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Buying A Musical Instrument For A Gift is Like Buying A Puppy!

by Wendy Hellyer, B.A., M.A.

As a parent, grandparent or other relative you may wish to encourage the development of musical talent in a youngster you love. This is especially so around the holidays, when we are searching for "gifts of the heart" that will be significant in ongoing years. We imagine "little Johnny" opening his new guitar and playing with enthusiasm for years. This is often not the case due to several factors that effect the outcome of such a gift. The desire to get a child started with an instrument is a good one, but like choosing a puppy, there are some guidelines to consider.

Does the child want this? Find out if the child has expressed real interest themselves in learning the instrument you have in mind. If not, it's unlikely a "surprise" gift of a trumpet will be well received. (Just because Uncle Joe likes the trumpet, does not mean the child will).

Will the parents provide help? Find out if the parents of the child will be able to afford lessons for the instrument in question and/or the time and commitment needed to take the child to and from lessons. Without parental support of the child's lessons it is unlikely that the child will get enough consistent training to accomplish anything musically.

Talk to a professional. If you get a "green light" on the first and second items, then it's time to consider the question of buying an instrument. Before buying anything it would be best to get help from a music instructor who specializes in the instrument in question and does not work for, or get a commission from, a store selling the instrument. Last year we had a grandparent call our school to arrange violin lessons for their nine year old granddaughter for whom they had purchased a violin as a Christmas present. Unfortunately they

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did not know that violins come in different sizes to accommodate the size of the child and the music store never questioned or informed them. When the violin instructor met with them it was determined that the full size instrument was entirely too large. The grandparents are now renting an appropriate size instrument until she grows into the violin they bought!

Cheap is not a good option. Knowing that a child may not follow through with their lessons or practice, some people think that it's best to buy a cheap instrument. This is not a good option as the instrument may be so bad that it will not hold a tune, be very comfortable and/or harder to play than a good instrument. This immediately puts the child at a disadvantage and discourages them from continuing with their music study.

Try renting. A terrific option for a new music student is renting an instrument. This avoids the investment in a costly high-end instrument but still guarantees the child a quality instrument. Most rentals run between \$30.00-\$50.00 for an initial four-month trial period or \$80.00-\$125.00 for a nine-month lease.

The rewards of commitment. Renting is also a good way to gauge a child's commitment level. Ask them to commit fully to lessons and practice for the lease period. They won't accomplish anything significant in less time than that anyway. If they learn to make this commitment (as they would for a sport team's playing season) then they can be rewarded by participating in the purchase of their first instrument. You've made a better, more economical choice and your child learns to strive for goals.

If the items above are taken into consideration, both the giver and the receiver should experience great satisfaction in learning the joys of music.

Wendy Hellyer, B.A., M.A. in Music (Temple) is the owner of the Wendy Hellyer Music Studio in Bensalem. For more information on musical instruments and lessons call her at 215-757-7775.