

From The Times
October 25, 2007

Face the music

Getting children to practice musical instruments is tough but necessary



Emma Thompson

It's 7.15pm. A hunched, hooded creature with contorted, scowling features – like Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*, but incongruously clad in a Beckham dressing-gown – mutters strange oaths and imprecations as he sulkily unzips a large case. Behold my son, submitting to torture inflicted by a cruel mother.

Not for me the eager, cello-playing Perfect Peter of the Horrid Henry stories. My real-life boy shows a sum total of zero enthusiasm for cello practice. Our nightly battles seem orchestrated to put Mummy in the wrong. My son's music teacher, in his youth, cycled across Bath at 6am each day to practice the organ, despite parental indifference. Handel and Berlioz fought to become musicians, against parental opposition!

Are there any self-motivated children left in Britain? A generation of kids that has been spoon-fed knowledge in fun-sized pieces at school seems ever more reluctant to apply itself to the repetition and hard work that learning an instrument demands. One despairing friend says of her daughter: "Little Miss Attitude wins the Oscar for acting out reluctance, slumping at the piano with deep sighs like Dame Edith Evans."

"My daughter is remarkably talented – at inventing original excuses," laments another. "She's hurt her hand; she's lost the music; she can't unravel the music stand . . . Her trump card is when she's succeeded in leaving her violin at school." Another friend shrieks at her son: "I'll cancel your cricket if you don't pick up that flute!" Most of Britain's maladies now get laid at the door of the Pushy Parent. Perhaps shelling out for oboe lessons, then expecting the sprog to lift the instrument to its lips occasionally, is another form of child abuse?

Surely not. Wishing our children to have interests and “accomplishments” is a no-brainer. Music, not only a thing of beauty and a joy in adulthood, benefits brain development: creating neural pathways particularly valuable for boys.

Numerous studies link instrument-playing to school success. One US survey of 25,000 secondary students found that music boosted kids’ math performance regardless of social background. The gap between instrumentalists and others widened over time. But, regardless of all that, it’s fun.

Show me a teenager who – even if (s)he won’t be a Mozart – has no response to music. Instrumental tuition equips a future audience to appreciate music and reopens access to our neglected musical heritage: folk-songs, hymns and classical music. It improves children’s “listening skills”, fosters communication, expression, sensitivity. Those too image conscious to try it are at risk of ending up the losers. “Kids who play instruments,” opines a teacher, “eventually become the coolest teenagers, because they can play in bands; and we all admire success.” Instruments are playable long beyond most team sports. Shared music-making brings our brats into social contact with children with some intellectual aspirations.

Every schoolchild needs to feel good at something; by the time my son realized that he would never win the 100 meters, he could add: “But I can play the cello”. Yet two mums I know – both teachers – have recently thrown tantrums of their own, pulling the plug on music lessons.

Hmmm: merely deferring the arguments? Later, those kids will reproach their parents for allowing them to quit. My little-appreciated childhood music lessons founded a lifelong interest.

“I refuse to nag or plead a moment longer,” one mum snarls. “It’s the worst part of parenthood.” Why do parents get so het up? Because we may as well rip up tenners if the child won’t practice, that’s why. Because we feel our little beasts should value a privilege that, shockingly, is now denied to most UK children. BBC Two’s recent award-winning series *The Choir* showed how one professional conductor could bring out extraordinary harmony from a bunch of teenagers in a failing comprehensive.

A child’s unwillingness to embrace the opportunity has a Shakespearean vibe of vile filial ingratitude. Especially if the parent never had it: like Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, many parents believe that, only given the chance, they would have been “great proficients” . . .

That curse of modern parenthood, self-awareness, casts a shadow here too. At some level, the Music Practice Wars tap into our deepest insecurities. Our guilty knowledge that we’re spread too thinly, too impatient: that Better Parents would spare ten minutes to relish Frère Jacques ad nauseam. Resenting the extra parental chores – having to buy reeds and strings, hire the next size violin, give the trumpet a bath, lug the tuba home on a trolley – we also hate ourselves for begrudging the darlings our time.

So why not leave it up to them? Because we know they would give up. So accustomed are today's kids to consumer choice that they begin lobbying to quit if a teacher even raises her voice. Now that teachers don't enforce practice with sanctions such as the ruler on the knuckles, parents have to do the dirty work. I went to school for education and discipline, and came home for love and understanding; it sometimes feels as if, now, the reverse is true.

Accepting our involvement unleashes deeper worries: that we've bred disagreeable shirkers who can't do anything for themselves. That, raised in an "all must have prizes" educational culture, over praised and undercriticised at school, spoiled at home, they "can't be bothered" to work at anything. Don't children now equate any kind of hard work with pleasure?

Perhaps we overlook the gap between the way children and adults think. My sons, poor forward planners, can drift a whole day without practicing; yet, assisted to schedule a time slot, may observe it. One friend's child whom I helped with sight-reading dissolved into tears at the first attempt. I gently observed that nobody had died; that she wouldn't need my help if she could do it already: whereupon she progressed enormously.

Any parent can nurture good organizational habits: encouraging the child to read the teacher's notebook every time, to practice intelligently and systematically. We can ask questions that make them think: what is the mood of this piece (happy? sad?). We can advise finding the bits they hate, and nailing those, first. It's an uncomfortable truth that music remains one area in which application cannot be faked. Music exams have even got harder, with board examiners as ruthlessly tough as they ever were.

In my teens, failing my Grade 8 clarinet first time around was a great life lesson: that you get back what you put in. "Pushy parents" can help their children with their academic course-work, possibly shovel them into universities. But no child will get to lead the London Symphony Orchestra with her mother camped under the music stand.

What to do to strike the right chord

PARENTS

— Choice of instrument: consider the child's build, finger length, character and environment: it can be hard to be a violin-playing boy in a big comprehensive; it can be best not to give your eldest (who will set an example for the others) the more difficult instruments, such as strings and piano.

— Try to get your child into a group as soon as (s)he can cope. It teaches children to listen and keep time, and makes it fun.

— Bribery will work only in the short term.

— Write a note on the book or contact the teacher if you have queries: most good teachers welcome parental support, unless it is over intrusive.

— Change teacher swiftly if it's not working well; otherwise, tread carefully in any interference with teachers – musicians tend to be highly strung.

— Parental support does make a difference, even if it's only playing recordings: listening to music helps so much with assimilating ideas about interpretation. Encouragement from other adults is also very valuable.

— Set a regular practice time (morning is best). Feed the children first.

— Buy “cool” music if necessary: repertoire is important. Children always prefer recognizable tunes. Try the Abracadabra series or buy a book of easy carols in the run-up to Christmas.

CHILDREN

— Plan it; don't just expect to end up doing it later on.

— Little and often is best.

— Practice intelligently and by efficiency, not time. Don't waste time practicing something over and over again incorrectly. Practice makes permanent. Only perfect practice makes perfect.

— Use the four Ss: **(1)** Slowly; **(2)** hands Separately (keyboard instruments only); **(3)** Several times; **(4)** in Sections.

— Start at the end rather than at the beginning; practise the “joins”. Play around in a way that makes it harder: up an octave, a different key. Constantly remind yourself why you are doing it.

— Don't “run away” from certain areas: scales, sight-reading, theory and aural are all important aspects of a musician's skills. One piano teacher says: “I often hear a cry of ‘I don't want to practice scales: I prefer jazz’ – to which I respond that, if it's jazz they love, they will have to spend 90 per cent of their practice playing scales. After that, the 15 per cent that I normally ask for doesn't seem so onerous.”)

— Enjoy it as much as possible. If you hit a bad spot, take a break; never reach the point of getting annoyed with yourself.

— Reward each practice by playing through an old piece that you have mastered: leave the practice session with self-esteem.

— Practise away from the instrument: it's much harder to play it in your head (or on your duvet) remembering all the correct fingering.

— Listen to recordings of your pieces and others like them.

- [Have your say](#)
- [Have your say](#)

As a doting young father who lives and breathes music...I have to say that I don't agree with this "Make our kids learn an instrument" dolalee.

Make no mistake I will be utterly heartbroken if my son chooses not to learn an instrument - but I will understand. Why? Because music is meant to be fun - and if people don't get a kick from it - then what on earth is the point?

There are hundreds of other ways to stimulate a child's brain and learning abilities; and every child is different and must be nurtured in a way that is suitable to him or her. Do we really want to become the parents of a child who hates playing the piano just so we can say at gatherings "Oh, our son can play Piano at a grade 6 level!" "Oh really" will come the response, "Our Antony just performed lead violin at the annual school recital!" Treasure our children for the whims and interests - that's what will make them unique or else the result will be our children thinking that we're grade 8 slave drivers.

Daniel , Bangor,

It seems a strange idea to "assign" your child an instrument, no wonder they won't want to play it! I was desperate to play the trumpet from the age of 5, I was very specific and I loved (still love, but don't play anymore) my trumpet a lot because I had chosen it.

If you want your child to play an instrument I would take a different approach of taking them to concerts, playing a variety of music in the home, taking them to music shops. If you don't already play one, then learning an instrument yourself so they can see how much joy you get from it.

Kathryn, London,

I agree with both Tom and Mrs. King. Both my children had piano lessons. My son was very talented and took the conventional route of sitting exams. The exams however came to be his downfall. He became so anxious at exam time that he became quite ill with tummy cramps and insomnia. When he failed his grade 3, both my wife and I agreed that it was time to call it a day and let him play for pleasure only. Today at the age of 28 he still plays. My daughter, had lessons without the rigors of sitting exams. These continued for about three years and she too will still occasionally play. A friend of my son's was forced into playing to grade 7. He even took part in competitions. Guess what? He hasn't touched the piano for 10 years. When he tried playing a relatively simple piece on my piano several months ago he failed miserably. I taught myself the piano at the age of 13

and had my first lesson at the age of 29. I still play regularly at the age of 61. There is lesson there somewhere.

Malcolm, Cardiff, S.Glamorgan

As a 17 year old violinist who often wanted to quit when I was younger, I can safely say just how glad I am that my Mum refused to let me stop playing. It has given me teamwork skills, leadership skills, confidence, sensitivity, and the chance to make some fabulous friends, and most importantly gives me a valuable source of relaxation and enjoyment when times get tough. I am proud of my achievements; I am proud to say that I have a talent which sets me apart from the crowd. It is naive to believe that when a child starts an instrument at the age of 4 they will need no pushing to get them on their way. I have friends who wish that they had got to the stage where they started to enjoy playing, and I believe in most people this doesn't come until several years at least into playing.

I often hear people telling me how they wished they hadn't quit playing when they were younger. Don't let yet another generation of children miss out on such a valuable opportunity to express themselves.

Lauren, Telford, England

Like the other commenters, I have to agree that this article misses the mark by a wide margin.

First, violin & cello and other "middle class" things are unpopular. Violin etc. used to be the instruments of popular music, but not anymore. Kids are more likely to play if they play guitar or keyboard. Or sing.

Second, practicing music is really good for one thing: playing music. While there is some (not very good) research indicating benefits as side effects, they are so small that if you want your child to be good at, say, math, then they should practice math; just as if you want your child to be good at tennis, you practice tennis.

Third, you have to expect that a lot of kids will want to take it so far and no further, and no amount of coercion or persuasion will help. The vast majority will be doing well if they make it to grade 3. It won't satisfy purists, and it won't get a job in an orchestra, but it will be good for a lot of fun and pleasure

William McIlhagga, Ilkley,

I would second the recommendation to get children into groups, but for a different reason. It was through participating in music schools and orchestras organized by Suffolk County Music Service that I was spurred on: I saw the more experienced musicians playing better parts, and more exciting music, and I wanted that.

Music isn't my career now, but I have happy memories of foreign concert tours with the

county wind band, and being in the band for student musicals at university (where I wasn't a music student). I wouldn't have had those experiences if I'd not started out playing trumpet 3 in the basic Kaleidoscope arrangements in Ipswich on a Saturday morning!

Emily, St Albans, UK

For goodness sake! Music is supposed to be a pleasure, and as someone who gets huge enjoyment from singing in a choir I can confirm it IS a pleasure if you do it because you want to. Nothing is a pleasure if you are forced to do it against your will. I do feel sorry for middle-class children these days. If they miss out on a smidgeon of 'brain development', so what, and don't you think that will be more than compensated for by the removal of stress? A child who is interested in music and enjoys it but needs a little pushing to practise is a different matter. They have all their lives to learn to play an instrument or sing. What is certain is that if they're forced to as a child, they are a lot less likely to later on.

Jean Jones, Edinburgh,

For goodness sake, let your poor child pursue the extra-curricular activities he chooses. Enforced music won't 'improve' him. I spent hours every week as a child practicing my instruments - of my own volition, not parentally enforced - and it gave me great pleasure at the time. But frankly, in terms of useful adult skills, I'd have been much better off spending that time learning to play a decent game of tennis - and I'm sure the discipline involved in tennis would have been just as beneficial as that of music.

Rebecca, London,

Neither pleasing one's parents nor beneficial brain development are good reasons to learn to play a musical instrument.

A better thing for parents to do is to peacefully assist their child in activities that he already enjoys. This includes coming up with ideas for improvement and for new activities that will be genuinely preferred. They won't necessarily be culturally sanctioned activities like music, ballet or horse riding.

However, they will be truly educational, because the child is intrinsically motivated. And they may lead to greater things.

Coercion just damages people's autonomy.

Tom, Bristol,

My husband is an orchestral musician (violin) and was forced - by an over enthusiastic parent (accompanied by regular physical assaults) - into playing from the age of 4. Whilst successful in his career, the rewards are poor and the costs high (how many employees

have to own and maintain at considerable expense their own tools of trade? The annual cost of his violin - including maintenance, insurance and servicing a loan for a soloist standard instrument - is around UKS18,000). He loves music but has a love/hate relationship with his career. He also regrets enormously losing his childhood to parental over ambition.