

How to Choose a Music Instructor

By Marty Dickinson, Manager of Music Mates, LLC

When I was 4 years old, my parents introduced me to my first piano instructor. Fortunately, I enjoyed the lessons immediately and had a good relationship with my teacher. Instead of spending all of our time together on site reading, theory and exercises, we practiced song writing, which became one of my favorite elements of music. I grew to have a strong appreciation for the piano and songwriters as well.

After three years or so, my parents got tired of me playing "air guitar" every time there was a band featured on the television or breaking into solo position every time a song came on the radio featuring a guitar. Finally, I received my first junior sized, nylon stringed guitar on Christmas morning of that year.

When I walked into my next lesson with the guitar in-hand and my piano music book in the other, my instructor took one look at me and said "GREAT! A guitar! Would you like me to show you a few chords?" I didn't even know he could play guitar. But, my smile was from ear to ear when I found out he could.

We spent the first 20 minutes tuning the guitar. I sure thought that was boring! Then he spent ten minutes getting my fingers to twist in ways that couldn't possibly have been natural. My first experience with guitar included boredom and pain. For the second half of the lesson, we went back to the piano (as my instructor had planned) and we began having fun again writing songs. The guitar went in the closet.

It was 13 years later that I found that same junior guitar, still in my parents' closet. All of the strings were broken, except for the low "E" string. Dust covered it to the point that I couldn't tell the color of the wood. I hadn't played a piano in more than five years (just lost interest I guess), but I was about to have a revelation with this guitar!

As I listened to a song on the radio, I began to tune that lone string and I was surprised to find that I could even find a few notes as the band on the radio played on. I was hooked! Even though I had no idea what would be involved with learning guitar, suddenly I was willing to endure the pain and shrug the boredom.

The next music teacher I enrolled with changed my life by giving me the gift of music that I had longed for since that Christmas morning so long ago, this time with a guitar. My only wish is that my childhood music instructor was more supportive of my interest in guitar at the early age.

If you're looking for a music instructor for your child or yourself, you have quite a responsibility on your hands. Choose the right one, and the results and enjoyment are endless. Choose wrongly, and you could find an old beat-up instrument in your closet someday.

I'd like to provide you with some tips for finding a music instructor. Hopefully, they will help you to choose wisely so that you or your child may realize their musical dreams.

Tip 1 – Decide how often you want to have lessons

Music students are notorious for paying for a lesson and then not showing up for three weeks. Don't drive your instructor crazy like that! Make the decision before you engage an instructor's help as to how often you would like to receive lessons. Once a week is the norm so that the instructor can make the most of his/her schedule. It's a total insult to say you'd like to have a lesson every Saturday at 10am and not show up. So, plan on making the commitment ahead of time and stick to it.

Tip 2 – Have an idea of “when” lessons will be convenient for you

Hand-in-hand with Tip #1, it will help you be more consistent with your attendance if you can come up with a day and time of the week that you can devote to lessons. With more popular instructors, you'll find that they're booked solid for peak days and times like Saturday mornings or after school times. Know in advance at least what days and times are out of the question. Then, if the instructor is not available for those times, you've asked the question up-front and can move on to someone who has a better suited schedule.

Tip 3 – Know how much you want to spend on lessons

The average guitar lesson can cost anywhere between \$8 and \$15 per half-hour or \$15-\$30 per hour. Piano lessons are usually an hour in duration and can average \$20-40 each. Specialty classes on those instruments can be \$50 or higher. Vocal coaching is a completely different animal in itself.

Many of the instructors that post their profiles on the Music Mates site also display their rates. You can get a good feel for what the fees are by doing a few searches on the MusicMates.com site. You'll save yourself a lot of time by setting your budget first and then trying to find your ideal instructor.

Tip 4 – Make sure your instructor can play what you want to learn

When I was learning to play guitar, speed-metal was the “in” thing. I wanted someone to teach me how to play Yngwie Malmsteen style if it meant my fingers would have to bleed to make it happen. There was only one instructor in my entire city at that time that even knew who Yngwie was! I found him because I was very specific about what I wanted to learn. There's nothing worse when it comes to getting lessons than getting stuck with a music instructor that doesn't know what you want to learn or doesn't enjoy what you want to learn.

Tip 5 – Decide if education level is important to you

If you play an instrument at the college or performance level, you might want to find a specialty instructor or masters class trainer that with more credentials than what can fit in a suite case.

If you're just starting out with an instrument, be open to the idea that it might not be the most schooled instructor that is your best fit. My first guitar teacher graduated high school by attaining his G.E.D. after he got back from a national tour. His school of music was "Highway University."

Tip 6 – Chemistry is everything!

No, my guitar teacher was no GIT or Berkeley graduate. But, what was important is that we liked each other and we both looked forward to my weekly lessons because of that relationship. He liked (and could play) the kind of music I liked. I aspired to play the guitar as well as he could. The whole first year of lessons with him, I never missed one. It was because of the chemistry we shared.

Tip 7 – Try before you buy

Every once in a while, you will hear of an instructor offering the first one or two lessons for free. This is a good deal because it allows you to get to know the instructor a bit and to see if your skill level is in tune with what the teacher can teach you. Always ask if a free lesson is an option.

Tip 8 – Pay by-the-lesson at first

Some instructors do not offer free lessons, but many are quick to demand that you pre-pay for the first 4 or 6 sessions. Don't do it until you've had 2 or 3 lessons with the person. Make sure the chemistry is there. And, never pay for more than two months of lessons in advance. Your schedule could change or your instructor might just get the phone call he's been waiting for and have to leave on a national tour somewhere. Plan that you might not get your money back if you or the instructor has to end the lessons arrangement.

Tip 9 – Ask what type of materials budget you will need

I think just about every instructor uses a different training program than the next. Some will require you to buy a music book every few months. Some require that you have a certain type of instrument to play the specific music you want to learn. Others create their own musical exercises that are provided to you at the lesson to work on in your own practice time.

When I first started playing guitar, my instructor told me to go out immediately and buy a \$40 digital tuner. It helps to know in advance what you'll be expected to spend.

Tip 10 – Finally, evaluate the instructor’s attitude

Whether on the phone or by email or in-person at your first few lessons, continuously evaluate your instructor’s attitude toward teaching. Is the teacher patient with your mistakes and sympathetic to your efforts? When you say, “I didn’t have time to practice this week,” is the instructor able to spontaneously do something with the lesson that wasn’t in the plans?

In summary...

Choosing the right music instructor is surprisingly one of the more important decisions you can make for yourself or a family member. Going into the process blindly can spell disaster for your bank account and crush your desire to continue music training.

Hopefully, these tips have provided you with a solid checklist for getting started with the right teaching arrangement.

Best of luck in your music learning experience!

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