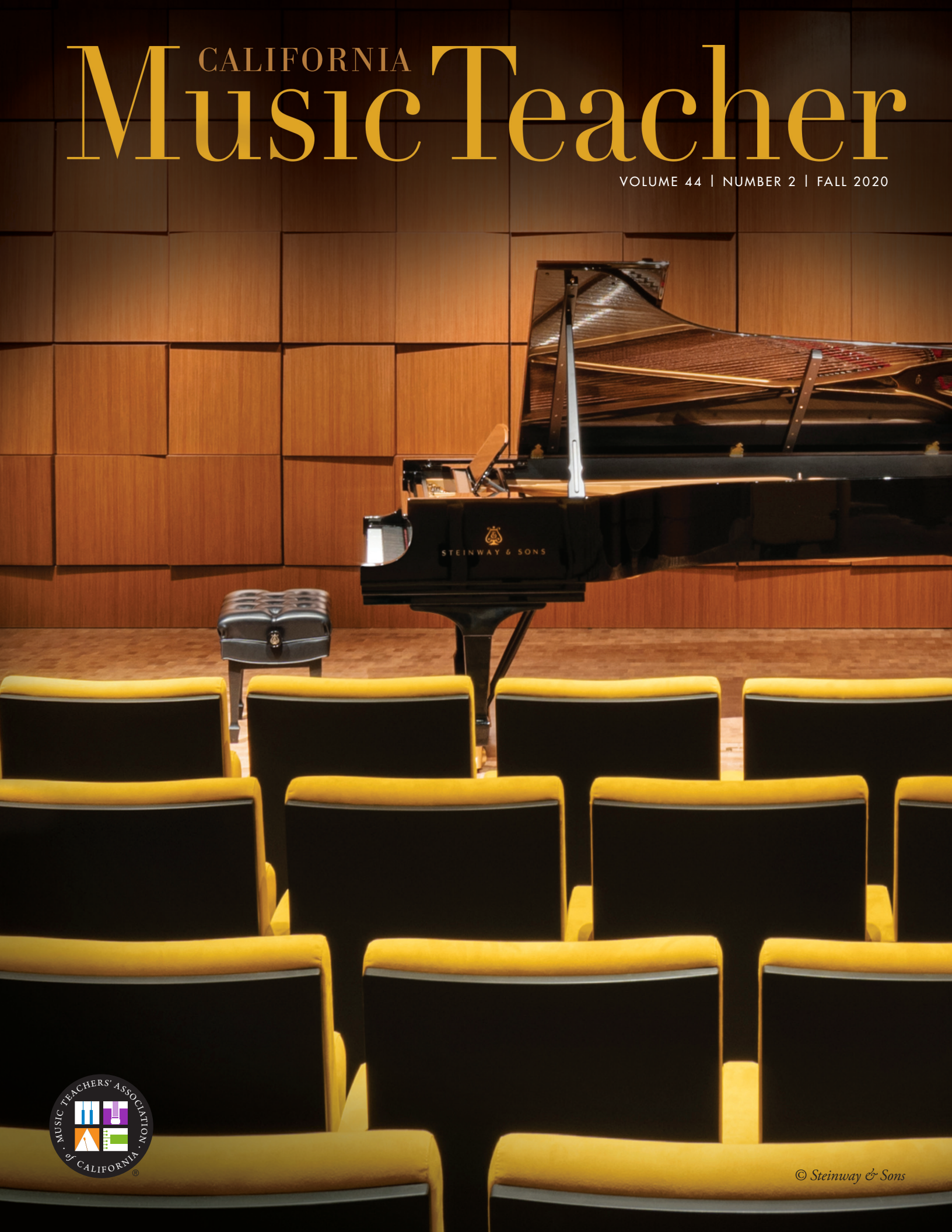


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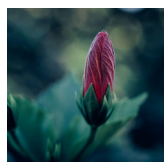
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Throughout this special issue you'll find inspiring quotes to bring hope during these times. The images are rights free from unsplash.com and pexels.com. You can frame and display them in your studio as a visible reminder that music, and your teaching of music, can brighten any day.



Art by Ryan Low

Music Teacher and Mom: My Experience

BY MARETHA DAVEL

I have been a music teacher for over 25 years. Having taught in many different countries, in diverse settings, to various ages and abilities, and in a variety of music examination systems, I've always felt good as a teacher. No student was unteachable and most of my students did pretty well. But my confidence was shaken when I met my match: my oldest son, Ben, who is now 10.

In my family, playing music and taking lessons have always been non-negotiable. My husband and I have not had the slightest doubt that our sons would learn how to play instruments, and I felt well equipped for the job. What I did not take into account was Ben's unique temperament, as well as the particular demands of learning an instrument, from a parent's perspective. This entire process has transformed not only how I teach, but also how I approach my students. I believe that this change is for the better.

Ben and a few of his friends started with group piano lessons at the tender age of four. We used the cute curriculum, "Music for Little Mozarts," and I have fond memories of the kids singing and playing the songs. I have equally fond memories of them crawling under the tables, being silly with the toys and not paying any attention whatsoever to the sheet music.

We had fun, but teaching piano to students of that age takes a special type

of patience, resilience and insight. For example, they loved playing by ear, but had little interest in reading the music. I continued teaching Ben after he turned five, but lessons were irregular and we did not make a big deal of either formal lessons or regular practice. Sometimes, when I heard my young students at the Russian piano school perform the entire Suzuki Book 1 from memory, or play in a recital, I felt guilty that Ben was not able to do that...yet. Getting paid by parents who expected results was a great motivator, yet I was also strangely reluctant to put so much pressure on my own child.

Eventually, as he turned six and his piano career hobbled forward, I decided to enter Ben for the ABRSM examination, with which I'm very familiar. We started working towards his very first exam, the Prep Test. This was also the time that the arguments and issues around piano and practice began in earnest. I look back fondly at the picture of him after playing his very first exam—he was beaming and felt so good!

It was a struggle to get him to that point. I've always been a "good" student—someone who listens to the teacher—and it came as a huge shock to be confronted on a regular basis by a little human who had different ideas about how to follow instructions. I had to cajole, bribe, incentivize, threaten and plead to get him to practice regularly, >



and to do what I asked. Unlike my well-behaved students at the piano school, who never talked back or argued, he was constantly wanting to do his own thing, and quibbled about the tiniest instruction or suggestion. Piano turned into a battleground and inevitably he conquered. I tried so many different strategies—to make the lessons more playful, to be more strict and disciplined, to be super supportive and accommodating—but somehow practicing piano frequently ended up making both of us miserable and feeling like failures. There were a lot of tears, and not only his.

During his sixth year, however, we moved to the city and I had my second son. Piano lessons essentially came to a halt. Teaching is emotionally exhausting, and I did not have the stamina or conviction to be on his (piano) case during the first year of the baby's life. As a teacher, this has made me more sensitive towards family circumstances. Eventually, I felt ready to start again, and we fell back into our old habits: parents arguing with boy to practice, boy cooperating only because we took away (or added) candy, video games, (insert reward here) in no particular order.

Throughout everything, my husband and I obstinately stuck to one principle: there was never an option of stopping lessons. We believed the mountains of research on the benefits of learning to play an instrument, and trusted my personal experience about the joys of being able to make music. But getting to know our child, we discovered that piano was one of the few things that he had to work at. He *needed* to have something to teach him grit, perseverance and patience. I try to tell my students' parents to get to know their child's temperament and decide how that affects the family's expectations for lessons. I also try to be honest about the challenges.

I decided it was time for me to heed my own advice. First, by coming to terms with our temperaments, I found Ben

another teacher. This transformed his relationship to the instrument because it was not so closely associated with me. He had to form a relationship with another adult, who also expected a lot from him, but it was way less personal. It drove me crazy that he would listen to her and not to me, but at least he listened, made progress and sounded increasingly proficient.

Second, I made a deliberate decision to take a step back from piano and become *only* a supportive parent, not a music teacher parent. I stopped correcting him, and when he struggled, I sympathized or asked questions to see if he could find his own solutions (I had to grit my teeth through many a mistake). I did not stop caring, but I wanted him to own the experience.

Third, we focused on our motivations as parents. We started having lots and lots of conversations with Ben about the reasons *why* we were expecting him to take lessons and practice. We explained the scientific benefits, backed by research; we told him stories about the joy of sharing the gift of music and of music being a universal language loved by all. We also continued to tell him how much we loved hearing him practice and play. Repeatedly, and to this day, we explained how playing an instrument opens doors later in life, and how nobody has ever been happy that they stopped learning how to play. In fact, I have only once heard an adult say that they rejoiced when they stopped playing! Everyone else is sad/disappointed that their parents didn't force them to continue.

Ben is playing beautifully now. He's playing the CM Level 4 exam this year, and I love, more than anything else, to see how he has grown as a person. He has a lovely teacher who's forged her own relationship with him and keeps him motivated. We make sure that he practices, but for the most part we just leave him to it. He still complains, regularly and emphatically, that it so *UNFAIR* that we are *FORCING* him

to practice, but when we talk about it, he admits that he likes playing, he just doesn't like to practice. Playing piano has become part of his unique identity: he is a proficient sight-reader, likes to work out popular melodies on his own, and this year, he and few school friends decided—independently—to perform as an ensemble at the school's winter concert. He will accompany the group on the piano, and he is so excited about it! He loves to accompany me on the flute, and his teacher frequently comments on his ability to practice until perfect. So far, so good!

I am realistic enough to know that it all might backfire on us, and in a few years, who knows what will happen? As an educator, I'm also observing this process from a distance, wondering whether our gamble will pay off. Will he continue with piano, and eventually love it and come to appreciate its benefits above the "pain"? Or will he stop at the earliest moment, never to play again? As parents, we only ever have one chance to do things with conviction. ■



Maretha Davel teaches flute, piano, and music theory in the San Francisco Bay Area. After completing her music studies in South Africa,

she moved to England and Scotland, where she worked at various schools. Maretha, her husband and two kids are now happily settled in California, where she enjoys watching her students and children thrive as musicians.

Success
is not final,
failure is
not fatal:
it is the
courage
to continue
that counts.

– WINSTON CHURCHILL



Image: Sharon McCutcheon on Unplash