

Ask the Right Questions. You'll be glad you did!

Remember those two questions I talked about on the webpage? Would it surprise you to learn that this is how most parents make a decision on what could be one of the most important investments they will ever make for their kids - education for themselves or their loved ones.

I want to challenge you to think beyond getting lessons as cheaply as you can. I also want you to question what it is that you expect from the person that is likely to spend the next few years teaching you or your child.

In short, you ***need*** to know the information in this article!

I'm about to shoot myself in the foot, right? Really, I'm not!

We want you to be a well-informed consumer and we don't want you to waste a lot of time and money on instruction that just goes through the motions causing you or your child to quickly lose interest!

My names is Jim Duncan and I've been both a public school band and choir director most of my adult life and teaching private music since 1980. So, I'd like to at least think I've learned SOMETHING along this journey... I have spent nearly three decades at one point or another teaching for both small and large school districts where I specialized in group lessons. I don't want to blow my own horn here, but I think I've a pretty good handle on this stuff and I want to share it with YOU!

So, here's the straight scoop! No colorful, crunchy, candy coating; no sprinkles! It might not be what you want to hear, but knowing this information (and using it wisely!) will save you a lot of time and money so I hope you'll continue reading!!!

After you finish reading this article you will find yourself better informed and ready to shop or the right teacher and the right studio to meet YOUR expectations. Maybe it's TMSOW, maybe it's not. That's OK!!!

LESSON #1: What Do You Want to Accomplish?

Before you call us up and ask to sign up (or any other studio for that matter!) you need to sit down and decide what it is that **you** want from your study of music!

This is going to be expensive over time. Do the math! If your teacher charges your \$18.00 for a 30-minute lesson multiple that by 4 weeks in a month the times 12 for a year then add a zero to the result to see how much you're about to spend!

When you consider only cost and location you could cheat yourself out of a great value and end up wasting years and hundreds of dollars fixing bad habits that could have been avoided had you invested more wisely in a proper teacher right from the start.

More often than not, a professional teacher charging \$50-an-hour (just an example; **not** our actual fees) could end up SAVING you precious time and money over the \$5-an-hour kid-next-door or the studio that hires the next warm body they can find when someone moves on.

When it comes to your education, cost and convenience should be way down on your priority list. If they're not, I challenge you to read further and then consider what's really best for YOU!

LESSON #2 – The Top 10 Questions You Should Ask FIRST!

So, let's take a look at the Top Ten items you should consider when choosing a music school:

#10 "How Much Does it Cost?" (Nope, so sorry. It's no longer #1!)

Our crazy economy demands that we are ever watchful of our expenses but the reality here is, "How much?" should be THE last question you ask when it comes to choosing a music school or teacher!

Hey, you're NOT comparing ears of corn at Wal-Mart here. Who would you rather learn from a full-time, degreed and certified professional teacher with decades of experience or the teen next door? "HEY! He really plays good" and he can pass his college playing exams but that doesn't necessarily mean he can TEACH.

An experienced teacher is MUCH more than just someone who can play their chosen instrument or sang in the (fill in the blank!) _____ choir. He/She is also a coach, a career counselor, a mentor, a psychologist, and a trusted advisor among many other roles. You certainly don't want to leave yourself in the hands of someone who has barely figured out his or her own life... no matter how cheap the price!

#9 "Where Are You Located?"

Well, heck ya!!! We'd all much rather drive only a few blocks for the sake of convenience. I mean, WHO WOULDN'T?!?!?

Let's say your next-door neighbor agrees to teach your child for \$1 per lesson (not likely, but just as an example). It just doesn't get any better than that, right? So, you sign up and after a year you sadly realize that your child can't play anything, is totally frustrated, and wants to quit. Can you blame them?

You know what? Most people will BLAME THE CHILD" and decide, "Well, she must not be very musical" or "I guess she just wasn't interested."

This same, old story plays out far too many times and it didn't have to! Yes, sometimes that really IS the problem, but it didn't HAVE to be. What might have happened had you entrusted your child's welfare to the careful watch of a proper, experienced teacher? But

you didn't and now your child is turned off of music for life and you are left with a bitter experience and empty pockets to show for your investment.

So, what SHOULD we be looking for then? Gosh, I never thought you'd ask!!! <grin>

Now if you've taken the time to figure out exactly what you want to accomplish through your study of music, the MOST important question you can ask is:

#1 "How Can This Teacher Help Me Achieve My Goals?" (Did ya see that? I jumped from #9 to #1!!!)

Let's say you come to our studio with a goal of starting from scratch as a brand, new beginner and you want to be able to play _____ (fill in the blank with your own goal here!) within one year. But...you only have a \$150 keyboard you bought from WalMart; and you don't want to practice more than 2 or 3 days a week, and no more than a few minutes a day... well...

Don't Laugh – People really think that making music is really that easy!

And we have to tell them, "Sorry, you just can't pop this in the ol' microwave and pop out an M.R.E. in two minutes!"

Yes, it IS possible to scrape by with the bare minimum requirements but what do you prove to yourself when you come to your lesson and can't make the teacher's grand piano work for you? Worse, what if you spend half the lesson just getting accustomed to that Steinway? Did you get VALUE for 1) whatever practice you put in last week and 2) for the money you spent for that lesson?

When people ask our students, "Who is your teacher?", I want that question coming from a positive frame of mind as if to say, "Wow, you are so good! You must have a terrific teacher."

In the above example, if someone asked that student to play something and he couldn't, how does that make the teacher look?

My best advice to you and all the rest of our students is, "DON'T DO THIS!"

What is the BIG HURRY? Learning is a lifelong skill and unless you know you are going to die soon, you've got time! It would be better to develop the good habit of doing things to the best of your ability. That way you will be more successful in life rather than always looking for the quick and easy way out.

However, if you still insist on doing it 'on the cheap and easy' we can refer you to people who will gladly take your money and let you sit there and practice for 30 minutes.

BUYER BEWARE! Guess what? There are lots of people out there who will take your money if you just hand it to them. When it comes to your education, 'Cheap, Convenient and Fast' are not always the best things. Re-examine your priorities and get them in order and ask better questions!

#2 "What Will Be Required of Me?"

This is the next MOST important question you should be asking.

Teachers can have as many different standards and expectations as there are students. These range from a "Whatever - Anything Goes" kind of attitude to those with clear, well thought out policies developed over years of experience and designed to help the student-teacher-parent relationship flow more smoothly.

The better schools and teachers will expect you to make some kind of commitment. Most busy teachers don't have time to take on new students who just want to "Try it out" for a month or two. The accomplished teacher is certainly not going to "TRY" to teach you; he or she is committed to DOING IT, so you should come with the attitude that you are going to DO IT, too! Otherwise, invest your hard-earned time and money into something else.

As mentioned previously, we get a fair amount of people inquiring about piano lessons who don't own a piano and have no intention of getting one in the near future. What's up with that? Think about it: How are you going to practice?

Playing piano (or singing, or playing a band or string instrument) doesn't just magically happen unless, of course, you're a savant like Rain Man!

One of my favorite admonishments to my beginning band students over the years when they ask "Why is this so hard? Is there a way to make this easier?" My response: "If it were easy, EVERYONE would be doing it. You've got talent, but you have to work hard to make something out of it!"

You want to learn to play, sing, act, or perform? You've gotta pay your dues, as they say. "How do you get to Broadway? PRACTICE!"

Good teachers (hint: the ones YOU want to be with) will expect a firm time commitment from you and will probably not tolerate too many changes in schedule as you drift from one activity to another. Make up your mind about what you want to do; then DO IT! Your teacher can and should expect you to practice regularly at home and come to class prepared at your appointed time each week.

Are you over-committed with too many activities? Don't clutter up your teacher's life by wreaking havoc with your schedule. Settle for just a few things and do them well, rather than trying to be a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none!

Following instruction and respecting your teacher's advice is another area of expectation. A good teacher will know from years of dedicated effort and often frustrating experience what will work and what won't. Having a parent tell the teacher, "Well my friend's daughter's teacher doesn't make her do that," is an act of total disrespect. You are paying your teacher to do a job, so let him or her DO THEIR JOB! Be sure you are very clear on your teacher's policies and expectations and be ready to honor them if you wish to develop and maintain a strong working relationship. Otherwise, find someone else with whom you will feel more comfortable.

#3 "Does My Teacher Understand Me and What It Is That I Want to Accomplish?"

Listen, learning any new skill is hard enough without having to deal with someone you just don't connect with. Choose a teacher whom you can understand and who understands you. Just because your teacher has all kinds of impressive degrees and qualifications, they mean nothing if you can't relate to each other!

And speaking of understanding, sometimes there are differences in lifestyle, such as generation-gaps, musical tastes and preferences, etc. It is important to have someone you can relate to.

Mozart and Beethoven were unquestionably two of the greatest musical minds that ever lived. Who wouldn't want to study with geniuses like that, right? However, when it came to people skills, both men were thought to be quite at the other end of the spectrum. They just could not tolerate working with other people and considered most of their fellow man to be below themselves. This certainly didn't make for a workable student-teacher relationship.

#4 "Do I Feel Like I Belong Here?"

You're at your private teacher's home for your weekly lesson. The dog is barking and your teacher also has something cooking in the oven for dinner. Down the hall a television is blasting away, her teenage son is crankin' out the tunes on his blaster.

Or...

You're sitting in the studio with your teacher and you can't hear what they're telling you or you can't stay focused on your playing because you've got the sound of a bunch of kids just outside the door having their afternoon social and gossip time...

Soon after, you are shuffling down the sidewalk, trying to piece together what just happened to you over the past 30 minutes. While the distractions during the lesson are perfectly clear in your mind, the details of your lesson, whatever there was of it, are rather foggy.

OR how about this one...

You're at one of the big MEGA schools. They've got over 2,000 students going there so they must be good, right? You stand in a crammed waiting area with 50 other students, waiting for the 'change of the guard'. Nobody acknowledges you, and nobody really cares to know your name... unless you owe money of course! Only then do you get to meet the 'boss' who informs you that you may rejoin the class once your 'obligations' have been met. Kinda gives you the 'warm-and-fuzzies', doesn't it?

Not comfortable with any one of those scenarios?

HHHMMMM... you mean there's more to this music school shopping than just price and location? WHO KNEW?

You might be better served finding a place that is professionally set up; away from all the usual distractions and clutter that can take place at home, including your own!

Yes, having the teacher come to your house may be the ultimate in convenience, but unless you have your home set up like a professional music studio, you are probably not going to get the greatest benefit from your music lessons. For most students, children and adults alike, it just doesn't FEEL like a music class. Things are too familiar and comfortable and it's hard for a student to properly focus in that kind of environment, especially with his TV and toys, brothers, sisters and pets, just around the corner.

#4 "Will I Have Sufficient Access to My Teacher?"

When you enroll at some studios you do so through a music counselor (fancy name for salesperson). You don't even get to meet your teacher until your lesson time.

Once you're in there, your teacher makes one or two suggestions during your lesson but you don't understand and ask her to demonstrate but then she can't SHOW you. You're a visual learner, but your teacher really can't play. WHAAAT?

Or...

You've been on the same song for weeks and you're frustrated because you just can't get that weird rhythm right. You're sitting there crying and all you want is your teacher to help you learn it but the only advice she can give you is "you'll just have to go home and practice harder!" Don't know about you, but that's not exactly my idea of value for your money!

To her, you are just another kid and it's too much trouble to actually help you figure it out in a way that you can relate to and remember. If you learned something tonight, you were one of the lucky ones. If you didn't learn anything, well... go home and practice and pay better attention next week!

When your lesson is over, the next kid - who shall remain forever nameless and faceless as far as your teacher is concerned - takes over and you slide outside to oblivion.

OK, so it's not really THAT bad. But having taught in those kinds of environments for several years, I know first-hand that it just isn't possible to get to know each and every person; their likes and dislikes; their strengths and weaknesses. I do remember vividly though, as the teacher, the primary concern is to Survive Another Hectic Night! And when quitting time comes, that's exactly what the group teacher does. Let the receptionist handle the details. She's outta there!

This is not going to happen in a teacher-owned, professional music studio. To keep overhead to a minimum, the teacher/owner most often plays ALL the roles, including receptionist, bill-collector, etc. You are in direct contact with your teacher at all times.

#5 "What Is the Primary Focus of My Teacher?"

Good question! Here is why you should be asking it.

Some teachers are performers FIRST. They love to play or sing and take liberal opportunities to 'demonstrate' for their students. Lessons quickly escalate into mini-concerts with student and parent alike admiring how well the teacher can play. This feeds the teacher's ego. Unfortunately, it really doesn't do much to improve your own skill level.

As well, whenever an outside opportunity to perform comes up, students are quickly rescheduled or passed on to the 'supply' while the regular teacher is away.

Do you go to class to listen to your teacher play? Do you like getting the 'supply' teacher every other week or finding out your teacher forgot your make-up lesson after your mom drove 30 miles to bring you? Most people don't. And for the kind of money they are paying for lessons, who can blame them. Rather, you want to look for a teacher whose main passion is TEACHING!

#6 "What Is the Primary Focus of The Place You Go for Your Lessons?"

Some studios are located within music stores. They provide music lessons as a convenience for their customers, but their main focus is to sell instruments, books and sheet music, along with other assorted musical items.

The focus there is getting you in the door, not to be encouraged to learn, but so you look at all the "stuff" and buy something.

Again, consider the small, professional teacher-owned music studio. That person more than likely has their life invested in their business and so they care very deeply about each and every aspect... including you! They may keep a few books and small items in

stock as a convenience to you, but their main focus is to see you grow and develop as a person through music lessons.

#7 "What Kind of Motivation & Incentives Will My Teacher Use?"

The study of music can be a lot of fun. In fact, it should be fun most of the time; otherwise there is really no good reason to stick with it.

Of course, there are always going to be those days when it just isn't fun. Mastering any skill takes some degree of dedication and commitment; that's called "hard work" if you want to put it into plain English. In the music world we call it "payin' your dues." So what you want to know when you are shopping for a music school is, "How is my teacher going to motivate me on the days when I just don't feel like practicing?"

Are you prepared to work with a 'Dictator'? With some teachers, it's THEIR WAY or the highway. You might not like this approach. Then again, you might very well need that sort of discipline.

However, I've seen and taught students who absolutely crumble at the blink of an eye. The slightest tonal inflection of my voice could set off a fountain of tears.

Get to know and understand your teacher's personality style and see if it matches yours and especially your child's temperament. This can make all the difference in the world.

Let's summarize now, putting our 'Top Ten' list in order: These are the types of questions you SHOULD be asking when you are ready to shop around for a music teacher and school!

1. How can this teacher help me achieve my goals?
2. What will be required of me?
3. Does my teacher "get" me?
4. Do I feel like I belong here?
5. Will I have sufficient access to my teacher?
6. What is the primary focus of my teacher?
7. What is the primary focus of my school?
8. What kind of motivation & incentives will my teacher use?

Only after you get satisfactory answers to these and other similar questions should you ask: Where are you located? How much does it cost?

Remember, it's all about asking good questions. Good luck with your music school shopping! We hope it's here with us, but no matter where it is we hope it is what YOU want and need to be the most successful that you can possibly be and have a blast doing it!

The world can seem like a crazy place sometimes...

OK, a LOT of the time!

However, no matter what is going on in your life, magic happens when you learn how to choose better feelings now! **You're Gonna Love That Feeling!!**