

Be Your Best

Following a recent music festival, I experienced a wide range of emotion as I watched three of my children play the piano. I felt nervous, proud, pleased when they received a medal or certificate, and empathetic when I knew they were disappointed for not being labelled “the best.”

I participated in festivals as a youngster, myself, and I believe in their benefits. However, as a parent, who thinks each of my children is a star (aren't they all?), I sometimes find it challenging to swallow the subjectivity of musical evaluations. Everyone works hard to prepare their music; everyone endures the anxiety of the performance; everyone demonstrates a level of talent and skill; yet, based on a single adjudicator's opinions and preferences, only one person is the winner.

Some people might question my reasoning for subjecting my children to the stress of these evaluations. In spite of their drawbacks, however, music festivals (and sporting events, speaking contests, honour rolls, etc.) prepare children to be champions in life.

The following is a list of the life skills that I, personally, have gained from participating in festivals.

Intrinsic Motivation

I've heard it said that music festivals prepare children for life because “life is competitive.” It's true that many people are competitive; however, I do not believe that we are called to compete with each other, but to use our gifts and talents to live our best lives, regardless of what others think or say about us. God expects us to share our gifts to serve and to enrich the world, not to focus on outdoing others.

It's always nice to be acknowledged for our efforts, but the fact that there can only be one winner in a competition teaches children the value of intrinsic motivation. In life, many of our talents and labours will go unnoticed by others. We cannot allow this reality to dictate the fullness of our participation. We are ultimately accountable to God and to ourselves, and we need to be the best that we can be.

Goal-Setting

Festivals gave me the opportunity to work towards something. With the goal of a performance in mind, I worked diligently to learn a piece of music and to present my accomplishment to an audience. Setting goals and working towards deadlines are valuable life skills.

In life, we must constantly create goals for ourselves, if we are to accomplish anything at all. Whether we aim to pray daily, complete a renovation project, gain a promotion at work, or plan a dinner party, we must set goals, devise plans, impose standards and give ourselves deadlines. Without them, our ambitions will remain on an elusive “to do” list and we will lack a sense of accomplishment and direction.

Confidence

Festivals gave me the chance to perform in public and face the nervousness associated with doing so. This has served me well in terms of being able to share my skills within my community. Many of my

school friends who also played the piano, have barely played a note since their last piano exam. All of their efforts are basically collecting dust along with their trophies and certificates. I, on the other hand, never won a medal or even had a top three finish, but I still play the piano almost every day. I've never been a "winner," but I have overcome my nerves to regularly play for schools, choirs, and for the glory of God at Mass.

Education

Festivals allowed me to listen to other performers and hear different musical interpretations and skill levels. Adjudication affirmed my achievement and encouraged me to continue to improve. Even after thirty years, I continue to surround myself with people who know more about music than I do; as a result, I strive to learn and improve, fully aware that I still have much more learning to do.

Etiquette

Music festivals teach the value of attentiveness and respect. When a competitor is playing the piano, everyone is silent, out of respect for their performance. Likewise (unlike sporting events where people feel they have the right to challenge referees), in music, people accept the fact that the results are final. Whether we agree or disagree with the adjudicator, we keep our ears open and our mouths shut, and that's that.

Pleasure

I play the piano when I need to relax. I don't need an audience to find pleasure from music, but preparing for performances for so many years, has made it integral to my daily life. Music is part of me and immersing myself in it, helps me to live my best life.

As long as my children continue to take piano lessons, they will enter festivals. My maternal bias places each of them at the top of the heap, but I encourage them to realize that God's gift of music does not limit them to being the best, one time; it provides infinite opportunities for them to be their best, all the time.

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Julia O'Shea VanSpall

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