

The Childhood Music That Shapes Who We Are

Daphne Berryhill, Guest Writer



A too-late thank you to my piano teacher, Kimberly Schmidt. Through starts and stops, he taught me to find flow, reject the label, and just keep going.

Music has meant so much in my life. Not as background noise but as a never-ending soundtrack. The sappy kind. The edgy kind. And everything in between. I can rewind back or listen now as the future turns present. It never stops playing.

Lately, classical piano music has been filling my head and home. It's probably becoming part of my kids' soundtrack, paired with memories of their mom in the kitchen, sometimes toiling, other times putting. But for me, the music takes me back to my '80s childhood in suburban Chicago. Or, more specifically, to an 1850s Greek Revival on 7 W Eastman in Arlington Heights.

Each time I entered the Arlington School of Music for piano lessons – even on days I didn't want to go – I left feeling filled with something new. Something I wanted to stay with me.

After climbing up the extra steep and long staircase, I'd sit on the colonial bench in the landing waiting area while tapping my feet until my teacher, Kimberly Schmidt, would pop open the door, usually walking out with another student. Next up, it's my turn.

Usually dressed in cords and Sears-grade buttoned-up shirts, it amazed me how someone dressed so plainly could have such presence. Kim exuded joy and calm. A total contrast with the material '80s, obsessed with signaling wealth and symbolizing status. Kim had his own vibe – a version of "you do you, and I'll do me" that was refreshingly rare then.

Playing Through Starts and Stops

As I learned beginner versions of the classics – from lively Mozart to melancholy Beethoven – I chopped up each song with too many starts and stops to count. Kim encouraged me. "It's OK, keep going. This is how you learn." And learning to play piano is really hard. So I kept going and moved through *Kabalevsky 30 Pieces for Children*.

Sometimes Kim would play alongside me or play something by himself as an example. Or maybe I'd hear him working on a piece he was practicing for a performance before our lesson started. I was wowed by hearing the music another human being could make.

The biggest lesson I learned from playing piano is that perfection isn't the endpoint – finding flow is what you strive for. Chasing perfection feels crappy. Even if you get close to it, or even hold it for a second, it feels like pressure to do it again.

On the flipside, flow is that feeling when you're relaxed and focused, not on the nit-picky details of getting that next note right but on the experience of music as a whole, whatever shape it may take. It's when playing actually feels like play.

Seeing Past the Label

During my troubled teen years, when I felt really stuck or burdened with worry about things I felt helpless to change, playing a song to match my mood helped me express my feelings when the words all felt stuck inside. And during that time, while others were seeing me as something wrong or bad, Kim just saw me as me. Because I still was.

In high school, I took a break from piano to learn guitar, wanting to play something cooler during my glam-metal phase. But I returned to piano lessons because of Kim and wondered: Why do the people who actually deserve rock-star status rarely get it?

"All those skills I learned in piano lessons are life skills transferable to so many other things."

But after high school, everything changed. I had to grow up fast. I quit piano, focusing on working my way through college. There was no time to play anything anymore. Or maybe that's what I told myself.

Change wasn't just in my own life. Everything was changing in the '90s. The Arlington School of Music house was torn down, making way for a condo project – the start of a decades-long changing landscape. Ranches were razed to make room for McMansions. Paneras and Starbucks replaced mom-and-pop diners. Big box stores became mega-sized. Despite the changes in scale and stuff, nothing that really mattered seemed to change.

Finding Flow Again and Again

Sometime after turning 30, I thought about reaching out to Kim. I wanted to thank him for everything he taught me. Things that were starting to feel bigger than before. But it was too late; he had recently died. He was only 57. "That's so young." Those were his words, not mine. Kim told me that at my stepdad's visitation 15 years earlier after he asked me how old my stepdad was. He also died at 57.

The older you get, there's more that is lost. But there's also more that you carry with you as an endless song. A soundtrack, uniquely yours. All those skills I learned in piano lessons are life skills transferable to so many other things. They helped me through pharmacy school and into parenthood.

And now, I'm realizing how the focused flow of playing piano in childhood is helping me get started as a freelance writer in midlife. The muscle memory comes back when I listen to classical piano, and it helps me write.

Writing is remembering a bunch of little pieces from your life and finding some way to knit them together. It's plodding through stuck spots over and over until eventually you find something better, or maybe even good. It's overcoming the fear of sounding bad because embarrassment is a risk worth taking when you do something you love. Learning to write and play piano feels very much like the same process in my brain. I'm still chasing that flow.

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