

How To Choose A Music Teacher

The Musician's Guide To Finding The Best Music Teacher For YOU And How To Avoid Painful Mistakes

By Tom Hess

www.tomhess.net

You have just made one of the most important decisions in your musical life by reading this guide to finding and selecting the very best music teacher for YOU! You want to be able to play your instrument exactly the way you wish to play it! You want to feel great each time you pick up your instrument, or create your own original music.

Here are some 'problems' you will likely have when you work with an average teacher:

- You will spend a lot more time than you should trying to learn and master what you want to be able to play and do. ☺
- You will spend a lot more money for lessons trying to learn something a better teacher could teach you in less time. ☺
- You will likely feel disappointed and discouraged because your improvement on the instrument will be slow, but you probably won't know why. ☺
- You may begin to doubt your own potential as a musician and give up the idea of reaching your musical goals. ☺

Here are some of the 'benefits' you will have when you find the right teacher for you:

- You will save a lot of time. ☺
- You will save a lot of money - even if the better teacher is more expensive (I'll show you how later) ☺
- You will reach your musical goals much faster ☺
- You will reach your musical goals a lot easier ☺
- You will feel GREAT as you learn to play music the way you always dreamed about!
☺

You can already see that choosing the right teacher for you is going to have a huge impact on your playing, but also on your bank account, your time, and the way you are going to feel over time. When I was a student (I am a guitarist), I studied with 14 different guitar teachers. Three of them were horrible, seven were average, two were above average and two were truly great. It was those two teachers who did the most to help me reach my musical goals. Now that I am a teacher myself, I have taught well over 1,000 students since 1991 (including more than 250 students I teach right now online). Another big part of what I do today is to train other music teachers how to become great music teachers, trainers and coaches in their local areas through my "Elite Guitar Teachers Inner Circle" program. This combined experience has taught me a lot about the differences between 'average music teachers' and 'great music teachers'.

So here is what you need to know about a music teacher before you begin taking lessons.

Ask a teacher the following 9 questions (if you do not already know the answers):

1. "What styles of music do you teach best?" – Some music teachers will tell you that they teach 'all styles' of music well... Beware of this. Do not be impressed by a teacher who tells you that he or she can teach every style of music well. This is virtually never true. And more importantly, you should not care if the teachers can teach all styles well or not. You should only care if the teacher is excellent at teaching the style of music that YOU want to play. If, for instance, you really want to be a great rock guitarist, you want to take lessons from a great rock guitar teacher, not a blues or country teacher who claims to also teach all other styles well. If you want to learn multiple styles of music that are not similar (like country, classical and heavy metal) take lessons from more than one teacher for each of those styles. The same is true for piano, or voice, or any other instrument!

Tip: Make sure that you ask the teacher what styles he/she teaches best BEFORE talking about what style of music you want to learn. That is why this should be the very first question you ask a teacher. Do not give the teacher a chance to lie to you by "telling you what you want to hear".

2. "Can you please tell me about your teaching experience, such as: How long have you been teaching and approximately how many students have you taught during that time?" – At least 3 years of teaching experience is preferred... certainly no less than 1 year of experience. It is best if the teacher has taught a moderate to large number of students. It takes time for a teacher to really learn how to teach well and the main way that most teachers learn to teach is by teaching for a while. So a young teacher's first students are like experiments. Learning to teach is typically done on-the-job by trial and error. This means some mistakes in the beginning of his or her career are going to be made. You don't want to be one of those first 30-50 students. Let inexperienced teachers gain his or her experience by making mistakes on someone else.

Tip: Some inexperienced teachers will lie to you when you ask this question if they have not taught many students yet. Here is a quick and easy way to test if they are probably lying to you. Ask them how many days per week they are available to teach, then ask them to tell you all available time slots available for you to come and take a lesson. IF they just told you they have a lot of students but they have lots of open time for you to schedule a lesson with them, then you probably just caught them in a lie about how many students (and much experience) they really have. Another way to catch them in a lie is to have a friend call the teacher the next day. Your friend should say this, "I am looking for a music teacher who doesn't teach too many students because I don't want someone who is burned out from teaching every day and I do not want to be merely "a number" to a teacher. Often times the same teacher will give your friend a completely different answer about how many students he/she is teaching than he gave to you the day

before. If this happens, then you probably have discovered two things, first, the teacher is likely inexperienced and second he/she is also a liar.

3. “Do you offer private lessons or group lessons?” – Working with a great teacher is clearly the best way to learn however, do not make the mistake of assuming that private one-on-one lessons are always the best way to learn how to play an instrument. Small to mid size group lessons can give you a lot of direct and indirect benefits which one-on-one lessons cannot. This may seem counterintuitive, but it’s true. Private lessons have a lot of advantages, but so do group classes IF THE TEACHER IS A TRUE EXPERT GROUP MUSIC TEACHER!

Tip: One of the huge advantages of group classes is the supportive community environment because good communities keep you motivated, engaged and accountable. If the teacher you are talking to ‘only offers’ private one-on-one lessons, that is ok, but a group community element added to that would be valuable to you.

4. “Can you tell me how you teach the lessons?” – This is probably the most important question that you can ask any teacher, yet almost no one ever asks it! The answer to this question can really help you to determine if a music teacher is competent because this is actually a trick question. Let me explain: Anyone can tell you they have been teaching for 20 years and that they have had 1,000 students and the cost is \$100 per lesson because they are the greatest teacher of all time...but an inexperienced teacher cannot trick you with an answer to this question (unless he or she is reading this guide too).

If a prospective teacher who does not know you, your musical knowledge, your technique on the instrument, your musical tastes, and your musical goals tries to explain how he or she will teach you, then you know immediately that this person is NOT a competent teacher.

Not even the best teacher on Earth could answer this question if that teacher knows nothing about you, your goals, your playing level, your knowledge of music theory, etc. So what would an experienced and competent teacher say to you when you ask the question? Well, I can tell you what I do when a new student asks me this. I explain to him or her that I can’t formulate a lesson plan for anyone until I learn a lot more about that student’s playing, goals, musical tastes, knowledge of theory, etc.

Before I accept any new online correspondence guitar student I require each person to fill out a long list of questions that will tell me everything I need to know about that person’s music background, goals and other things. This is the only way I can really know how to teach this student.

I also encourage the student to send me a tape or CD of his or her playing with a variety of his or her playing on it so that I have a clearer picture of what areas need improvement.

Tip 1: Listen to the language the music teacher uses when trying to answer this question. Does he talk about “what he does” or does he want to know more about what YOU want and need to learn?

Tip 2: READ CAREFULLY: Does the music teacher talk only about “teaching things to you”? Or does the teacher ALSO talk about how he/she is going to TRAIN you to become a better musician? It is not important for the teacher to use the specific words “train” or “training”, but what IS important is that the teacher needs to do more than simply ‘give you new information’. You can get information from a lot of sources, what you need is training to help you implement what you already know and what you will learn in the future...this is key to your progress, but most ‘average music teachers’ do not do a good job in this area... This is one of the things that separates mediocre teachers from good or great teachers.

5. “Do you have a specific strategy to help me reach my musical and playing goals?” – Most teachers have a 2-4 different ‘cookie cutter’ teaching methods that they use with most or all of their students. Please read carefully to what I am about to say next, this is very important: It is not necessary for your music teacher to “reinvent the wheel” with every new student he/she teaches. It is perfectly ok, for your teacher to give you the EXACT same lesson material that the student before you received... in SOME cases. For example, if you need to learn some scales, it is ok if your teacher simply makes a photo copy of a lesson he created for another student before you. Why is this ok? Because scales are scales, they haven’t changed, it’s the exact same thing (although fingerings are different). So if your friend received the same lesson on scale that you did, that is not a problem. HOWEVER, do not confuse “lesson content” with “lesson strategy”. I do not want to go into too much detail here because unless you are already a highly advanced musician, you might not follow all the specific concepts I could talk about (and frankly it might even bore you since it would take a long time to read through all the various possibilities). What I want you to understand is that when you ask the teacher the question above, the answer should ALWAYS be YES. AND the teacher should not hesitate for one second before saying yes with confidence and conviction. If you sense any hesitation in his/her answer, that is a warning sign that the teacher may not truly have the ability or interest in designing specific strategies for you personally.

Most teachers do not develop long-term strategies for students for 2 main reasons:

1. **They do not know how to effectively do this.** (which explains why most teachers do not have a long list of advanced students who are now exceptional musicians and players.)
2. **Some music teachers who DO know how to create a decent strategy often won’t!** Why won’t they do this? Because teachers often think if they are firm in their lesson plan, that the student may quit if he/she feels that the teacher “didn’t teach me what I want to learn today”.

Tip: Most music teachers who advertise for music lessons put the following phrase in their ads and on their websites: **“Learn what you want to learn”**

This sounds good to potential students, but it is simply not an effective way to teach anything. Those teachers think that if they do not give the student whatever they ask for this week that the student will stop paying for lessons. This fear prevents teachers from staying focused on building REAL STRATEGIES that bring REAL RESULTS for their students’ REAL GOALS which would ultimately give their students what they REALLY WANT in the long term!

6. **“Will you teach me in a logical and linear step by step way?, What I mean is, will you help me to learn all the steps of a particular topic before moving onto the next thing?”** – Ok, this is another trick question, and only the very best music teachers will be able to answer this correctly. First, in order for this question to be ‘useful’ to you, you MUST ask the question in the EXACT WORD FOR WORD way I just gave you above (do not change any words). If you ask the question differently, the question will not work in the way that it is designed in order to test the teacher for the right answer. After you have asked the question, this is what you need to listen for:

If the teacher answers “Yes”, then you need to ask him/her to go into more detail so that you can better understand what they mean by ‘yes’ (more on this later).

If the teacher answers “No”. Then you need to ask the teacher this EXACT question. “If you do not teach me things in a linear step by step way, how will I reach my goals in the best possible way?”

The ‘average’ music teacher will answer the original question with “YES”. (which is the wrong answer!)

The very **best** teachers **and** the very **worst** teachers will always answer the original question with “NO”. The difference between them is how each will explain their answer to you. The worst teachers will have nothing to say, or give you some lame reason why they do not teach in that way. The very best teachers will tell you that they DO teach with specific strategies in mind, BUT those strategies are NOT ‘linear’, they are “geometric music teaching strategiesTM”. It is important to know that not all great teachers use the term “geometric music teaching strategiesTM”, but they do teach in this way. To teach geometrically means that they will teach and train you from different angles or perspectives of the same topic. In a nutshell, a linear music teaching strategy would be a logical (but less effective) step by step approach where all steps proceed in a straight line. A “geometric music teaching strategyTM” is also a step by step process, but those steps are arranged from all sides, not in a straight line. Sometimes music students who take lessons from a teacher using a geometric strategy feel that the lessons are not connected in a logical way, or that the teacher has no plan and the lessons are random. It is not important for you to know all the details of a teacher’s specific strategy (it is possible that you may not be able to fully understand the strategy even if it is explained to you – if you are not a highly advanced guitar player – these strategies can be quite complex), however it is critical that

the teacher understands them. You only need to follow the plan the teacher has set for you. Fortunately, following the plan is a LOT easier than understanding how the plan is built and why it is built that way.☺

Ok...so I said not all great teachers will use the term “geometric music teaching strategyTM”, so how can you know if they teach in this way or not? If the teacher explains why a linear approach is not the most effective way to learn and gives you specific reasons why not, then the teacher likely understands and uses the geometric approach in his/her teaching. But if the teacher cannot defend his/her reasons for not following a linear approach, or it all sounds like bull shit excuses for having no plan at all, then this is a good indication the teacher is clueless.

Note: A linear music teaching strategy can be effective in some cases. If you are an extremely analytical person who MUST ask “why” to every thing you learn (many engineers are this way), then you will be ok with the linear approach...but for the rest of us, the ‘geometric music teaching approach’ is far more effective.

7. “How will help me to better organize my practice time? I’m a serious student and I want to maximize my practice time.” – Average teachers will teach you some things and say, “practice your instrument every day and I’ll you see next week”. Good teachers will show you in detail how to manage your practice time. They will tell you what to practice each day and for how long to practice each item. Great teachers will either teach you how to manage your own practice time in effective ways, or they will point you to a customizable practice schedule resource such as Practice Generator.

Tip: If you are working with a teacher now, push him/her to get more specific with you about how you can learn to effectively manage your own practice time, or use the practice schedule resource mentioned above. Your ability to get the most out of your practice time is just as important as the quality of the teacher you study with!

8. “Have you successfully taught many other students to reach musical goals similar to mine?” – Ask to see the proof. Can you talk to some current or former students? Are there places where you can find several of them? Are any of those students doing anything with their musical skills? Good results are not always based on the skill level of a teacher’s students, not all students want to become ‘great musicians and players’, many just want to play for fun or whatever, if those students ‘feel fulfilled’ and happy about their experience with their teacher, we can consider this a good result too. But obviously, if you find a teacher who has proven track record of successfully teaching many students to reach their musical goals and/or play on a highly advanced level, you have likely found a great teacher.

Tip: Most good teachers (and great teachers) feature some students playing their instrument on their websites and may have testimonials from many of those students too...Search for this on the teacher’s website.

9. “How did you learn how to teach music?” – For instance, most guitar players struggle to learn as fast as pianists or violinists because piano and violin teachers almost

always have intense training on 'how to teach piano or violin'. Sadly, the vast majority (more than 99%) of electric guitar teachers have ZERO training on 'how to teach guitar'. They simply teach students using the painful 'trial and error' method. It has become accepted that electric guitar teachers can teach students even though they may have no real ability to do so — and this tendency is rapidly spreading to other instruments! This sickens me because when I was a kid, my first 8 guitar teachers had no training on how to teach guitar. Now that I am a music teacher with a lot of training and experience, I can look back and see how horrible my early teachers were, and that also explains why I struggled to learn to play guitar in my early years. Don't accept the 'trial and error' method. Look for a teacher who actually cares enough about teaching to get some real training. This kind of training makes a huge difference for both the teachers and their students. I know this because I now train music teachers from around the world and I have seen over and over again how much better the students of these teachers learn today. My music teacher training program is the Elite Guitar Teachers Inner Circle program.

Avoid These 3 Common Mistakes!

Mistake 1. Choosing a teacher based on location! – One of the first questions most students ask a new teacher is "Where are you located?" If you are pretty sure the teacher teaches within 90 minutes of your home or job, do not even ask the teacher where he/she is located until AFTER you are sure you want to study with him/her. You might be thinking that it's a waste of time to travel far to study with a great teacher, but the truth is, the EXACT OPPOSITE IS TRUE! The extra travel time that may be required to study with a great teacher is time well invested. If you study with an 'average teacher' you WILL waste a lot of your practice time as you study things which are not as helpful to making you the musician you want to become. In addition the better teacher will help you get more out of your practice time, (which saves even more time since you can actually get better while practicing less!) The bottom line: It's often worth traveling 3X the distance in order to get 10X the value from a better teacher!!! See the big picture ☺

Mistake 2. Choosing a teacher based on price per lesson! – I once made the huge mistake of choosing a teacher based on the price per lesson. I thought I could save some money each week by hiring the lower priced teacher. After 8 months of mediocre results with this mediocre teacher, I finally realized I could get much better results with a better teacher. I found a much more expensive teacher and began to study with him. What I quickly realized was that I was improving as a musician at a much faster rate. I estimated I was progressing about 3X faster with my new teacher. So I did some math and found something which shocked me! If my new teacher was 50% more expensive, but I was getting 3X the result, I was actually SAVING a LOT of money with my new teacher.

Here is what it looked like:

Teacher 1: \$50 per lesson x 9 lessons to achieve my short term goal = \$450

Teacher 2: \$75 per lesson x 3 lessons to achieve my short term goal = \$225

The point is, I was paying my first teacher a LOT more money to learn the same thing which my second teacher taught me how to play in only 3 lessons!

More expensive teachers are usually worth MORE than the higher price they charge for lessons! Excellent teachers are in demand and usually already have a lot of students. These teachers often are not cheap. In general, don't look for the teacher with the lowest rates, you usually get what you pay for... or LESS! If you simply can't afford to pay the higher rates for a really good teacher, ask the teacher if you can take lessons on a bi-monthly basis instead of taking weekly lessons. Some teachers offer group classes which also might be within your budget.

Tip: Many of the best teachers will refuse to accept you as a student if one of your first questions is "How much do your lessons cost?" Why would they refuse someone who asks about the price in the beginning of the conversation? Because experienced teachers know that people who are primarily motivated by price do not make very good students. (this is not always true of course, but statistically speaking, it is.) The reason for this assumption is that when students are choosing a teacher based mainly on price or location, this means they are not likely to be focused on finding the right teacher who can help them reach their musical goals. Good teachers do not want to feel like they are "selling lessons" like it is a mere commodity for sale, they truly care about people and helping students to transform their lives through music and playing.

Mistake 3. Assuming that the best player is the best teacher! – Many students (especially guitar students) are immediately attracted to great players and want to learn from them. I am often approached by my guitar fans who want to study with me only because I am an exceptional guitar player, have toured North America and Europe, etc. but the truth is, those things do not make me a great teacher. Yes they do enhance my ability to teach, but they do not determine if I am any good at teaching or not. I am an exceptional teacher because I have exceptional teaching skills, training and experience. This is what you should look for in your search for your next teacher either locally in your area, or online. **Tip:** When you talk to a teacher and he/she goes on and on and on about his/her playing ability, this is a sign that the teacher is not so good as a teacher. Great teachers mainly want to talk about YOU. They will ask you about YOUR skills as a player. They want to know specifically what you want to achieve. They will ask you what is important to you, what you struggle with, they will probe deeper and deeper about YOU. That is what the best teachers want to talk about most of the time!

The BIGGEST Mistake You Can Make Right Now Is...

The biggest mistake you can make right now is to do nothing with the insider information you just learned! If you want to save a lot of time, money and energy, reach your

musical goals much faster and feel GREAT as you learn to play your instrument the way you always dreamed about, then invest the time right now to search for a great teacher who meets all the criteria discussed in this guide. Be prepared to spend a lot of time talking to many teachers because most of the teachers you will find will not do so well answering your 9 special questions. When you find the one who can, you have found the best teacher for yourself!

©2009 Tom Hess Music Corporation