Encourage Musical Journeys

by Wendy Cheng

People with hearing loss are fully capable of learning and playing music. With the right support, students with hearing loss should be able to learn to play an instrument well and be able to play with others. Based on my experience, I hope to provide some practical tips for parents and music teachers to encourage musical development in the next generation of students with hearing loss. I only hope their musical journey(s) will have less hurdles then my own.

Whenever I think back to the public school music teachers I met during my K-12 years, I think, “so many opportunities lost.” Lost opportunities that I regret, especially for someone who is an athletic/scientific/mathematical klutz but who has music in her soul. Lost opportunities that I can only try to capture as an adult music student.

Growing up, I wore a hearing aid in my left ear but I did not know about and did not use assistive listening devices (ALDs). I was often filled with anxiety when my fourth grade music teacher walked around the room or when I was facing her back and not her lips. And because fourth grade recorder class was so stressful, I made a painful decision not to join junior high school band even though I passed a required musical aptitude test with flying colors and was eligible to participate. I did not realize then that band instructors normally conduct band class standing in one place or sitting in one chair and did not walk around as much.

In high school, I fell in love with the sound of the violin. By that time, I had four years of classical piano under my belt but to me, piano has always been Mom’s instrument and not MY instrument. Many people, including my piano teacher and some string teachers, tried to dissuade me from learning the violin because the intonation requirements for mastering the violin were so high. In my senior year of high school, I passed the audition to join a all-girls choir, but was subsequently asked to leave because I was not singing in tune with the alto section.

I finally learned about ALDs just before high school graduation and my parents purchased an FM system for me before I started college. I began violin lessons as a college sophomore and I insisted that my instructors used the transmitter unit of the FM system during my private lessons while I wore the receiver unit. I stopped taking lessons while attending graduate school, but went back to lessons once I was gainfully employed after graduation.

My tips for parents and music educators who work with children with hearing loss:

**Speak the Same Language.** Parents should realize that audiologists and music educators will use different terminology to describe the same thing. Most audiologists do not have a musical background, so instead of asking the audiologist to adjust the hearing device “so notes an octave above middle C need to be louder or less tinny,” it might be more helpful to say that notes between 262 Hz to 523 Hz needs to be adjusted for loudness and timbre. You can find note-frequency conversion charts on the web- here is an example.

**Understand the Limits of Technology.** All music educators need to understand the limitations of cochlear implants and hearing aids. These devices by themselves are often effective only if the music teacher is standing close to the student. They can lose their effectiveness if a teacher moves more than a few feet away. Even with aided hearing, a student’s ability to hear at a distance or hear soft whispers will never equal what one who has typical hearing is able to hear. Secondly, these devices amplify everything. This has ramifications on how the student will perform in music class.
The most challenging task that music instructors will need to remember is that they cannot talk over music that is being played. In group rehearsals and private lessons, most music teachers are used to giving verbal feedback while the students are playing. However, most analog and digital hearing devices are not good at separating voices from music. It becomes incumbent on the music teacher to remember they cannot give verbal feedback when the students are playing.

For young children who use cochlear implants/hearing aids and are educated in listening and spoken language environments, the parents and music instructor may need to fill in gaps in the child’s musical education prior to learning an instrument. The child should develop a sense of pulse, timing and musical cadence. He/she should learn to count beats and sing melodies. One violin instructor reported using “marching, dancing, rocking, bouncing, jumping, clapping, tapping, chanting, acting and drumming” to fill in these gaps.

Choose Your Instrument with Care. Traditionally, individuals with hearing loss are steered toward a path of learning piano or percussion, since the intonation requirements are not as high as orchestral and band instruments. This works if the child likes these instruments. But if the child is drawn to “less conventional” instruments, such as the voice, clarinet, flute and violin, the instructor or parent should obtain an electronic tuner. When the student plays or sings a note, the tuner gives feedback on whether the student is playing in tune. Having a tuner with a visual guide will help the child develop an idea of what it means to have good intonation. Here’s an example of a visual tuner.

If a child elects to take up a string instrument, the music instructor may need to put tape on the fingerboard to help the child develop a sense of finger placement and position if they have difficulty hearing specific notes. If aided hearing (via cochlear implants and hearing aids) are not reliable enough to distinguish between semitones, the child will have to develop kinesthetic awareness what their hands, throat and lips need to do to get to good intonation. It is hard and repetitive work, but the important thing is to ensure that the child enjoys the learning process. With time and practice, muscle memory develops.

Play with Others. Learning to play in an ensemble is one of the highlights of grade 3-12 music education and beyond. I highly recommend handbells or handchimes as a beginning ensemble experience for children with hearing loss. Handbells/handchimes are great because although they are percussive instruments, they are used to create beautiful melodies. They are also visually appealing to watch and unlike orchestra and band music, the music is written in score form – you see every part of the music and know exactly what everyone else is doing. In orchestral and band music, you can only see the music your instrument section is playing. The Handbell Musicians of America is an umbrella resource where handbell affiliates in specific regions in the United States and Canada offer handchimes for loan to try out in the school environment. What would be particularly useful is for the bell tables to be arranged in a semi-circular fashion as opposed to a straight line. This will allow ringers to see each other better and aid in utilizing vision as well as hearing to perform handbell music.

However, ensemble playing for band and orchestral instruments as well as choral singing pose formidable challenges for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. You have to be able to keep time and stay in tune with your instrumental section, and you have to hear the conductor. In many instrumental ensembles in the grade 5-12 setting, ensemble seating is often determined by how skilled the student is on their instruments. If the student cannot sit in the first or second row due to lack of proficiency with the instrument, an ALD would be very beneficial. For example, Etymotic Research has created an assistive listening system called the Companion Mic system where there are three transmitter units for one receiver unit. Unlike many other ALD systems, the receiver unit also allows the student to hear themselves play.

Regardless of whether an ALD is available, having a stand partner or fellow musician nearby to assist the student with hearing loss is always going to be helpful in ensemble situations. A member of my association, the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss, recently reported that two alto singers in her choir help her with controlling volume and pitch when she participates in a women’s choir.

Avoid Assumptions. Last but not least, the parent and teacher should never let preconceived notions about a person with hearing loss blind them to new possibilities in learning to play musical instruments. With determination and the drive to succeed, people with hearing loss can succeed in musical endeavors beyond expectations.
It is my hope that this article provides the impetus for much needed dialogue between parents and music educators to determine the best way for young musicians with hearing loss to develop a love for music.

Wendy Cheng is the president and founder of the group Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss. Cheng grew up with a profound hearing loss in the right ear and a mild-to-moderate hearing loss, which worsened to the severe range by the time she completed high school. She now uses bilateral cochlear implants and is a viola student who hopes to earn a music degree and integrate successfully into a community orchestra someday.

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