

Book Review

More Than Music Lessons

A Studio Teacher’s Guide to Parents, Practicing, Projects, and Character by Merlin B. Thompson

by [Patricia Baehr](#)

Teaching skills to children and teens inarguably requires a sequential, leveled curriculum to be conveyed through both explanations and demonstrations. In the music studio, the teacher is the expert! But in *More Than Music Lessons: A Studio Teacher's Guide to Parents, Practicing, Projects, and Character*, Merlin B. Thompson makes a strong case for implementing student-centered teaching, envisioning it as an opportunity to be “socially relevant, inclusive, accessible, and culturally diverse,” as well as a doorway to student self-expression and creativity.

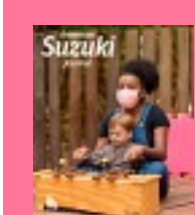
Thompson was the first Canadian to graduate from the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute. He is a Suzuki Piano Teacher Trainer and recognized authority on the Suzuki Piano Method. He produces both a podcast and video series for music educators and has published numerous articles in academic journals as well as a previous book, *Fundamentals of Piano Pedagogy: Fuelling Authentic Student Musicians from the Beginning*. His latest, well-researched work is a highly readable exploration of how studio teachers can successfully support student musical development. In *More Than Music Lessons*, Thompson aims to share “what can happen when music teachers take an interest in and have an ongoing appreciation for students’ home life, their sense of self, their musical interests, their personal views and their world views, their culture” and “spiritual individuality.”


Effective teachers present material in various ways, and each of Thompson’s chapters offers an array of approaches and teaching tips that can be easily implemented. The book features questions to prod readers into examining their own practices and anecdotes from Thompson’s own teaching experience that illustrate both the *aha!* moments and the incidents that sent him on a search for a better way. Thompson backs up the writing by a panoply of references and resources. While *More Than Music Lessons* is directed toward helping studio teachers, the students themselves are Thompson’s real focus—real-life students who divide their time among many commitments and interests.


The book is structured in four parts. The first delves into considering how home life shapes each student and proposes the idea that parents—always integral to the Suzuki Method—might be supportive not only by “stepping in” but by “stepping back” or “letting go.” The second and longest section is an in-depth and fascinating look at practice. Its tantalizing premise is that practice should fulfill some or all of five basic needs. (And if it doesn’t, your assignment just might be perceived as boring or not worth doing!) Still considering those five needs, the third part of the book addresses the value of non-performance projects that allow students to become experts while they explore their personal music-related interests. Thompson’s scope expands in the fourth section to consider character. Dr. Suzuki’s motto, of course, was “character first, ability second.” Thompson strives to weave character formation throughout his teaching. He begins with a desire to understand who students actually are, then follows up with validation to allow those unique personalities to grow and thrive. His ultimate intention is to help students not only discover but express their authentic selves through the study of music.

Along the way, Thompson covers many aspects of teaching well, like the importance of word choice and the benefits of using challenges, listening, and reflection to develop self-critical skills that can lead students to improvement. Fortunately, he manages to keep all these goals from appearing too daunting by supplying useful frameworks in the appendices and urging teachers to simply “build on and exercise” what is already present. To get started, all teachers need to do is really look at the student before them in the studio. 🎵

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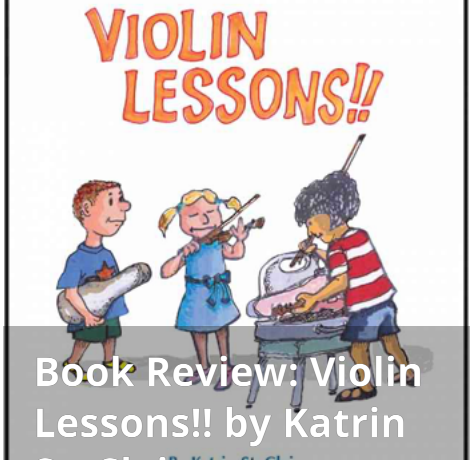
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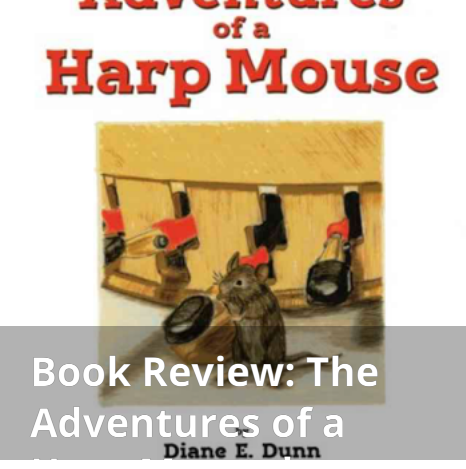
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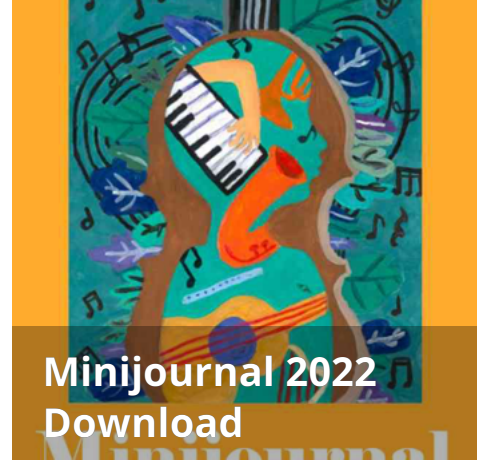
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