

What age to begin instrumental lessons

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

Making music is a primeval urge in humans, and there's a wealth of studies that demonstrate the benefits of music to young children in their emotional, social and academic development. Some research shows that babies can respond to music even before they're born. Videos circulating on social media showing children performing impossibly difficult pieces at prodigiously young ages, and perhaps the lure of a music scholarship at their chosen school, can lead to a clamour among parents to start their children on formal music lessons at an early age, in the belief that it will give them a head start.

But what factors do we need to consider when starting instrumental lessons? Is there a benefit to starting as early as possible, or can it be counterproductive? Rather than benefiting from an early start, is there a danger that the imposition of rules and discipline may put children off and stifle creative urges? Could poor posture and bad habits become ingrained if they start too young? And how do we adapt our teaching style for younger pupils?

Basic skills

Some instruments lend themselves to earlier starts than others, and the starting points I'll be suggesting in this resource are a rough minimum age. I'll be using school year groups, which will be helpful for those who teach in schools. To convert that to an age, add four or five – for example, Year 3 is age 7-8. Children obviously come in different shapes and sizes, and have varying levels of aptitude, motivation and coordination, so generalising about ages is not always useful. What's more appropriate is to consider the skill sets required, which are prerequisites to learning an instrument. These include being able to:

- ▶ Grasp the basics of reading, writing and counting, so they will be able to transfer these concepts to reading music.
- ▶ Hold and operate the instrument in a relaxed way without distorting their posture.
- ▶ Be able to carry the instrument without straining themselves.
- ▶ Produce a sound without unnecessary tension or straining.
- ▶ Have the maturity and patience to understand that they are in it for the long haul – they are unlikely be able to play *Star Wars* in their first lesson, for example.
- ▶ Understand that to make progress, regular focused practice is essential.
- ▶ Have the attention span for a full lesson.
- ▶ Have the ability to exercise self-criticism and independently learn from it.
- ▶ Have enthusiasm and a determination to learn music.
- ▶ Ideally have a basic understanding of pitch and pulse – though these will, of course, be developed during the lessons.

The danger of starting too early is that slow progress might make a pupil disillusioned, and make parents think they're wasting their money. Pupils who start later usually catch up quickly on their counterparts who started years earlier, and will then have more momentum moving forwards.

Edward Maxwell is a freelance trumpet player and experienced teacher who has taught in primary, secondary and higher education. His current teaching includes Cranleigh School, Hurstpierpoint College and Reigate Grammar School. He is a keen composer and arranger, and his educational music books have been published by Boosey and Hawkes, Spartan Press, Music Sales and Warwick Music. He is an examiner for Music Teachers' Board.



Who chooses the instrument?

Any guide on choosing an instrument for a child is in danger of being based on a false premise: a parent or teacher should not be imposing the choice of instrument. Both parents and teachers do, of course, have the right to exercise a veto: lack of ownership of a car may preclude larger instruments, for example, and certain instruments may be prohibitively expensive, though schools or music services may be able to lend or rent out a suitable instrument. A particularly loud instrument, on the other hand, may be problematic for someone who lives in a flat with close neighbours.

There are many tired clichés about the type of people who play particular instruments. As a trumpet-playing introvert, I certainly don't fit the stereotype of the loud, brash brass-playing personality. I've seen huge people playing the piccolo and tiny people playing the double bass. Left-handed or right-handed, big or small, virtually any child is capable of playing any instrument, and it's crucial that they have the final say. Many schools and music services offer 'hands-on' introductions, and children's concerts or YouTube videos can easily inspire a child.

We'll now turn to look at some different instruments. Beware: very small, cheap and/or simplified plastic versions of instruments should be treated with caution and researched carefully. Some can offer an excellent pathway to the real thing, but others can be of very poor quality, difficult to play, tune and maintain, and sound terrible, causing endless frustration.

Instrumental possibilities

Piano (Year 1)

Some teachers may start pupils on piano in reception or even younger, but be warned that progress is likely to be painfully slow. The advantages of piano include:

- ▶ The notes are all laid out in front of you, so you can make visual and aural connections between the different notes.
- ▶ When learning to read music, the shapes of the written notes on the page follow the same contours as the fingers on the keyboard, ie if the notes move up in steps on the page, your fingers move up adjacent keys.
- ▶ There is no technical obstacle to making a sound – no problems with making reeds, strings or lips vibrate.
- ▶ The black notes give a ready-made pentatonic scale, ideal for early compositions and improvisations.
- ▶ Piano is good for early development of children's coordination and fine motor skills.

As with all instruments, there's the risk of bad habits developing, mainly connected with posture and maintaining a curved hand position. It's a good idea to put a stool under the pupil's feet so they can rest them, and to help them sit up straight.

Strings

Small instruments are available in all members of the string family to cater for tiny hands. Just to clarify, the ratio is not the fraction of the size of the full-size instrument – for example, a full size violin is 60cm long, a 1/2 size is 52cm and 1/8 size is 43cm. The larger the instrument, the better the sound is likely to be, so starting on a very small instrument can cause frustration with tuning and sound production. However, using good-quality strings can considerably improve the sound of a cheap instrument.

Children can struggle with the independent movement of their left fingers, and establishing a good bow hold is difficult – they need to keep fingers flexible, knuckles bent, and the wrist supple, without gripping the bow in a fist.

Violin (Year 2)

Some Suzuki violin courses start children as young as three years old, but most violin teachers will not start teaching pupils until they are in Year 1 or 2. The physical process of holding up a violin can make your arm ache, hindering practice and lesson length, and there's a tendency to grip the left hand around the neck.

Viola (Year 3)

Viola players are always in demand, and although most viola players learn violin first, it's not necessary to do so. Indeed, starting viola from scratch removes the need to transpose the alto clef from treble clef. Small-sized violas are available.

Cello (Year 2)

Although more bulky to carry, the cello has the advantage over the violin and viola in that it rests on the ground, making a good posture easier to maintain. Again, there's a variety of sizes available – start with one that's initially comfortable, not one that your child or student can 'grow into.' A small bow should be used to teach a good bow hold, and a stool of a suitable height is essential.

Double bass (Year 4)

Starting on a 1/4 size is common, though some pupils start as young as Year 2 on a 1/8 size.

Guitar (Year 3)

Although they're very different from playing a real guitar, games like *Guitar Hero* can provide early inspiration and teach some basic coordination skills. Ukulele has recently become popular as a classroom activity, and it can provide a gateway to the guitar. Although it's tuned differently and there will be many technical differences, some of the necessary coordination and motor skills can be developed on ukulele first.

Wind

As with brass instruments, second front teeth are desirable when beginning a wind instrument, as are the abilities to hold the instrument up, form an embouchure, coordinate fingers, and maintain sufficient breath support, all factors that make wind instruments unsuitable for very young children.

Learning the recorder first can give a good introduction to the feel of blowing, fingering and tonguing on a wind instrument. Even a recorder can cause frustration, however, if a pupil is unable to cover the holes completely.

Flute (Year 3)

Smaller flutes are available, which are lighter to hold and have curved head joints. Reduced key-work means they lack low C and C sharp. The fife can be used as an introductory instrument. Although the fingerings are different, it should not present a problem when transitioning to flute.

Clarinet (Year 3)

A full-size clarinet can be hard to hold for small hands, but there are smaller, lighter, plastic C clarinets available which are suitable from Year 2. Particular attention should be paid to a suitable reed, balancing ease of sound production with quality of tone.

Saxophone (Year 5)

Saxophonists generally start a little older than other wind players because of the extra size and weight of the instrument, though some pupils start on clarinet and then move across – there are many transferable skills.

Oboe (Year 4)

Student oboes are available with fewer keys. Oboes can be hard to blow and the lips tire quickly, so it can be difficult for a younger child to sustain sufficient stamina for a half-hour lesson. Reeds can cause considerable frustration to younger pupils.

Bassoon (Year 5)

Mini bassoons are available as a starter instrument for younger pupils, but they may have difficulty getting a good sound, and there's often problematic intonation.

Brass

Most brass teachers wait until pupils' adult front teeth are fully grown, which is usually between the ages of six and eight. There is, however, no consensus. I've heard anecdotal evidence that playing while the adult teeth are still moving into position has made them misaligned (but who knows if they'd have grown like that anyway?). In reality, playing a brass instrument is unlikely to affect the direction of teeth growth because the mouthpiece rests against the gum, not the teeth. As a brass teacher myself, I used my daughter as a test subject: she was keen to learn the trumpet from the age of five and played through wobbly teeth and gaps without any ill effects. However, I would still advise against taking on pupils without adult front teeth.

The pBuzz plastic instrument can make a good starter instrument to introduce the concept of brass playing to very young pupils, especially for group teaching. I have heard of successful group projects with five- and six-year-olds.

Trumpet (Year 3)

The trumpet can be heavy for small arms, so starting on the more compact cornet is worth considering. There are lighter plastic trumpets available, but they are variable in quality. A poor-quality trumpet, whether plastic or metal, can cause endless frustration with sticky valves, especially with pupils who have poor finger technique.

French Horn (Year 3)

Smaller, more compact 'kinder horns' are available in B flat and F. These are suitable for pupils up to the age of around ten. The advantage of a B flat horn is that it is smaller, making it easier to hold, and the harmonics are wider apart, making it easier to find the pitches. However, some horn teachers prefer the F horn because of the improved sound quality. The tenor horn is an easier instrument to hold and can be a good starting point for a potential French horn player.

Trombone (Year 4)

The main issue with the trombone is the weight and reach. Plastic trombones have become widespread and are much lighter to hold, though they don't make the reach to sixth and seventh position any easier. There's also the danger that in stretching, the mouthpiece position will slide to the right, which should be avoided at all costs. The alto trombone is often considered to be an advanced instrument, but it can be used as a starter instrument for smaller children, and there's a plastic version available. They will soon get used to the change in pitch when they move to a full-size instrument.

Tuba (Year 4)

Small, three-valve tubas (in E flat) are available, and there are also stands available to rest the instrument at a suitable height. A pupil would then move to a full-size tuba at around secondary school age. Pupils need to be careful when carrying the instruments – it's best to avoid carrying them as a back-pack even though many cases offer that option, because of the potential for back strain. Many pupils move to tuba having started on euphonium or baritone.

Euphonium (Year 3)

A baritone, being slightly smaller, is a suitable alternative if a euphonium is too cumbersome.

Percussion

Drums (Year 3)

Children's rhythmic ability and general coordination skills can vary enormously, so this is one of the harder instruments to pin down to a suitable age – pupils can start learning drums from any age. However, they often struggle with the requisite coordination and motor skills, and an over-enthusiastic youngster may be hard to rein in. There's also the physical problem of reaching the drum pedals. Before taking formal lessons, video games such as *Rock Band* are great for learning to sustain a pulse.

Adapting your teaching style for younger pupils

How do children learn?

Young children learn by playing, copying, assimilating and experimenting, rather than simply following instructions. They speak language before they learn to read and write – a very different approach to learning a language formally at school, where reading and writing go hand in hand with speaking. And here we can draw an analogy with music: initially a young child may develop a sense of pitch by singing and a sense of rhythm and pulse by dancing or playing percussion, without the need for notation. They may further create and explore sound-worlds by playing with toy instruments.

The most important thing at this stage is to open their minds and immerse them in the beauty of music, giving them the freedom to enjoy it without the rules associated with developing a secure posture and technique on an instrument. Parents singing along with their children and listening to music, taking them to toddler music groups and dance classes, can sow the seeds of a reliable sense of pitch and pulse which will be so important to them in their future music making.

Taking a practical rather theoretical approach

For younger pupils, we need to adapt our teaching style. An aurally focused curriculum may initially be better than one based on reading. The ability to sing is crucial, and it may be good to incorporate elements of the Kodály approach. You may want to incorporate solfège into simple singing games, or sing the first five notes of a major scale with the numbers '1, 2, 3, 4, 5', and then sing different patterns of notes applying the same numbers. This sows the seeds of learning intervals. So, in C major, singing C to F is going to be '1' and '4' – the interval of a 4th.

Singing rounds is a fun way to lay foundations for ensemble playing. Patterns of words are effective in learning different rhythms: names, foods or animals can be clapped or incorporated into chants or songs. Making up nonsense rhymes can engage and amuse young children. Once they've learnt these skills with singing, clapping and using body percussion, the next step is to transfer these skills onto their instrument.

Learning by rote or by ear?

There's an important distinction to be drawn between learning by rote and playing by ear, though there's room for both in teaching small children. Repetition is very important: just as learning times tables by rote is an important tool in maths, so learning technical and scale patterns is important, since these are the building blocks of music. Learning exercises by rote develops fine motor skills and 'muscular memory' (obviously this term is a misnomer – we all know that muscles don't literally have a memory). Essentially, we are building a physical knowledge on the instrument whereby we instinctively play the right notes because we have internalised so many note patterns, gradually building up fluency in different keys.

Learning small note patterns and then playing call-and-response games can be a very useful exercise. At first, just play a short phrase for a pupil to copy, and then get the pupil to play something for you to copy. If the pupil is copying by just looking at your fingers, that is copying or learning by rote; if they are reproducing phrases by *listening* to the note shapes, that is playing by ear.

It might be a good idea to cover your fingers or position them in such a way that your pupil can't see them. Then you can do some simple improvisation games, preferably over a backing track to instil a sense of rhythm and pulse. The important thing is not to blindly copy, but be creative with the patterns you have initially learnt by rote. Going back to the analogy with times tables, the crucial thing is to be adaptable with the information you've learnt by rote and use it with intelligence. If you want to teach some simple pieces by ear, ask pupils to sing the note shapes and then work them out on their instrument.

When introducing notation, it's important to make mental connections between the shapes of the notes on the page and the aural patterns of sounds that the notes represent, using the finger patterns that children may have learnt by rote to do this fluently. Getting a child to make up their own system of notation with graphic scores can be useful to introduce the logic of the relationships between notes, perhaps drawing a stair case and imagining walking up and down, firstly in adjacent steps, then skipping steps or moving in bigger jumps. For rhythm, imagine walking at a steady speed by a fence. You have a stick and hit each fence post, thus creating a beat. You can create different numbers of beats in a bar by having different numbers of slats between the main posts of your fence.

Some teachers resort to the 'colouring by numbers' approach, writing in every fingering. I have seen pupils playing Grade 5- or 6-standard pieces, purely following fingerings, with no thought or understanding of the aural shapes or musical notation. While there can be a place for learning the building blocks by rote, it's crucial not to rely too heavily on this approach for learning pieces, otherwise no transferable skills will be developed.

Practice

The much-vaunted 10,000 hours' practice required to be truly proficient on an instrument can be misunderstood. Practice needs to be focused and systematic. If it ingrains mistakes, it may be doing more harm than good. The practice of a ten-year-old may be infinitely more productive than that of a five-year-old. This isn't to say that starting early is a bad thing – if a child derives pleasure from the experience, that's obviously beneficial. But if the motive is to gain a head start, there may be parental disappointment, and slow progress early on may put the child off. It's likely that for younger children, practice will need to be directly supervised and monitored by parents. Even children who are enthusiastic to learn will probably lack the organisational skills to sustain practice in a methodical way.

Managing parental ambition

The most important factor in accepting a pupil who may be on the borderline of being too young is managing parental expectations. If parents' motivation is a gentle introduction to the fun and creativity of music making, and if they're willing to give support and encouragement to both you and their child, the pupil may be worth taking on. If, on the other hand, the parents have a strict timetable of exams and will hold you personally responsible if the child does not make their first concerto appearance by the age of ten, it might be prudent to decline the request for lessons.

Ensembles

Children should be encouraged to play in ensembles as soon as they start, even when they can play only a handful of notes. Making music with others creates friendships, encourages teamwork, improves a pupil's sense of rhythm and pitch, and keeps them motivated. There are always peaks and troughs when learning an instrument. Being in an ensemble can keep momentum going in the times when practice feels like a struggle and progress is slow.

Conclusion

There's no consensus among music teachers about when is the best time to start, though most will suggest later rather than earlier: it's often best to err on the side of caution and wait until a child is sufficiently mature, physically able and musically astute. Many early starters lose interest because progress is so painfully slow. Child prodigies are extremely rare, and would end up being just as good if they had started a few years later (and maybe enjoyed a more normal early childhood). Not all top players started on their instruments as toddlers – many didn't start until their teens.

There's always the temptation to take a pupil on too early because you may risk losing them to a rival teacher. However, if you stick to your principles, your reputation will be enhanced. Learning an instrument requires lots of patience, and it's a good test of a pupil's patience if they're prepared to wait until they're big enough to hold their instrument correctly, or for their adult teeth to come through. It's fine to give a young pupil a trial, but if the lessons descend into little more than overpaid child-minding, have the integrity to tell the parents that they're wasting their money.

Of course, there's no upper limit, as my 80-year-old mother will attest: she's just passed her Grade 1 piano.