



little bird music

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Summertime Reset

Summer gives us a much needed break from the rigors of the school year. It's also a time to slow down, regroup, and think about our goals for the upcoming year. In the weeks before school starts, I always ask students to reflect on their musical accomplishments and to think about what they wish to achieve musically this next year. Below are a few questions for students to consider:

1. What makes you feel proud about playing the piano? Maybe it's performing at the recital, tackling a difficult piece, composing a song, or completing a set of books. Highlight the achievements!
2. What are the hardest/easiest parts about playing the piano? Learning music is challenging! Mistakes are part of the process. When we maintain a growth mindset, that is taking on each task with positivity and effort, making time (even just a few minutes a day), and using the skills we continue to learn in lessons, students will see progress –and have more fun!
3. Name three goals for piano this year. These can be modest (i.e. learning bass clef notes) or lofty (i.e. composing an album). Sometimes just saying our goals out loud helps us to make a plan and mobilize!



Steven Spielberg's "E.T., The Extraterrestrial" (1982).

Listening to Film

Whether we are conscious of it or not, much of the music we encounter on a regular basis is in movies. Director Steven Spielberg has always been aware of music's power in determining how we respond to film. Take, for example, the final moments of Spielberg's 1982 movie *E.T.* about a boy who befriends an alien and helps him return home. [Click to watch.](#)

Why does this scene affect us so profoundly? Immediately, the music, composed by John Williams, extends the narrative beyond what we are actually seeing onscreen. There's no doubt that the music (a lush melody in the strings followed by a heroic theme in the horns) establishes the mood and atmosphere. It also creates emotions that we likely wouldn't experience if we watched the scene on mute. Try it!



E.T. goes home.



Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964).



Penelope Spheeris's "Wayne's World" (1992).

What's special about film music is that it gives rhythm to a sequence of images. For instance, the music synchronizes with the action when E.T.'s finger lights up. A dissonant chord sounds when the boy's dog tries to jump onto the spaceship. The music also helps set up the scene's boundaries: beginning, middle, and end. The orchestration, for example, grows bigger and louder alongside the build-up to the climactic moment we all know is coming: the separation of E.T. and Elliott. All of this operates under the radar of consciousness.

We're probably not even remotely aware of the source of our strong feelings at the end of E.T., but the music plays a significant role in helping us engage with the story's meaning. Deep within us is the memory of separation, whether from our parents when we left for college or in the form of another kind of loss. But even more importantly, we're reminded of the triumph of surviving an experience of separation. Herein lies the power of music combined with great storytelling.

In other instances in film, there's a clear disconnect between image and music. The ending sequence of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film "Dr. Strangelove" is the example par excellence. [Click to view](#) Kubrick pairs the 1930s love song, "We'll Meet Again," with images of nuclear explosions that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. Sometimes our emotions are conflicted when the music evokes pleasure in a horrific scene. This unsettling mix of trite and terrifying creates an uncomfortable irony that is central to Kubrick's film aesthetic.

We tend to take speech and sound effects in film for granted because they're understood as "natural" or what we'd expect to hear if we found ourselves in the action onscreen. Music, though, has a unique place in film because it's only "natural" when a character is performing music or

when characters are listening to the radio/tape deck, as in the 1992 movie “Wayne’s World.” [Check out the clip here](#). Everything the characters can hear (whether it’s dialogue, birds chirping, a car starting, or in this case the song “Bohemian Rhapsody”) is called diegetic sound. Non-diegetic sound is the background music the characters do not hear. Only the viewers hear it. And yet, paradoxically, it is this “background music” that makes a film feel more immediate and real, prompting emotional responses that can cause us to empathize with characters onscreen.

Sometimes musical themes, called leitmotifs, accompany characters throughout a movie, as in Darth Vader’s Imperial March from Star Wars. [Click to watch](#). Each time we hear the theme, we associate it with the “dark side.” Luke Skywalker likewise has his own “force” theme. [View/listen to it here](#). In each of these instances, the music alerts us to the fact that the character is onscreen or that there’s a symbolic correlation between the character and plot development. In other moments, fragments of the characters’ themes will overlap, calling attention to the complex relationships between them, as in the secret paternal link between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker. [Listen to their overlapping themes](#). Leitmotifs come from the world of opera and give psychological nuance and a unifying structure to intricate plot lines.

The next time you’re watching a movie, draw your attention to the music. Consider how the music is functioning. Does it reinforce or foreshadow developments in the plot? Does it help us know what characters are thinking and feeling? Does it call attention to aspects that aren’t necessarily onscreen? If there are lyrics, how do the words enrich our understanding of the narrative? Music in film does so much simultaneously. It’s fascinating when we actually start to listen.



George Lucas’s “Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope” (1977).



George Lucas’s “Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope” (1977).

Certificate of Merit 2019-20

'Tis the season to start thinking about Certificate of Merit! Little Bird Music students who play at an equivalent level to Piano Adventures Level 2A are eligible to participate. The program, sponsored by the Music Teachers' Association of California, is designed to help students achieve musical excellence.

Starting each fall, students begin their CM studies in performance, technique, ear training, sight reading, and music theory. Upon successful completion of the annual evaluation in late February, students receive a state honor and special certificate for their level (preparatory through level 10).

It's not for everybody, but it is a wonderful educational opportunity for students who want to take their musicianship to the next level. The deadline to enroll is October 31. MTAC fees to participate range from \$68-\$85/year. It requires a one-day commitment in late February and a suggested practice routine of at least 30 minutes per day. Talk to Alice if you or your child are interested!

These little birds told me...



"I like to play the piano because there are different feelings in each song, for example, creepy, jumpy, nice, and relaxed."

–Ave Taylor, age 9



"My favorite thing about the piano is playing staccato and legato because they're two different things. One is bouncy and the other is not."

–Cullen Conley, age 5



"I like how my fingers move on their own while I'm looking at the music on the page. It helps me learn to play other songs."

–Giuseppe Juiliano, age 7

Upcoming Events

August 4 at 10am: Classical Tahoe Family Concert, "All About the Piano," at Sierra Nevada College

August 10-11 from 2-8pm: Brews, Jazz and Funk Fest (benefits the Humane Society) at Squaw Valley

September 3: Little Bird Music regular school year lessons resume (after Labor Day)!

September 28 at 1pm: Reno Phil Orchestra presents "Beethoven Lives Upstairs" at the Pioneer Center