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Svetlana K Ukhova

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# ON THE EARLY STAGE of TEACHING MUSIC TO LESS GIFTED CHILDREN

**Svetlana K. Ukhova**

*Senior Lecturer*

Communal Institution of Primary Specialized Education

«Odesa Art School №1 Named After E.G. Gilels»

4/1 Mayakovs'koho Ln

Odesa, Ukraine 65082

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## **Abstract**

The present work covers the topic of the early stage of teaching less musically gifted children. The work is rooted in the principles of inclusiveness in music education and is based on an extensive pedagogical experience of the author throughout a prolonged teaching career in a music school for children. The success in teaching less musically gifted children depends critically on the choice of pedagogical approaches by the teacher, on the teacher's attitude toward a child, and on creativity and flexibility adopted by the teacher. Several practical rules—based on the author's teaching experience and on pedagogical literature—are described as guidance to teachers working with less musically gifted children. The connection between music education and overall child development is also discussed. Music education is a stimulating cognitive exercise which plays an important role in overall cognitive development of a child. Musical education can stimulate not only intellectual development, improve general educational performance, but also yield improved physical condition. Musical education, therefore, is closely connected to the most valuable aspects of life.

**Keywords:** Inclusiveness; Inclusiveness in Music Education; Pedagogy of Music Instruction; Teaching Methods in Music Education.

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## **Introduction**

The present work covers the topic of the early stage of teaching less musically gifted children. This work aims to draw attention of the teachers to children who are less gifted (in musical sense). The concept of a “less musically gifted student” is not an abstract notion, but – for many reasons – is a large-scale modern reality faced by practicing teachers at music schools for children.

The first goal of this work is to describe and review the methods and practical approaches to teaching less gifted children during the early stages of music education. The second goal – addressed in the second section – is to draw the teacher’s attention to the subject of overall child development during musical education, in addition to the topics of purely musical schooling.

The material in the present work is based on an extensive pedagogical experience of the author throughout a prolonged teaching career in a music school for children.

While concluding the introduction to this work on the beginning period in teaching less gifted students, I stress that the description and the concept of a “less gifted student” (with respect to musical talents and aptitudes) used in this work should be taken only as guidance to a teacher for search and selection of teaching methodologies and approaches. Such description in no case is used to sort the students for any other purposes.

## **1. The Early Stage of Teaching Less Musically Gifted Children**

### **1.1. General Remarks**

The present work treats the concepts of “inclusiveness,” “less gifted students,” “children gifted in musical sense” as separate concepts. It should be understood that the division between “less gifted” and “musically gifted” children is not precise, and in many practical cases does not have strongly defined boundaries.

The concept of inclusiveness forms the background for our discussion of the main topic—early stages of musical education for less gifted children. A detailed and expansive discussion of the topic of inclusiveness in education is contained in Abramo (2012), Colwell (2002), and Benedict et. al (2018).

At one end of the spectrum, there are less musically gifted children. At the other end of the “spectrum of abilities” of students there are musically gifted children. Throughout the history of musical pedagogy, many authors have written extensively and innovatively on this topic (see, for example Neigauz (1988), Maikapar (1963), Milich (1977), Sokolov (1981), Gordon (2007), Timakin (1984)). Many effective methodological approaches have been created to work with musically gifted children.<sup>1</sup>

Separation of students on their abilities does not imply that a teacher should limit the search of effective pedagogical methods only within one theme (in the case of this work –less gifted children). When working creatively, a teacher can find many useful recommendations and methods regarding the theme of the present work within the literature on inclusive education, and – although this may appear surprising at first glance – within methodologies for teaching musically gifted children.

## **1.2. A Brief Case Study in the Practice of Inclusiveness in Teaching**

I will mention briefly that while the topic of inclusiveness in teaching is receiving active development in more recent times, the inclusiveness itself has always been present in the practice of music education.

I will describe a case from my own practice. I was a student at Odessa Conservatory<sup>2</sup> and taught at the School of Music at Odessa Conservatory. Teaching at this school was conducted by the students of the Conservatory under direction of Conservatory’s professorial faculty. I was teaching in my discipline – the piano. One of my students was Vladimir (Volodya) Goryachenko, who was blind.

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<sup>1</sup> Classic pedagogical references include: Campbell (2008), Kodály (1965), Chosky et. al. (2000), Jaques-Dalcroze (1980).

<sup>2</sup> Odessa Conservatory in Odessa, Ukraine (now - Odessa National Music Academy named after A. Nezhdanova) was established on September 8, 1913 on the basis of the Odessa Musical College. On the territory of the Russian Empire, the Odessa Conservatory became the fourth higher educational musical institution - after the St. Petersburg, Moscow and Saratov conservatories. Among the graduates of the Odessa Music Academy are the names of such world-famous musicians of the past and the present as Emil Gilels, David Oistrakh, Yakov Zak, Bela Rudenko.

During that time the cases of blind students enrolled in piano lessons were extremely rare. There were no methodological publications on the topic of teaching blind students to play the piano. There was no music published using Braille system.<sup>3</sup> Each musical piece had to be played and transcribed into Braille in advance. Transcribing was done by hand (during that time, there were no personal computers, and computing equipment was used only in industrial and scientific applications).

The curriculum was designed to give the student world-class education to enable his further studies at a higher educational musical institution. Curriculum included preludes and fugues by J.S. Bach, sonatas by Haydn, W. Mozart, L. van Beethoven, etudes by Chopin, plays by R. Schumann, and many other music pieces.

Exceptional talent, outstanding sense of purpose, strong family support, and constant studying taken together assured success in the student's musical education.

Today, Vladimir Gennadievich Goryachenko is a composer.

The described example illustrates that during the career a practicing music teacher faces cases and circumstances that do not have pre-made solutions. Such circumstances make the teacher responsible for finding solutions and require creativity on the teacher's part.

### **1.3. A Brief Introduction to the Topic**

The true task of a children educational institution (a music school for children) is to help children determine the extent of their talent and to facilitate their musical and cultural development.<sup>4</sup> The goal of music education is to make music a part of life not only for gifted and talented children, but also for all those who are admitted to a music school for children.

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<sup>3</sup> Braille is a tactile writing and publishing system used by people who are visually impaired. It is traditionally written (published) with embossed paper. Braille is named after its creator, Louis Braille, a Frenchman who lost his sight as a result of a childhood accident. In 1824, at the age of fifteen, he developed a code for the French alphabet as an improvement on night writing. He published his system, which subsequently included musical notation, in 1829.

<sup>4</sup> Zhabina (2016).

The concept of being “gifted” has been developed in psychological research regarding both general development of a child (see, for example Burton (2001)) and regarding the degree of musical talents (for example, Manturzevska (1994)).

In practice, the attitudes that teachers have toward the problem of teaching less musically gifted children vary widely. There are teachers who are against teaching such students at all. Musical training, however, is not only about learning of instrumental (technical) skills. Musical training is one of the forms of musical development of a child; And a very effective form, at that. Musical education and training attract a child toward the world of music. The world of music is a treasure that will never lose its value for the child. This will remain true even if a child only achieves a relatively modest level of skills in playing a musical instrument.

With regard to less musically gifted children, the level of mastery over a musical instrument that they will achieve depends, first and foremost, on the appropriate methodological methods that a teacher will adopt. When teaching and mentoring piano students, the teacher must creatively adopt recommendations from methodological literature (for example, Chosky et. al. (2000), Maikapar (1963), Milich (1977), Campbell (2008), Sokolov (1981), Timakin(1984), Pennington(1925)).

#### **1.4. On the Choice of Pedagogical Approaches**

There are teachers who use the following approach when working with less gifted children. These teachers use the same methodologies, the same pedagogical approaches, as when teaching highly gifted children. They use the same set of exercises, the same pieces of music, the same explanations, the same manner of performance, only everything being conducted at a very slow pace.

The result of such approach is predictable. In many cases a child does not learn how to play a musical instrument, becomes discouraged and loses interest. In many of these cases a teacher attributes the failure not to themselves and to the lack of appropriate pedagogical methods, but to the lack of child’s “abilities”. The mistake such teachers make is that they force a child to adapt to pedagogy, instead of striving to derive pedagogical approaches from the abilities and traits of a specific child.

### **1.5. On the Teacher's Attitudes toward a Child**

Music, and musical education, do not include factual knowledge only. Other manifestations of musicality are necessary: intuition, inspiration (reproduction and reflection of artistic reality). These qualities cannot be taught directly. In terms of teaching success, much depends on the relations between a teacher and a student. Power and domination will never lead to a positive outcome in teaching. A teacher cannot adopt authoritarian patterns of behavior and demand respect.

A teacher must possess and exhibit individuality. And from the very beginning of teaching, a teacher must respect and take into account individuality of a student. A student – is a human being with individuality and personality! If a teacher chooses to approach a student from the point of view of the development of student's individuality, then the student will meet the teacher. And the student will respond favorably to teacher's appeals, assignments, and directions during the lessons.

### **1.6. General Principles for Working with Less Gifted Children**

The following general principles are recommended for working with less gifted children.

1. A teacher must place strong emphasis on the development of the child's musicality. When teaching music notation to a child for the first time, the teacher should use the notation that just had been taught to write a down a simple tune, preferably one known to the student and recognizable by the student. Doing it this way makes it easier for the child to build correspondence between what the child sees in terms of notation and what the child hears. The teacher should also emphasize the rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and expressiveness of the tune. And, of course, the teacher must teach the student to play this tune on the musical instrument.
2. Moving forward must take place at a slow pace.
3. Because the lessons must progress at a slow pace, each lesson must be interesting so the child does not lose interest.
4. Selected repertoire must not be complicated. Experienced teacher know that students who are less gifted play folk tunes with significantly more enthusiasm than musical pieces from the standard teaching curriculum. Usually, folk music has a bright and attractive emotional

and poetic component. Material from standard teaching curriculum, on the other hand, is typically focused on purely technical and cognitive tasks. Such tasks, for example, include playing notes of full duration, pauses, *staccato*, *legato*, and so forth. These exercises develop student's cognitive skills, motor skills, energy, stamina, and tenacity, and are certainly necessary and irreplaceable. At the same time, purely technical tasks leave the soul and imagination of the child untouched. The teacher, of course, must find a balance and combine folk melodies with the musical material published in teaching publications.

5. Teacher must be very patient, exhibit positive thinking, and maintain genuine interest in the student.

### **1.7. Main Exercises During the Early Stage of Teaching**

Listed below are several fundamental exercises for the early stage of education.

1. Repeat a given sound with voice. If this exercise is not successful, then the teacher needs to determine student's voice tessitura and conduct this exercise at the sound pitch that a child is using involuntarily while singing along, without realizing its pitch. Then, at later steps of the exercise, the teacher can expand the sound range.
2. Following a given simple rhythm. If this exercise is not successful, then practice walking to musical accompaniment; follow different rhythm and tempo, then continue the exercise while accelerating and decelerating, with accents on the second, third, and fourth steps.
3. Development of basic rhythmic skills by reciting children's poetry, counting-songs<sup>5</sup>, and riddles. While reciting children's poems, counting-songs, and riddles, a teacher should tap out the rhythm of this material. While using this technique, a teacher should use different intonations.
4. Development of elementary understanding of melody. To accomplish this, a teacher plays a previously announced sound, and the student repeats the sound mimicking the duration and volume. When the student masters the first simple exercises, the teacher can move onto more difficult tasks: Student repeats two or three previously announced notes. One more

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<sup>5</sup> An example of a counting song: "Bee, a bee, a bumblebee · Stung a man upon his knee · And a hog upon his snout, · I'll be dogged if you ain't out!"

exercise: A student should notice and point out mistake that the teacher makes (on purpose) while playing a musical composition.

5. A student is given a task of composing his or her own tunes for children's poems or other texts. First a student is asked to tap out the rhythm of the poem, then the student distributes melodically this rhythm among two (later, three) notes.

### **1.8. Attitude toward a Student during the Early Stage of Instruction**

In this sub-section I will add a few words regarding the attitude that a teacher assumes toward a student during the early stage of instruction.

Teaching sessions and lessons are a creative process.

Everything that we want to teach to a student should not be dictated; instead, it should be jointly discovered by a student and a teacher, as if it is being discovered anew. This approach draws the student into the active process of learning. By using this method, a teacher can turn even routine tasks into interesting and exciting exercises.

From time to time, we as teachers underestimate abilities of a child to think, to understand, and to comprehend. And, in our attempt to create a forged (counterfeit) connection with the student, we start using a primitive and fake tone. Children feel this fake tone immediately; They become offended by it and become repelled by it. After this has happened, it becomes pointless to attempt to awaken any musical perceptions and dispositions in a child, because all of the child's attention has become focused on the teacher's wrongly elected tone of conduct.

It is also wrong to talk to a student in the form of an unquestionable order, to take on the demeanor of strict domination, requiring subordination without any questioning on the part of the student. If a teacher adopts such demeanor, the result will be that a student will enter a state of fear and stiffness. A student is overwhelmed with fear to do something a teacher will not approve. Such lessons will not be productive.

A child should feel that the teacher talks to him (or her) as to an equal; that the teacher engages in a discourse and a discussion with the student, and respectfully listens to the student's views and opinions. In this case the student will develop trust toward the teacher and the student will acquire a sense of responsibility and will grow a desire to justify this trust. This is how a teacher establishes trust and acquires valid position of authority. This is how the ground is set for motivating a student's interest in the music lessons.

Further, a teacher should not emphasize student's shortcomings and faults too often. In this particular case, the power of suggestion can be a dangerous method, which is better reserved for nurturing positive qualities. A teacher has a duty to discover and determine the positive qualities of a student (albeit, insignificant ones) and use these positive qualities as a starting point in teacher's work, further encouraging their development.

The discussion above does not imply that a teacher can ignore the student's shortcomings. Quite the contrary, it is the teacher's responsibility to actively wrestle with these shortcomings. Any shortcomings, however, are more visible and stand out better against the background of positive characteristics.

Of course, often it is substantially easier to point out shortcomings than to find positive traits. It is extremely difficult, however, to remedy the shortcoming without finding any of positive qualities in a student. Therefore, teacher's ability to find and set the right tone and to create appropriate atmosphere determines the ability to conduct an effective and successful lesson.

When speaking, discussing, and pondering with a student on equal footing, we cannot forget that we are communicating with a child; and children tend to think in concrete terms, they tend to have concrete thinking. Therefore, every music assignment must be expressed explicitly in terms of sound, tempo, rhythm, and the corresponding playing techniques. Every lesson must be useful for a student, and therefore each task set forth for a student must be feasible and certainly must be clear for the student.

### **1.9. Two More Practical Rules for Teaching Less Gifted Children**

Let us now return to the discussion of teaching less gifted children. There are two main rules to follow when working with such students.

The first rule: Do not start playing from musical notation before musical abilities of a student have been developed at least to the extent when the student can feel and associate the pressing of keys on the keyboard with an external expression of the student's internal musical perception. Therefore, it is not recommended to start playing from musical notation when the student still cannot pick up some simple songs and play them by ear.

The second rule—also logical in nature, although frequently violated in the common practice—is: The process of learning musical notation must take place at a speed sufficiently low as for the student to have time to thoroughly register in their memory the connection between a given note (notation) and a certain *sound*. This does not mean the perfect musical ear (or, the “perfect pitch”). From the very beginning, the link between reading of a musical notation for a note and pressing a key must be an auditory representation and perception of the sound; the sound of a certain pitch, duration, volume, and perhaps even a timbre. For children who are less gifted in musical sense, in the beginning all this may be imprecise and vague, but it is most important not to allow for such auditory representation and perception to be absent from the link.

### **1.10. Final Remarks on the Topic of Teaching Less Gifted Students**

While discussing the set of methodological approaches that a teacher has in their possession, I would like to stress that application of pedagogical methods and methodological approaches is a truly creative process. Take, for example, a common phrase: “We must take modern realities into account.” Behind these simple words there is a plethora of details. Among such “details” are behavioral patterns and the upbringing of a modern child! Among such “details” is the ever-increasing and substantial penetration of computing technologies and devices into modern civilization, with all the positive and negative effects that such penetration brings with it.<sup>6</sup> Among such “details” is the new reality that began in 2019 with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Achievement

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<sup>6</sup> Beland and Murphy (2015).

<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 Pandemic. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic)

of positive results in our work as teachers follows from accumulation of our own teaching experiences, from studying and learning from the experiences of our colleagues (see, for example Zhabina(2016)), and from adhering to the following principle: “In order to be an excellent teacher, you need to love the subject that you are teaching, and to be fond of those who you are teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, let us recall one of the critically important didactic principles which becomes especially significant when teaching less gifted students: Teaching a child should not be burdensome work, it should be an attractive and appealing way of life.

## **2. Child Development During Music Education**

### **2.1. Introduction to Section 2**

This section discusses the influence of music education on child development. This is an interesting topic, which has many dimensions, and it is certainly always important. The connection between musical development and child cognitive development follows from the fact that child’s music education always takes place in close connection with general development of a child. Also, musical education takes place in connection with education in other disciplines.

The discussion in this section and the overview of the material is relatively brief. Interested teachers, however, can use the Internet to find more detailed information on this interesting topic. The topic of overall child development during music education is certainly important for music teachers and is relevant for the teachers’ day-to-day work.

### **2.2. Child Development during Music Education**

Every human being has hidden potential and aspiration to develop this potential. In other words, the strive toward self-expression is present in human beings at a genetic level and is a necessity, just as a strive to satisfy hunger, thirst, the strive to create comfortable living conditions. The difference is that the strive for self-expression is at the very top of the pyramid of needs, and thus may be ignored by many, thereby robbing a person from the opportunity to achieve true happiness.

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<sup>8</sup> Zhabina (2016).

According to scientific research, musical activity can be seen as stimulating cognitive exercises, which train and prepare the brain for interaction with the surrounding world. Training to play a musical instrument requires many years of practice, and therefore this activity can stimulate the development of alternative connections within the brain which enhance learning ability. Also, it should be noted that musical education can stimulate not only intellectual development, but also yield improved physical condition. Musical education, therefore, is closely connected to the most valuable aspects of life.

Children who study music are often ahead of their peers in terms of cognitive development. They are faster at learning reading. They are better at expressing their thoughts. These are scientific findings. Music studies not only develop hand motility but also speaking skills.<sup>9</sup>

Presently, many children have problems due to short attention span. There are many reasons for developing a short attention span, but most frequently the insufficient ability to concentrate and attain and maintain high focus levels is rooted in day-to-day routine lifestyle behavioral patterns. Children spend a significant amount of time in front of a computer and TV.<sup>10</sup> Quick changes of images and action overload and exhaust child's psychics. A child's perception ability deteriorates, and children develop difficulty to focus on one task for a prolonged period of time.

A study by researchers from the Institute of Education (London) confirmed that music studies raise intellectual abilities of a student. Music promotes concentration, attentiveness, improves overall mood, and enhances performance of the immune system.<sup>11</sup>

Researchers from Northumbria University (Great Britain) have found that regular music studies help children enhance their vocabulary, develop skills in arithmetic, improve ability to listen and increase information processing abilities.<sup>12</sup> Medical foundation for these findings was discovered by researchers from Harvard Medical School. They discovered that children who studied music for 15 months, at least 2.5 hours per week, have increased the volume of *corpus callosum* – the

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<sup>9</sup> Burton (2001).

<sup>10</sup> Beland and Murphy (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Additional discussion on this topic is contained in Scott (1992).

<sup>12</sup> Steinberg (1999), Scott (1992).

part of the human brain that enables corresponding regions of the left and right cerebral hemispheres to communicate – has increased by a quarter, on average.

To achieve positive effects from musical education it is important set conditions for a child to be self-motivated for musical studies, without the traditional pressure from parents.<sup>13</sup>

The impact that music has on a person has been known and discussed through the ages. Ancient philosophers held a firm belief that music facilitates versatile personality development. Quite possibly, this was the reason why nearly all historical personalities – not only scientists, but also outstanding generals and leaders of nations – studied music and other fine arts. This observation applies not only to Ancient Rome or Ancient Greece, but also to the cultures of Ancient East, to the Old World, and the New World.<sup>14</sup>

For Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoreans, music was the medium that brings into balance the external flow of life with internal psychological state of a human being. During XVI Century music was used during a surgical procedure for the first time.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the interest toward research on the impact that music has on the development of spirituality and general intellectual development has increased worldwide. An increasing number of medical professionals and researchers, psychologists, and educators have made many efforts to communicate the importance of music education for the cultural life in society in general.

The true task of a children educational institution (a music school for children) is to help students determine the extent of their talent. Today, a music school for children is one of the institutions for growth and dissemination of musical culture. The goal today is to open up the world of music not only to the musically gifted children, but also to less gifted children; to all children who enter a music school.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Manturzevska (1994).

<sup>14</sup> Alekseev (1988).

<sup>15</sup> Zhabina (2016).

There are several components that make up musical education.<sup>16</sup>

1. Broadening and development of musical purview.
2. Development of child's interest toward creative work, and ability to work.
3. Development of will power and character.
4. Development of attention to detail and discipline.
5. Development of the culture of speech.

Student development and teaching begins with the moment when a student walks through the door into their teacher's classroom for the first time. Appearance of the classroom, teacher's manners and behavior all have significant influence over student's behavior. The content of the lesson is the foundation of educational work. The starting point for the pedagogical process is the work on learning to play a piece of music. Therefore, carefully selected repertoire becomes a critically important factor in teaching.

When introducing a student to music from different time periods, countries, and musical styles, it is important to maintain correspondence between the selected musical pieces and pedagogical objectives. The teacher should set the goal of awakening student's interest in the musical pieces selected for the curriculum. Such approach will lead to favorable outcomes not only in terms of music education, but also in terms of general cultural development of a child. And, of course, the teacher must continuously remember to help the student develop will power, attentiveness, concentration, tenacity, and similar qualities.

Finally, it must be noted, that there are regulations and laws that govern the rights of children. The main international legal framework that governs children's rights is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Teaching music to less musically gifted children in its early period has several characteristics that a teacher must take into account. The teaching process will be more successful if the teacher is

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<sup>16</sup> Vetlugina (1968).

able to find methods and approaches that take into account individual features of a child. After finding such methods, the teacher should use them creatively, with patience, and with inspiration.

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