

CREATING

Sensory-Friendly Recitals

for Music Students

with Autism

By Sunghun Kim

Sensory-friendly recitals help music students with autism experience the musical world and also act as a medium that connects their lives with the neurotypical society by showing that these students have equal or superior performance abilities. The purpose of sensory-friendly recitals is to allow audiences and performers alike to enjoy the musical performance by making the recital hall non-threatening for the those with autism. A recital hall with a sensory-friendly environment can play an important role in a successful recital. Moreover, music students with autism and their parents can be encouraged to maintain a comfortable environment, and a well-managed and planned recital hall may also be a safe venue that is welcoming to those with autism who might otherwise instantly feel stressed and agitated. Additionally, these sensory-friendly recitals serve as a method through which audiences can comprehend the behavioral characteristics of music students with autism and experience an extraordinary performance of their remarkable accomplishments.

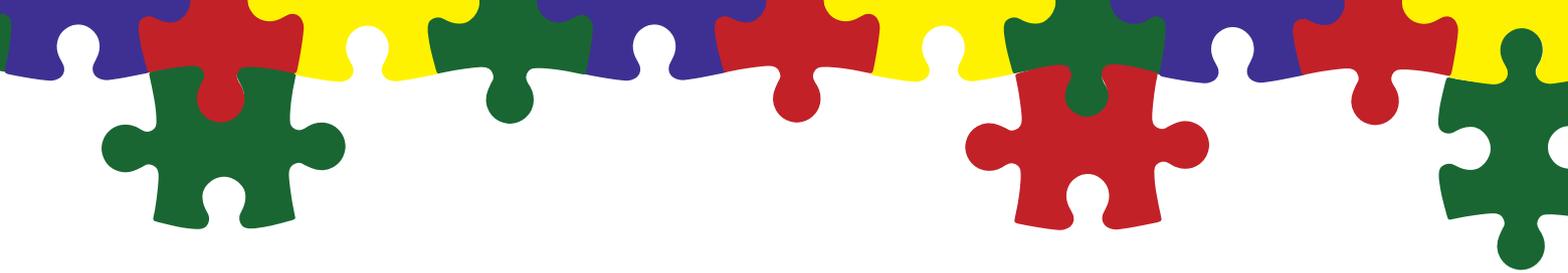
What is a Sensory-Friendly Recital?

Sensory-friendly recitals are specially designed for students with autism, sensory sensitivities and other neurodivergent disabilities (McCauley 2019). This type of recital promotes their performances and allows their family and friends to appreciate the students' gifts and talents in a non-judgmental environment. To organize a constructive sensory-friendly recital, teachers need to establish a highly specific and detailed plan for each individual and their families. Distinctive preparation for music students with autism is required to allow them to experience the actual recital process, which helps alleviate apprehension and/or unstable feelings and to allow the students with autism to be successful in their performance.

There are two stages of preparation for a sensory-friendly recital.

- **Stage 1) Preparation Before a Recital**
- **Stage 2) Day of a Recital**
 - Step 1) Before a performance
 - Step 2) During a performance
 - Step 3) After a performance





Stage 1 includes repetitive preparation before the recital: teachers should consistently mention the recital date and time in every lesson, explain the detailed performance process step-by-step and give the students with autism the opportunity to interact with the concert piano or other instruments and teacher at a recital hall. This will help increase familiarity and mitigate concern or fear associated with changes, which helps students get used to and be involved in a positive and affirmative recital experience.

Precise and Detailed Performance Process

- Music students with autism and their teacher should look at and experience everything in the recital hall.

The teacher should give literal instructions and articulated guidelines to students, such as:

- “You are the third person who will perform during the recital.”
- “Please be quiet and pay attention during each performance.”
- “We walk on the stage together and sit on the bench.”
- “You open the performance book to page 35.”
- “Before playing piece number 10, I will give you a count off of one measure.”
- “Are you ready? (1, 2, ready play).”
- “After performing, face the audience and give one nice bow.”
- “I will help you to return to your seat.”

After the performance, the teacher should always give students a compliment verbally and non-verbally, such as “excellent” and a thumbs up, making sure to practice with the student.

This process can be vital and practical as a part of a student’s routine and schedule, and it engages them in a step-by-step task for making the sensory-friendly recital productive and meaningful to their learning progress.

In stage 2, the first step before the performance on the day of the recital is to arrange the front seats in a manner that will prevent students with autism from being distracted by audience members and/or unexpected

occurrences. Teachers should label each student’s seat with their name and tell them about the performance order. The second step during the performance is to be aware of students’ behaviors. While music students with autism are performing, the teachers should always stay with them on the stage. The third step after the performance is to compliment and encourage music students with autism and perhaps even take a photograph with them.

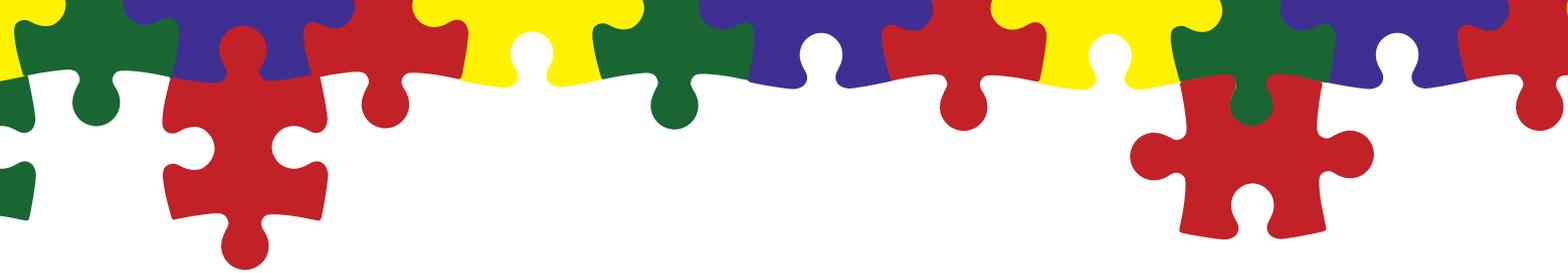
Inclusive Accommodations

A number of inclusive accommodations will likely be necessary for a sensory-friendly recital. One such accommodation may include using person-first language, such as “person with autism” instead of “autistic person.” Identifying the student first rather than the disability, means the disability is no longer a characteristic of the student. The person-first language or word used to describe the music students with autism can be an influential and formidable tool, and using this tool is also crucial to express a respectful mindset toward the students with autism and demonstrate their values first. It is, however, important for teachers to know if the family prefers person-first language (Bauer 2010). Other possible inclusive accommodations for successful sensory-friendly recitals include:

- Registration assistance
- Accessible parking
- Venue accessibility
- Front desk assistance
- Appropriate waiting room and warm-up facility
- Appropriate guidance

Friendly Environment

The recital hall for an autistic-friendly space has to be well-structured and arranged to help music students with autism focus, decompress and get ready for a performance. An unprepared recital environment may cause distractions; however, a well-planned recital environment can assist students with autism ease their fear, nervousness, worry and stress



Additional environmental considerations for sensory-friendly recitals include:

- Adjust light at the normal or low level.
- Organize special seating arrangements.
- Avoid the use of loud sound.
- Students are free to get up, move around or leave during the performance.
- Arrange sensory adjustments on the stage.

Scott Price is the founder of the Carolina LifeSong Initiative that is dedicated to providing piano lessons and music experiences for students with autism and in fostering best practices in teaching and teacher training (University of South Carolina). He says, “The student is the teacher, and the teacher is the student,” which means students with autism behave, function and communicate differently than their neurotypical peers, so piano teachers have to observe their students with autism and learn what works best for each individual. Music teachers should perceive and note the level of vocabulary students can access and what level of fine motor skills they can approach to best shape appropriate pedagogy. Teachers have to adapt their methods to create the learning situation that works best for students with autism, and that will be different for every student.

Sensory-friendly recitals for music students with autism strive to enable audiences and performers to explore musical performance together, creating tranquil settings. They are geared toward serving persons of all ages and abilities by including individuals on the autism spectrum and letting attendees musically anticipate enjoyable experiences and journeys in the sensory-friendly environment together. ♪

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Sunghun Kim is an active piano instructor with more than 10 years of experience teaching private lessons, including group classes to students of all ages and levels. He is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina.

