	35
6. Teaching strategies – theory, historical connections	33
Family and environmental influences: Please rate the significance of the contribution of these factors during your years of musical training	
1. Support from your family and relatives	38
2. Academic achievement in school	33
3. Social/community/church influence	29
4. School influence in musical growth	26
MusicLink: Please rate the importance of MusicLink in your musical training	
1. Lesson scholarships (financial need)	37
2. Recognition of talent	32
3. Opportunities (camp scholarships, other)	30

Figure 4: Results from The MusicLink Survey—The Significance of Musical Training in the Lives of MusicLink Students as Adults

Figure 5 visually shows these results in a graph format.

MusicLink Survey - Significance of Musical Training as Adults

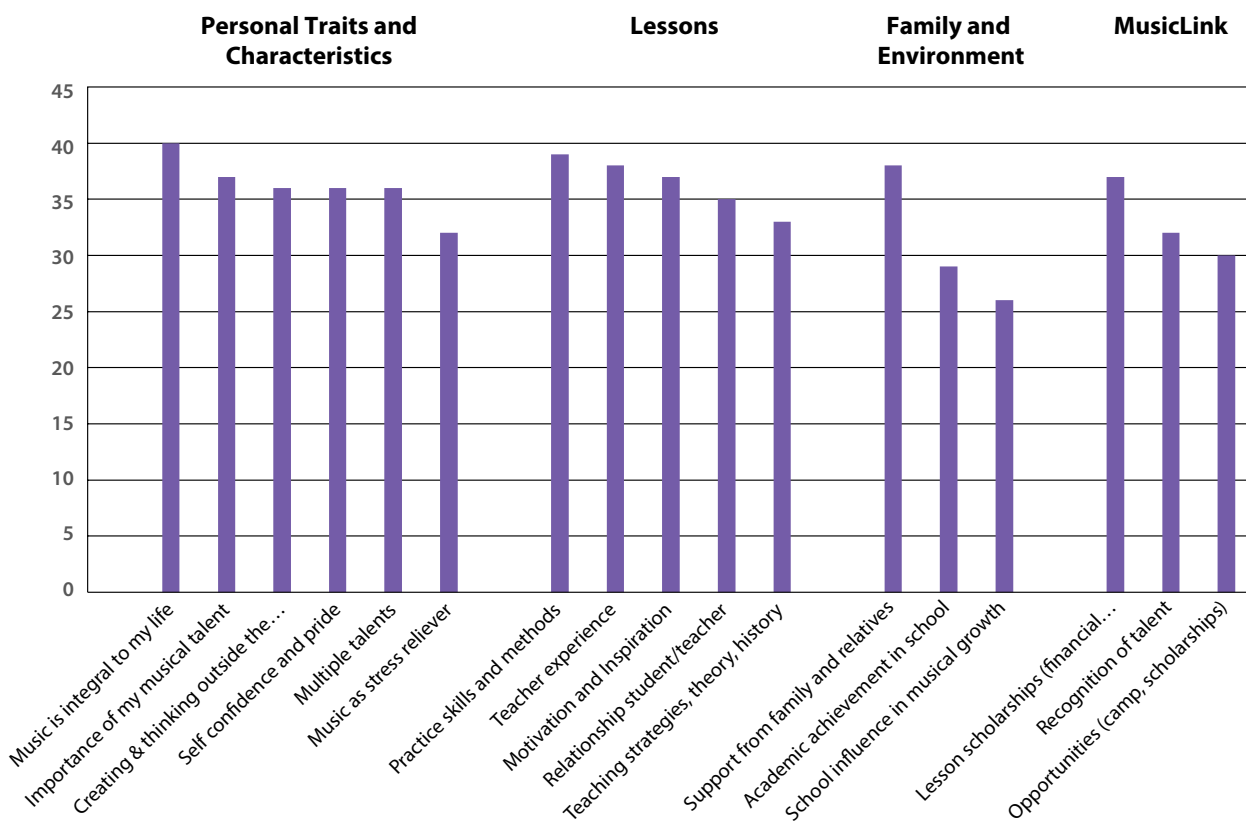


Figure 5: Significance of Musical Training as Adults

Survey Results

The ratings from the survey ranged from a low of 26 for *school involvement in musical growth* to a perfect rating for *realizing music as an integral part of their lives (musical depth, passion, appreciation)*, which was rated 5 (highly significant) by all participants ($8 \times 5 = 40$). The interview results mirror these findings, with *school influences in musical growth* being the lowest in prevalence (10) and *musical depth, passion, appreciation, love the highest* (67). However, the interviews also contained a separate subcategory of *music as an integral part of life* (35).

As adults, reflecting back to their musical training, the *mental and physical practice skills and methods* they learned in lessons made an impact on them (39). Comments in the interviews showed their use of these skills beyond the practice room, as they solved problems in their workplace or university studies. Again, the teacher's role was significant in recognition of *teaching experience* (38) as well as how this mentor *inspired them and motivated them to succeed* (38). This again closely aligns with the interview results, with motivation/inspiration included 50 times in the interviews.

The *family's supporting role* (38) in this long journey through musical training is recognized as a significant impact in their musical development, which again reflects the views shared in interviews, mentioned 51 times. Of interest, as adults, the role of the *community and church influence* has dropped in importance (29).

The adults showed an appreciation for the role MusicLink played in "linking" them with a professional teacher who provided a partial *lesson scholarship* realizing their financial need (37). Again, this reflects the similar prevalence MusicLink's impact on these students in the interviews, mentioned 64 times.

There were no substantial surprises or differences between interview and survey results. As these students grew into adulthood, they continued to have music in their lives, either professionally or as avid music-lovers. These ideas were shared in comments and a questionnaire that completes the MusicLink study. Seven adults offered a fascinating "encore" to our study by explaining their current role in life.

Where Are They Now and What Are They Doing?

To gather final thoughts from our adult MusicLink participants, the survey provided a space for comments and participants were asked to answer 5 questions about their current occupation, how music plays a part in their lives currently or in the future, and how they may have expanded into other areas besides music.

Current job: Of the 8 participants, 3 chose music as a profession, with fascinating ideas to expand their creative talents.

YB is completing a PhD in music composition at Princeton University, after graduating from Juilliard in 2014 and completing a MFA at Princeton, with both degrees in composition. He has expanded to entrepreneurial work, founding the AEON music ensemble with his brother (another talented MusicLink alumni). They have organized three concerts at Carnegie Hall, a collaborative concert with the Kronos Quartet and have premiered more than 20 new works by young composers.

DK is currently on the adjunct staff of the Virginia Commonwealth University, accompanying singers and continuing to conduct from his experience at Cleveland Institute of Music where he graduated in 2010. He loves to compose and arrange music and has been working with Korean film makers for the past three years. He is active in the "chamber

music scene" in Richmond and has 35 private piano students. He is heavily involved in a youth ministry combined with his love of chamber music. "I love to help with those types of events, meeting people and helping people make a better society."

JT is a recording/touring artist and educator with Quincy Jones Productions. After graduating from William Paterson University in New Jersey in 2008, he has been performing domestically and internationally with his trio and has performed as a supporting member of various groups. He has just released his fourth recording project called *Coming Home*. He plans to record a tribute to his mentor, Clark Terry with whom he formed a close relationship when developing the film, *Keep on Keeping On*. He hopes to pursue more opportunities to educate by bringing this film to as many schools as he can.

The other participants have chosen various professions, but still maintain an active interest in music as a performer, listener and music lover.

AA is the Research Lab Director and Data Scientist at VEDA Data Solutions. She majored in physics in college, but took a few piano classes outside of her degree requirements. She plans to continue scientific research with hopes to start her own business someday.

Music taught me about discipline and hard work. I learned how to work hard at long-term projects through piano lessons. Learning that daily practice and work is towards a larger goal in the future. This mentality carried over through college and graduate school. I learned how to command a stage through performance which has been extremely helpful in presenting scientific presentations. Audience members ask if I had acting lessons and I tell them about my experience in piano performance.

MJ is a general dentist and continues to play piano at home to help relieve stress. As

an undergraduate she played at the campus ministry every Sunday. She explains that dentistry requires manual dexterity, which piano helped her acquire. She values how playing the piano is "therapeutic during stressful seasons of life."

DF completed a master's degree in architecture and is now working as an architectural designer. With relocating for work and graduate school over the past 6 years, she has not continued any formal music training. However, she makes a conscious effort to improvise on a keyboard or guitar and was a singer in a progressive rock band in 2013. "Music has been and always will be a pervasive, indelible part of my life."

Music is more than something to be consumed. It's an agent of boundless inspiration. It's shaped my intuitions, inspired many a pursuit or creative work, and has been a friend in difficult times. Music is a kind of secret language, one that becomes a catalyst for problem-solving. I think through music—when faced with a difficult situation or complicated emotional palette, the narrative flow of music can guide me to vibrant understandings and epiphanies that were invisible before.

JM is a technical advisor at a patent law firm, drafting and prosecuting patent applications for inventors in the tech industry. He primarily works/practices piano on his own, but has taken occasional lessons from teachers from private to conservatory levels. He spent 2 weeks in Germany at an international piano festival and performs a few times a year. He even fits 3 piano students into his schedule. He is considering conservatory study and will definitely continue practicing, performing and teaching over the next 5 years. Ultimately, he would like to start competing again.

My study of the piano really shaped who I am today. It taught me tenacity, focus, patience, and the importance of consistency. The lessons that I learned on the piano taught me how to approach life. Whether taking an MIT physics class, writing patent applications for elite clients, or just going about my life, I can tie the skills, mindset, and approach I take to life back to the lessons that I learned on the piano.

Summation

The comprehensive analysis of what MusicLink does in terms of bringing lessons to talented disadvantaged students gathered statistical specifics that are valuable to those interested in how to identify and develop musical talent, realizing the role of parents and private teachers in this process. Examining the annual evaluations over 5 years of MusicLink study revealed the fluctuations that are a natural part of musical talent development. These are valuable findings that support the MusicLink process of talent identification and development.

The study discovered a wealth of information beyond the numbers once we gathered views from teachers, students and parents through qualitative inquiry. Students were inspired by their teachers, forming close relationships over time. Parents recognized the value of these lessons, seeing the growth of commitment, self-discipline and persistence in their children. Interviewers were impressed by the level of depth students showed when explaining their musical lives.

So often, music teachers wonder whatever happened to that one child who showed so much promise in their music classroom in school. The Encore survey and questionnaire provided a glance into the lives of adult MusicLink students who may very readily have started out in that classroom, recog-

nized by the music teacher and nominated for the MusicLink program. One of these adults describes his impression of MusicLink that seems a suitable close or “encore” to the study.

The MusicLink program plays a vital role in the development of not just pianists, but a generation of individuals and leaders who know how to take on the world and bring their wildest dreams into fruition. Whether its realizing that fast tempo for the virtuoso piece that you've been dying to play or it's changing some aspect of the world in some way, the approach and mindset that the MusicLink program instills in its students enable them to bring their dreams into reality. Keep it up! (JM) ◀◀

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3. Haroutounian, *Kindling the Spark*, 177–198.
4. L. Sosniak, “Phases of Learning,” in *Developing Talent in Young People*, ed. B. Bloom (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 409–439.
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6. S. Lundsteen. “Ethnographic Perspective: From Beginning to Final Product,” in *Conducting Research and Evaluation in Gifted Education*, ed. N. K. Buchanan and J. F. Feldhusen, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), 114–136.
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19. J. Haroutounian, *Arts Talent ID: A Framework for the Identification of Talented Students in the Arts* (Unionville, New York: Royal Fireworks Press, 2014), 1–13.

20. My thanks to Jacob Johnson for his assistance in formatting the survey for distribution through the internet.

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