

Arts in Mind

Even Lifelong Amateurs Benefit From Music Education

By Suz Lipman

When I was a kid, I practiced the violin in the kitchen. We had a fish tank, and the fish would do back flips when I played, leaping high above the water line. It seemed, for them, suicide was preferable to hearing yet another high "A."

I had nowhere near my brother's talent, discipline or drive. He played trumpet since kindergarten, starting on a pint-sized cornet after his teacher's husband visited the class and played "Never on Sunday" on the trumpet. Throughout our childhood, he dutifully practiced his arpeggios and scales, the patterns of which I can sing to this day. By 26, he was sitting in the first-trumpet chair of the Cleveland Orchestra.

The world sounds different to my brother than to me. He described his daughter's first steps musically, a lurching "ta ta ta ta ta." As a teenager, he applied for a ham-radio license, and he picked up the rhythms of Morse code as if he had known them from birth.

As children, however, he and I both got to play music in the public schools. I was able to sit in the center -- okay, the back -- of a group of musicians and revel in the sweet swelling of horns and of strings, the way music is conjured from keys, hollows, valves, air. I got to beat out an even time with the others, follow along on the page. Our high-school orchestra played unusually challenging repertoire. I played "Scheherazade" and "The Firebird" and "Pictures at an Exhibition." Me, who made the fish jump.

My musical life began in a large school closet, redolent of winter coats, sack lunches and Lysol. Beat-up instrument cases leaned against one another on bowing shelves. I was in fourth grade and Mr. Pleppler was asking: "Susan, do you want to play an instrument?" I told him I was wavering between cello and violin. He had me sit at a cello, which seemed as large as a stove and about as easy to drag to and from school. The decision was made. Violin.

The violin and I did not have an easy relationship. I couldn't make a good vibrato, never felt comfortable venturing beyond first position. There were years of private lessons with kind, old, talented Mr. Wiener, who taught with a pipe knocking gently against the body of his violin. He never let on that he knew when I hadn't practiced.

The school music teachers used to test us, and those who tested well moved up through the ranks. I sank further and further back. Had I played anything other than second

violin, whose numbers could swell to accommodate even me, I would have been out of the orchestra altogether.

During senior year of high school, I took up the French horn. I liked it and wondered if a knack for brass ran in our family. By the end of the first semester, telltale beginner's mouthpiece ring over my top lip, I was able to sputter out some second-horn parts and was voted "Most Improved Beginner".

I went on to play horn in my college marching band, building up my right deltoid lifting its heavy bell. (French horns were not meant for marching.) In an oversized uniform and wobbly shako-hat, I marched eight mincing steps for every five yards of football field while reading music from a flipbook of songs that bounced and skidded off its tiny stand.

I never adjusted to playing and marching simultaneously. I shudder to think of the sounds that emanated from my horn as I blasted out the few notes I could and tried to figure out where I was supposed to be walking. I was always relieved to hit my mark at the bottom of the UCLA "U", my parents snapping pictures from the stands.

My formal life in music ended until age 30, when I took up the flute. I found the instrument beautiful (and so light!) I really practiced between lessons. At a recital, I performed a Mozart "Allegro" with piano accompaniment. I took the coda a little fast and flubbed a few notes, but it was a proud moment nonetheless.

Though it was clear from the start I would never play professionally, I've gained much from my music education. I still play music with family and friends. One of my daughter's favorite lullabies was one I had learned on the flute. And occasionally I'll hear a piece of music and think, "I played that!" All because I stood in that instrument closet in fourth grade.

"Arts in Mind" is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Suz Lipman is a writer and a parent in the Mill Valley School District.