

The Unique Connection Between Music And Chess

(A Conversation With FM Slava Mikhailuk)

Ken Lee

I have met dozens of young people in the Pacific Northwest who participate in both these amazing lifelong hobbies.

I recently sat down with FM Slava Mikhailuk (pronounced Me-high-luke) to discuss his unique perspectives on the subjects of music and chess.

Ken: Slava you teach both chess and piano to kids. How do you think these two hobbies are related?

Slava: That is an interesting question. I never planned to mix piano and chess but those are my personal interests. It kind of happened by accident. My mother taught piano to me as a small child. I did not start playing chess until I was 11 or 12 in Russia.

From my perspective I can tell you that both piano and chess are excellent for development.

Children have to get familiar with pattern recognition, and it takes a long time and a great deal of daily practice to get better.

In my opinion, there is a direct relationship between chess and math. They both require lots of calculation and similar mental exercise.

On the other hand, I believe that chess and music are more complementary disciplines. To be specific, I think it is almost impossible for a chess player to play well when they are upset.

That said, I find that piano students often play their best music when

they are upset. A musician uses their instrument to express something that is more of a feeling rather than a rational thought.

Ken: Can you compare the development process of piano players and chess players?

Slava: For beginning piano players, they first start out with the fundamentals such as notes, white and black keys, and proper hand position.

For beginning chess players, they start with piece identification. Interestingly, there are white and black pieces in chess just like there are white and black keys in piano.

A beginning chess player also learns about individual piece movement and fundamental rules. A typical US Chess ELO rating for beginners is between 100 and 900.

While it varies for every learner, I like starting students in music and chess at about five and half years of age. At that age, they just want to have fun and are enthusiastic about everything.

In my case, however, I didn't start playing chess until I was 11 or 12. I was very fortunate. I received excellent coaching in Russia, so most of my progress in chess occurred between the 11 and 21 years of age. This was years before I moved to the United States in 1996.

For intermediate piano players, they can progress to this level as early as the fourth grade but sometimes it happens in Middle School. Age is not important. It is more important for piano players to enjoy the process of practice and playing.



*Slava Mikhailuk (L) playing chess with his son Michael.
Photo courtesy of Slava Mikhailuk.*

To me, intermediate chess players (US Chess rating ELO is about 901 to 1300) should concentrate on their middle game, where most games are won or lost. Also, we work on endgames and game analysis.

At the intermediate chess level, I also encourage my students to play aggressively. That does not mean that they have to take pieces all the time. It means that they need to be constantly aware of opportunities to counterattack.

My advanced piano students are at the level of my son, Michael, who is 18. Michael has the technical foundation and skills to learn just about any piece.

My advanced chess students have a US Chess ELO rating above 1300. At this level, my students must study openings. My advanced students understand that they have to continue to study and work hard to compete.

So, in both chess and music, it is a lifelong journey. I also tell my chess and music students that they have to practice every single day.

Ken: What do you think is the difference between music and chess?

Slava: Chess is a competitive sport. There is always a winner and a loser.

In piano, there are recitals but, for me, recitals are not about competition but about sharing with others. There certainly are high level piano competitions, but my students do not participate.

I think music competitions are so subjective. If the students are not playing the exact same piece, then the competition boils down to the opinion of an individual judge on the day of the competition.

Music is a mode of expression and students should be encouraged to express, not compete.

Ken: As a teacher in both chess and piano, what gives you the most satisfaction in working with students?

Slava: In piano, I often hear from parents that my students continue to play and practice piano at university. Even if they are not music majors, they still enjoy the process of playing and learning.

In chess, it makes me happy that I can introduce such a wonderful game to students that has such a long-lasting influence on their life.

When I was growing up in Russia, we did not have the benefit of playing chess with computers. We played long classical games and then took quite a bit of time to study between tournaments. We also used to practice playing chess without the board at all, often calling out moves while playing entire games in our head. It was excellent training.

With the advancement in chess engines, students today can play all the time with endless amounts of practice. Even so, my advice to chess students is to try and work on specific problems over a period of time.

For example, a chess student can study multiple ways to defend against the Sicilian over and over until they feel that they have multiple ways of addressing that situation.

Here is my final thought about chess.

My Russian chess coach told me years ago “You can never unlearn chess.” He was telling me that the fundamental principles of decision making, seeing options and opportunities, and always striving to get better through self-analysis is a very good thing.

Slava Mikhailuk is a five-time Washington State Chess Champion. You can connect with him about chess and piano on his website

<https://ellenartschool.com>.

