

Kids Stories That Hit Just the Right Note

By Denise Marchetti, Children's Librarian, Wyckoff Public Library

Just like reading, engaging with music has many benefits for kids. Singing, moving, dancing, and playing instruments help them learn and develop a wide range of skills as they grow and explore, including literacy. Music truly is a universal language, and when kids who are just beginning to read have been exposed to it, their minds are more receptive to hearing, building, and interpreting vocabulary. Music is also connected to social and emotional learning, promoting empathy, collaboration and leadership skills as well as mood regulation, and stress and anxiety reduction. While there are many true books about music, there are also meaningful stories where music can open up a wonderful new world to kids of all ages.

Music is celebrated as a powerful force in these stories, which include themes of friendship, connectedness, being true to yourself, persevering, following your dreams, and finding your voice. In fact, it can often tell stories when words aren't enough.

Music Is.... by Brandon Stosuy introduces very young kids to the ways that music can affect their senses. Featuring Amy Martin's bold and dynamic art, this story explains music through their eyes and ears so that their sense of hearing is transformed into a visual experience.

Dan Brown's interactive picture book, *Wild Symphony* offers a unique experience. Upon downloading the app, the reader is taken on an exciting musical adventure with Maestro Mouse and his symphonic friends. Each page features a different animal and poem, as well as some hidden puzzles that are fun to solve. They all combine to create a beautiful symphony.

A Fox Found A Box by Ged Adamson is the story of a little fox who finds a radio while looking for food. He brings it home to his animal friends, and when they turn the knob, music fills the forest. They begin swishing their tails and flapping their wings, until one day it suddenly stops. During the quiet, they realize that music is all around them, in the drip-drop rhythm of melting icicles and the thump thump of a beaver's tail. The noises of the forest and the animals build into a symphony, with everyone joining together in a joyous dance party.

A Neighborhood Walk, A Musical Journey by Pilar Winter Hill and illustrated by Olivia Duchess is a story based on the author, an internationally renowned violin prodigy. As Penelope and her mom excitedly walk to the farmer's market in the city, music is everywhere. They are enchanted by the sounds of musicians performing on the street corners and train stations. Penelope feels as though they are talking to her through the

floating, booming notes. But it is when she hears the magical sound of the violin, that her life changes forever. She knows that this is the instrument she is meant to play.

In *The First Notes: The Story of Do, Re, Mi*, Julie Andrews and her daughter Emma Walton Hamilton together with illustrator Chiara Fedele, introduce readers to the remarkable story of the development of written music. An Italian Monk named Guido of Arezzo found a way to write and teach music centuries ago by creating the musical scale using the words Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti-Do. His discovery remains the foundation for learning music today, and inspired the famous song in *The Sound of Music*.

The mother-daughter duo collaborated once again to create *The Enchanted Symphony*, which is illustrated by Elly MacKay. When a mysterious fog envelops a village, the community decides to stay inside. The town becomes quiet and sad as neighbors stop visiting each other. But the pervasive dullness disappears when a boy's simple melody reminds everyone that being together and enjoying life is most important.

Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music, written by Margarita Engle and illustrated by Rafael Lopez, is a poem inspired by the life of Millo Castro Zaldarriaga, a Chinese-African-Cuban drummer. Although Millo loves playing the drums, girls are not allowed to do so on her island. She is determined to continue making music with her drums and forms a band with her sisters, paving the way for other girls who love music.

Barb Rosenstock's *The Noisy Paint Box* tells the fascinating story of abstract artist Vasya Kandinsky, who began experiencing colors as sounds and sounds as colors when he was a child. He practiced playing the piano daily, but it is when his aunt gives him a box of paints that his life changes forever. He begins mixing the paints and suddenly hears a hissing sound, which swirls into a symphony of tones and colors. Vasya bravely decides to put aside his proper portraits and paint *MUSIC*. Mary Grandpre's Caldecott Honor winning illustrations invite the reader to join the dance.

Bravo, Little Bird written by Annie Silvestro and illustrated by Ramona Kaulitzki tells the heartwarming story of a friendship between an old man who loves playing the piano with his grandson and a little bird. It celebrates the power of music, family, and the gifts our loved ones leave us. From the first moment little bird hears the man's music, she begins to sing, and together they make music that they share with their families. But as time passes, the old man grows tired and stops playing the piano. Little bird discovers that her special friend isn't really gone, since he lives on in the beautiful music they created.

BECAUSE by Mo Willems and illustrated by Amber Ren is the story of a young girl, who unexpectedly ends up going to an orchestra's performance with her aunt because her uncle, who plans to attend, gets sick. She is captivated as she listens to the beautiful music, inspiring her to work hard and pursue her dream of becoming a conductor, and eventually composer. The last page shows her music wrapping around another child, whose life will also be changed forever by music.

Here are some good choices for middle-grade readers:

Echo by Pam Munoz Ryan is a story about the ability of music to cross boundaries and unite people across distance and time. It is the 2016 Newbery Honor winning novel that tells several enchanting stories, all connected by one harmonica. Ryan shares the stories of three children: Friedrich, an intern at the Hohner factory; Mike, an orphan in Philadelphia; and Ivy, the daughter of migrant farm workers. It begins when a boy named Otto has a mysterious harmonica bestowed upon him, which ends up traveling the world, further impacting the lives of each person it reaches. In the conclusion, we discover how each of the stories are intertwined,

The protagonist in *A Crooked Kind of Perfect* by Linda Urban is Zoe, a ten-year-old, going on eleven, who dreams of one day playing the piano at Carnegie Hall. She doesn't fit in with most of the girls at her school, but forms a friendship with Wheeler, a boy who really seems to understand her. Zoe's dad, who has social anxiety, finds it difficult to leave the house. When he inadvertently buys her an organ instead of the baby grand piano that she hopes for, Zoe is determined to become a great player so she can enter an organ-playing competition.

Elise Broach's *Duet* is filled with emotion and suspense. Michael Jin is an eleven-year-old piano playing sensation. His new teacher, Mr. Starek tries to help Michael prepare for an upcoming competition, but he refuses to play during practice. Mirabelle is a young goldfinch who loves music and lives with her family in Mr. Starek's backyard. When Mirabelle sings the Chopin piece that Michael begins to play, they have their first duet, and their friendship begins. A secret adventure soon takes them further than they ever could have imagined, as they set out to solve the mystery of a lost piano that could be worth millions.

The Chance to Fly by Ali Stroker and Stacy Davidowitz is the story of Nat, a thirteen-year-old girl who uses a wheelchair for mobility, and is obsessed with musicals and competing on her wheelchair racing team. Although she's never been in a musical or seen an actor using a wheelchair on stage, she wonders if someone like herself could ever get cast. She decides to try out for a show, and is chosen to be part of the

ensemble. As opening night draws near, Nat is determined to find a way to overcome her feelings of fear and insecurity. *Cut Loose!* is the second book in the series.

The Boy Who Failed Show and Tell by Jordan Sonnenblick is a hilarious memoir about Sonnenblick's fourth grade experiences. He keeps his sense of humor as he tries to get through a school year filled with trials and tribulations. His teacher dislikes him, he's got asthma, and there are a couple of bullies ready to stomp on him. He loves playing the drums, but finds that achieving his goal of becoming "The World's Best Drummer" is going to be difficult. Everything changes when he connects with a teacher who believes in him. He continues to practice, getting better over time. The sequel, *The Boy Who Failed Dodgeball* picks up on Jordan's adventures in middle school.

Twelve-year-old Malu loves music in *The First Rule of Punk* by Celia C. Perez. Her first day at a new school is a disaster when she inadvertently upsets the most popular girl, violates the dress code with her punk rock look, and disappoints her college-professor mom. She decides to assemble a group of like-minded misfits into a cool band. Just as Malu begins to feel at home, she faces a difficult decision about standing up for her right to express herself.

Jake the Fake Keeps it Real, the first in a series of three titles by Craig Robinson and Adam Mansbach and art by Keith Knight, is an illustrated novel about Jake, a sixth-grader who has just faked his way into the Music and Art Academy for the gifted and talented, where his older sister happens to be a star student. Jake can barely play an instrument, but he pulls off plenty of hilarious high jinks while trying not to be found out.

Miracle by Karen S. Chow is a poignant story about loss, healing, hope, and friendship. Amie has spent her life perfectly in tune with her dad, even playing his favorite instrument, the violin. But when he becomes ill and dies, she feels incredibly alone and disconnected from her family and friends. She even loses her ability to play the violin, and the notes that used to flow freely are suddenly stilted. With the help of those that care about her, Aimie tries to find her way back to the music she once loved, and learns that healing, while painful, can be its own miraculous song.

Blackbird Fly by Erin Entrada Kelly follows Analyn "Apple" Yengko, a twelve-year-old girl who is struggling to fit in and make friends. When she is teased at school, she turns to music to get through. She uses an old Beatles cassette tape left behind by her deceased father for inspiration. Even though her mother wants her to focus on school, she is determined to buy a guitar and form her identity through music, becoming like her favorite Beatle, George Harrison.

Emmy in the Key of Code by Aimee Lucido tells the story of twelve-year-old Emmy uniquely through free-verse chapters with poetic structures from musical metaphors. Emmy, whose dad is a pianist and mom is an opera singer, dreams of becoming a musician, but fears that she may not have the talent to follow in her parents' footsteps. Emmy feels out of place in her school, but then she decides to take a coding class. She begins to feel better, immediately connecting to the material as well as her new friend, Abigail, with whom she shares the language of music. As Emmy learns Java, music and code interweave in her poems.

For kids who enjoy graphic novels:

In *Garvey's Choice* by Nikki Grimes, Garvey's father wants him to be athletic, but he doesn't like sports at all. He feels lonely and misunderstood, and starts to be teased by bullies because he is overweight. His life changes when his only friend encourages him to join the chorus, and he suddenly becomes their new soloist. Through music, Garvey finds a way to accept himself while bonding with his dad, speaking the language of music.

All My Friends by Hope Larson is the first book in a graphic novel trilogy about family, friendship, and music. Bina, the main character, is a middle-schooler who is feeling great about her life. She has new friends and a new band whose song is about to be featured on her favorite television show. But she finds that it's not easy being the center of attention, and her parents are not happy when her band is offered a record deal. Bina must find a way to overcome these obstacles and achieve her musical goals.

In *Scout Is Not a Band Kid* by Jade Armstrong, Jade, a middle-schooler, learns that her favorite author will be doing an exclusive interview at the end of the year. When she finds out that the school band is going to that very location to perform, she decides to join in order to get there. The problem is that Scout can't play any instruments, so she pretends to play the trombone. Her new friend, Merrin, soon catches on and feels betrayed. As they get to know each other better, they realize that they have a lot in common, and work together to find common ground.

Please visit the Wyckoff Rizzo Children's Library and browse our Music Display this month, featuring picture books, beginner chapter books for emerging readers (there are lots of good choices!), and middle-grade novels, as well as non-fiction titles. Also, please inquire about our book clubs for kids of all ages. Visit, call us at #201-891-4866, x.3, or email denise.marchetti@wyckoff.bccls.org for more great suggestions.