

Free Yourself from Musical Ideals

by Dennis Winge

A more realistic ideal is a better ideal. When I was a high school and college student, my dad used to read my essays and comment that they were “full of idealism.” At that time, I thought, “well I should hope so. Adults like you are so ‘realistic’ that you don’t follow your hopes and dreams, and you have lost all motivation to make the world a better place.”

Now that I’m nearly 50 years old, I still believe that too many adults simply play it safe and don’t think ‘big’ (or idealistically) enough, but I also see that what’s ‘realistic’ can sometimes be better because it’s more tempered in and therefore connected to reality. The only worthwhile ideal is the one that can be acted upon. Therefore, “a more realistic ideal is a better ideal.”

Recently I was talking with someone who was saying that in a first marriage the couple typically pools their financial resources together, while second marriages often “don’t live up to that ideal.” I am re-married. My wife and I have separate finances, and I like this way better. Like many re-married people, the fact that we each have children from a former marriage would make it complicated to truly pool resources even if we wanted to, but who is to say that one model is “better” than the other? And, more importantly, what does this have to do with music?

Playing music can be a very vulnerable experience. In order to be truly self-expressive, we must put ourselves ‘out there’ at risk of being criticized. Musicians frequently hold themselves to standards that they themselves create, and the overall outcome is frequently the completely unnecessary habit of beating oneself up.

What’s ideal for one person has absolutely nothing to do with what’s ideal for you. There is no need to compare yourself, ever! Let’s look at an extreme example: your coworker was once a touring musician. She played in dozens of countries around the world and now doesn’t even sing or play anymore. She burnt out from touring, took a day job, and that’s the end of it. You are, on the other hand for example, taking lessons and enjoying the process of learning to play music. You try to share with her your small successes but you can tell she’s just being polite as she listens, and really has no interest. Which one of you is more “successful?”

A much more common scenario would be musicians or students who beat themselves up for not learning ‘fast enough.’ Where is the International Music Learning Barometer? Is it in Greenwich, England at the Royal Observatory next that marks the international time standard? Of course I’m facetious, but so many musicians ‘should’ on themselves so routinely that it’s almost as if this ridiculous exhibit could be real.

The big picture can only be seen when you ask yourself: Is playing music bringing joy to your life? Does your playing bring joy to other people’s lives? Is it stimulating, creative,

and healthy? Does it strengthen your tactile ability, mental ability, and focus? Does it give you opportunity for self-expression?

Another quick story from my high school years: our typing teacher would never, no matter how many times we asked it, answer the question “how fast should we be typing?” It used to drive me crazy, but now I understand perfectly. My wife did data entry for more than a decade and can type over 75 words per minute. I am happy with my 40.

So if the answer to even one of the questions above is ‘yes,’ then that’s all you need to know. There is no ‘ideal.’ The only thing that matters is what's right for you. Don't be one of those people who thinks they have no talent, and is judging themselves for taking too long to learn, and quits altogether. All of your favorite players took years and years to get where they are. But you don't have to get where they are to begin having fun playing music now. Every little thing you learn and do is a skill you get to enjoy for the rest of your life.