We, in Australia, are part of Western culture where originally music was learned much the same way as we learn language, strictly through oral transmission. Some cultures e.g. Koori, Indian, Indonesian, Flamenco still have an oral tradition for the transmission of their music. However, the growing complexity of western music over the past few centuries required that a universal system of notation be developed. To be truly musically literate in this western culture one must be able to look at music and “hear” the sound in one’s head, much the same way, as a person reads a book silently. As the twentieth-century Hungarian composer-educator-philosopher Zoltan Kodaly stated, true music literacy gives a person the ability “to see what one hears, and hear what one sees” (Bonis, P. 192).

Musical literacy is a set of multifaceted skills that are developed concurrently within a particular cultural and historical context. Musical literacy in our western culture encompasses the production of

- Musical performance (technique)
- Musical skills (reading and writing music notation)
- Aesthetic understanding
- Aural skills
- Stylistic knowledge
- Understanding of emotional content of music

Kodaly summarized a good musician as, someone who has “(1) a well-trained ear, (2) a well-trained intellect (3) a well-trained heart (aesthetic/emotional understanding) and (4) well-trained hands (technique). He also indicated that all four must develop together in constant equilibrium. As soon as one lags behind or rushes ahead, there is something wrong.” (Bonis, p. 197)

This brings me to the development of music literacy for our children who are blind. In general, in Queensland, we appear to be doing all right with the well-trained ear, the well-trained hands and the well-trained heart but we appear to be falling down with the well-trained intellect. That is we are falling down in the development of good Braille music reading and writing skills. There is certain amount of irony in this because in my 25 years in the field it has never been so easy to produce and give access to Braille music as it is now.

In order to improve the development of the 'well-trained intellect' I went searching and looking for concrete reasons as to why we need to teach our children to read and write Braille music. I came across statements such as ‘blind children need to learn to read and write music for the same reasons as children with sight’. These statements are not very helpful when you are going to present a submission to some higher authority to try and remedy the situation. However, it was statements such as these that led me to compile the following list of reasons outlining why we need to give all

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our blind children a chance to both read and write Braille music and thus become truly musically literate.

To become fully musically literate a child who is blind needs to read and write Braille music for the following reasons. To:

1. fully develop their aural skills. Music is expressed as sound therefore aural skills are of the utmost importance. Aural abilities should be developed in two general areas
   a. Perception – those abilities which involve the recognition and basic understanding of what is heard
   b. Inner hearing – the ability to imagine or hear notated music in one’s head.

   Therefore, to fully develop ear training the strategies employed should not just be sing this phrase after me, name the intervals/cadences (AMEB examinations) but should include both dictation and sight-reading.

2. be able to participate fully in music. Being able to read and write Braille music means that a child can participate in music (class/choir.band/orchestra) on the same basis as their sighted peers. They are not just there in an inclusive music setting for what at best can sometimes be described as entertainment value. Their musical progress, knowledge and skills can be accurately assessed along with the rest of their class. Also, nothing can replace, in rehearsal, having a piece of Braille music to follow (or probably more importantly having it ahead of time to learn then go on and use it in rehearsal).

3. become an independent and life long learner. Being able to read Braille music means that you can independently access, choose and learn a new piece of music (not wait for someone to teach you by rote, put it onto tape or burn the CD). Nothing can replace the convenience and independence of having a Braille copy of some piece in front of you – A blind child has the right of personal access to many pieces of music and the freedom of choice this provides.

4. have access to an accurate copy of the original piece of music. You can use this accurate copy for quick review to allow you to distinguish all notes, staccatos, ties, chords and so on. If you rely on recordings/rote you will find that performers tend to alter notes/rhythm for many reasons. These reasons can include ignorance of style, lack of technique or simply that the performer played the wrong note.

5. have access to the complete piece of music. You can listen to a recording of a piece a thousand times and you will be none the wiser about which is the best fingering of a piece or what an editor has suggested for fingering or even alternate fingering of a piece. This also goes for expression marks, directions, composers’ annotations, pedalling, metronome markings, instructions for which beaters to use, suspended cymbals etc. To have access to the complete piece of music you have to rely on your Braille score which will have all
   a. expressive elements (text, timbre, dynamics, nuances and articulation)
b. structural elements such as duration (pulse, tempo, meter, rhythmic patterns) and pitch (vertical and linear structures),
c. texture (monophonic, homophonic, polyphonic and antiphonal),
d. form (patterns or repetition, variation and repetition with variation),
e. stylistic characteristics (the combining of expressive and structural elements defines musical style.)

6. have a chance to accurately analyse the music. “The study of orchestration, arranging, and harmony is difficult, at best, without not being able to see the range of instruments, musical logic, and architectural form.” As a matter of fact some notes can be represented differently from the way they sound, depending on their harmonic function e.g. C sharp or D flat. Reading the music means you are more easily able to trace motifs and other compositional techniques e.g. identify the expressive and structural elements within a musical composition. This leads to being able to discuss a piece of music in an analytic or critical way. Having a good analysis of the music makes it much easier to understand and thus can streamline and facilitate memorisation.

7. make full use of own unique interpretive ability- Develop awareness and understanding of stylistic and interpretative differences in music from a variety of cultures and historical periods. You get to read and interpret the music, a variety of musical styles, for yourself - not hear someone else’s interpretation/version of the music. e.g. “Fur Elise”, mordants and ornamentation.

8. Able to share your compositions – share with others by using musical notation to express musical ideas, your compositions or to be able to have your assignments marked.

9. gain employment/career path. If you wish to have any type of career in music when you apply for a job/university course you will probably be turned down flat unless you can read music

**Conclusion**

It would be ludicrous, even unethical to contemplate teaching music to a sighted child without teaching them to read notation on the five line staff. No music teacher or parent would permit a sighted child to learn music using only rote methods and recorded materials. Ditto for a blind child. It is essential that a blind child learning music also learn to read Braille music. This skill is indispensable not only to potential musicians but also greatly enhances the participation of the ‘not-so-talented’ in regular school music programmes. There is no reason why a blind child cannot effectively participate in the school band, orchestra or choir on a par with their sighted peers.

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Quotes

“Remember, no matter how brilliant the ear and how good the memory, [Braille music] literacy is essential for the blind student too.”

“Having a good ear does not substitute for being able to read actual music.”

“Literacy gives dignity as well as competence, and is of the utmost importance to self-image and success … music literacy … [gives] great joy of learning and music, the thrill of participation, and the satisfaction of informed listening.”

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2 Fattah Abedouk in a MENVI Newsletter.