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Young minds come alive ... With the Sound of Music

By Sarah White

"Mommy, look at the elephant!" says the little girl in a purple T-shirt. "And the giraffe and the pelican!"

Her mother takes her over to look at more animals, where they discover an alligator, a snake and ... a violin?

No, they are not visiting the Fort Worth or Dallas zoos. They are visiting the Plano Symphony Orchestra's Instrument Petting Zoo, a collection of retired instruments that children can pick up and play, with carrying cases painted to look like animals. This organization travels to various community events throughout the year to encourage children in Collin County to take an interest in orchestral and classical music.

Many people have stigmatized classical music, saying that they find it boring. What most don't realize is that what is popularly referred to as "classical music" is actually a wide variety of different music genres lumped together. With an open mind and a little experimentation, almost everyone can find something they like; children can have a lot of fun with classical music, particularly when they can perform it themselves.

I have volunteered with the Instrument Petting Zoo for seven years, and I love to see the joy the instruments bring to the kids who participate. Every time I volunteer, kids happily drag their parents to our display of musical instruments for a chance to scrape some notes out of a violin or hammer on a drum set.

As for myself, I began to play the violin in the Plano Independent School District orchestra programs when I was 11 years old. I am now 17, a senior in high school, and still playing.

Taking part in music programs and playing an instrument have had many wonderful benefits for me that are common among musicians. One of these benefits is creativity. Music is not just about playing notes. It is very subjective, and one piece of music can have a thousand unique interpretations of how it is expressed. Therefore, musicians learn how to think originally in order to perform an inspiring work.

Having experience in creative thinking is extremely important in today's world of changing technology and innovative ideas; you must be an original thinker to get far.

In past years there has been a growing interest in "the Mozart Effect" – the theory that listening to classical music raises a child's IQ. There is hot debate between scientists as to whether the data that supports this theory is conclusive. Whether it proves to be true or not, classical music is certainly a more complex and challenging genre than most.

I think that children who spend time learning to appreciate it will find their efforts well rewarded, especially if they also play an instrument.

Playing a musical instrument provides children with vigorous mental exercise. According to neurobiologist Norman M. Weinberger in his article "Music and the Brain: a Broad Perspective," fundamental psychological processes – creative thinking, problem solving, and organizing thought, feeling and knowledge – are used when a child plays an instrument. These are valuable skills that can lead to faster and clearer thinking.

I know from firsthand observation in my school orchestra that musicians often achieve high grades, even in difficult college-level courses. Again, it's inconclusive that music makes you smarter, but I do believe that the discipline required to learn music in childhood directly translates to good study skills in high school.

Also, one of the most important things I've received from participating in my school orchestra is the friends I've made.

We all share a love of music, and it brings us together. The same is true with band and choir members. Being involved in a music organization provides an instant set of friends.

So how do you get kids involved? There are several local opportunities to promote children's interest in music. The Plano Symphony Orchestra offers inexpensive family concerts specifically designed to interest children, as does the Allen Philharmonic, the Richardson Symphony and many others in Collin County. Most schools in the area offer music programs to students, such as orchestra, band and choir. There are also many music teachers independent of the schools who are happy to share their knowledge.

Being involved in music has been one of the best and most beneficial aspects of my life. I urge the children of Collin County to start taking an interest in it; believe me, you'll love it!