

Your Child's Music Lessons

A guide for parents by Edward Maxwell

Section 1: 'Musical Stuff'

Why learn music?

Virtually everyone likes listening to music. Music makes the world a better place. But in addition to the enjoyment and cultural enrichment we gain from learning and playing music, music lessons have been scientifically proven to be of great benefit in children's social and intellectual development.

Research has shown that music is proven to be a learning accelerator and pupils who learn a musical instrument perform better than their peers academically, even when they miss school academic lessons to take their instrumental lesson. There is an overwhelming body of evidence, some of which is presented in the booklet 'The Fourth "R"' (Published by the Campaign for Music in the Curriculum, ISBN 1-899491-03-1), which quotes studies from Europe and the USA.

The foreword of the booklet states:

There is now empirical evidence linking children's learning of music with significantly improved abilities in other subjects. This seems to be particularly the case when children start to learn music at an early age... Even when learning music slightly reduces the time spent on other subjects, the experience actually increases children's learning in the other disciplines.

Apart from the unique ability of music to be a general learning accelerator, there are many fine by-products of increased music lessons, such as the character-building effects of music in teamwork, coordination and self-discipline.

It has been shown that music helps children improve:

- Reading ability
- Ability in maths, science and engineering
- Speech-fluency in native and foreign languages
- Team-working and social skills
- Memorising capacity
- Reasoning capacity
- Time management skills
- Learning ability
- Problem solving ability
- Ability to handle performance pressure
- Artistic ability and neatness

When you consider what children learn when they have instrumental lessons, this is not surprising: they are learning how to translate a code of symbols (musical notation) into an abstract medium (namely organised sound). They interpret this by coordinating muscles in the fingers, hands, arms, and (in the case of wind and brass instruments) lips, diaphragm and tongue. Along the way, they learn mathematics - such as fractions and relationships between different note-lengths within a steady pulse, relationships between pitches, the complex patterns of key signatures, the science of how sound is made, including the harmonic series, and (again in the case of wind instruments) the functioning of the diaphragm and the processes involved in breathing. Add to that, a new vocabulary (largely Italian) and the historical context in which music is written.

On top of these 'scientific' aspects of music can, of course, be added the enjoyment and appreciation of different musical genres from around the world.

All of this is delivered on an individual basis.

If your child was taken out of class for a one-to-one special session on maths, you would probably be delighted, and not too worried about the class lesson being left behind. Being so rich in educational content, music is just as good, if not better. Some schools suggest that academically struggling pupils should stop music lessons in order to concentrate on, say maths. In reality, music may just capture a child's imagination and learning the relationship between a crotchet and quaver may just make fractions 'click' for them.

Universities, unable to distinguish between pupils with straight A-grades are increasingly looking at musical achievements, as are businesses, which recognise the discipline, dedication and motivation required to be successful on a musical instrument.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882): *"If I had to live my life over again, I would have made a rule to ... listen to some music at least once every week. For perhaps parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use."* (Autobiography)

Plato (c428-c347 BC): *"Education in music is most sovereign because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the innermost soul and take strongest hold upon them, bringing with them and imparting grace if one is rightly trained."*

The following links are just a small selection of online articles about the power of music:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/12/141223132546.htm>

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/opinion/sunday/is-music-the-key-to-success.html?_r=0

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-406023/Music-lessons-IQ-booster-young-minds.html>

<http://www.mec.org.uk/news/2015/1/28/benefits-of-music-education-are-reinforced-in-new-publicatio.html>

Encouraging Independent Learning

My maxim for teaching is: **Teaching Pupils To Teach Themselves.**

Rather than being spoon-fed, it is good for pupils to think and work things out for themselves.

Learning music is rather like doing a jigsaw puzzle: once all the pieces are in place, you can step back and admire the bigger picture – the actual musical content. Each piece of the puzzle is one of the

technical and musical skills which have been learnt and they all come together to create something which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Here is a scenario frequently played out in music lessons:

Pupil: 'I couldn't practise the piece you set, because I don't know how it goes.'

Teacher: 'it's all there written in front of you. If your English teacher set you a short story to read for homework, it would be illogical to say that you couldn't read it because you didn't know what happened in the story. You read it and find out, just as if you play the notes written in front of you, you'll find out how the tune goes.'

When one of my children was about three years old, he loved being read the children's classic, 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'. One day he said, 'I'll read it to you.' Sure enough, he recited it word-for-word, turning the pages at all the right places. The only problem was, of course, that he wasn't actually reading a single word. If you could train a monkey to play a piece on the piano, you'd be back to square one if you wanted it to play something else. Sadly some teachers take this approach with pieces (especially exam pieces), which means that pupils sometimes don't have the skills to play anything else because they're not actually being taught to read the notes and the rhythms.

When children are learning to read English, class teachers will always encourage a high turnover of books which they can read fairly fluently. There is no benefit in a child needing help on every word. The same principle should apply to music: a high turnover of easy pieces develops fluency and musical understanding. An easy piece played fluently and expressively always sounds more impressive than stumbling through a piece which is a bit too hard.

I try to give something new every lesson, along with something old – perhaps revising an old piece. This doesn't mean that I think the pupil is going backwards.

I'm always happy for pupils to explore things for themselves, so if someone hasn't actually practised what I've set, but has tried something different instead – maybe something they've found on the internet or something in one of their books – that's all good!

I always welcome parents coming along to observe lessons – please let me know if you'd like to.

Exams

When my own children have taken gymnastics, ballet and swimming classes, they have received a certificate and gone up a 'level' every few terms without any practice between classes. **Music exams don't work like this.** Turning up for a lesson every week is not sufficient to work your way up the grades. I have heard parents say to me, 'my child has been learning for x amount of time, therefore he/she should be taking grade y.' However long your child has been having lessons, they simply won't work their way up the grades without practice. The answer to the question, 'when is my child going to take the next grade?' is simply, 'when they've done enough practice and when they can play the requirements.'

This is my very rough estimate of the amount of practice required to work your way through the grades:

50-150 hours of practice... then Grade 1
a further 100-175 hours... then Grade 2
150-200 hrs... Grade 3
175-225 hrs... Grade 4
200-250 hrs... Grade 5
250-300 hrs... Grade 6
300-350 hrs... Grade 7
400-500 hrs... Grade 8 (achieved in a total of 1,560-2,150 hours)
(All professional musicians will have done well over 10,000 hours of practice)

If your child practises for 10 minutes, three times a week, it could take around 6 years to achieve grade 1.

ABRSM, Trinity and MTB exams are internationally recognised qualifications, which sit within the government's Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). Furthermore, grades 6-8 give pupils UCAS points towards University entry.

If you think that you're merely buying exam certificates when you're paying for music lessons, then please talk to me – you probably have the wrong teacher.

My number one priority is to teach musical literacy and appreciation through playing an instrument – and the correct technique which this requires. Exams are good landmarks along the way - snapshots of progress - but should not be regarded as the be-all and end-all.

To quote from the introduction of 'Your Guide to ABRSM music exams'

ABRSM exams motivate achievement and support progression. They lay good foundations for music making while encouraging students to reach their full potential, though we advise teachers and candidates to use our exams as a means to this end, rather than as an end in themselves. They can form only part of a musical curriculum, for which they provide goals and recognition along the way.

Exams encourage a holistic approach by assessing performance skills, technical skills (scales and arpeggios), notation skills (sight-reading), and listening skills (aural tests) but if misused, they can distort a pupil's progress – for example, a pupil can sometimes move through early grades quite rapidly but if the correct foundations are not in place, they can hit a brick wall. This happens in particular if a teacher focuses too much on the exam pieces, to the exclusion of other repertoire. The pieces end up being learnt 'by rote' and the pupil hasn't picked up the skills necessary to work anything out for themselves.

When a pupil has passed one grade, parents invariably want to move straight onto the next, rather than what should often be a period of regrouping and consolidating. If you have played grade 1 standard pieces, you might not be ready to play grade 2 standard pieces. How about grade one-and-a-quarter standard; then one-and-a-half; then one-and-three-quarters?

To quote from the ABRSM book:

There is no need to go straight on to the next grade. Ideally there will be plenty of time between exams for a wide range of different music making, learning and listening activities.

A good teacher should be providing a broader curriculum than just exam pieces. I am always disappointed when I see that a pupil has only learnt three exam pieces from an exam book. Pupils should be learning non-exam pieces too. Why not learn all the other pieces in the book? It will build up a better knowledge of repertoire and style and develop sight-reading skills. In the long run, this approach will enable a pupil to move through the grades quicker.

Practice

Learning an instrument is one of the hardest but most rewarding things anyone will ever attempt. An instrument is never fully mastered and there are enormous frustrations to be overcome along the way.

The legendary cellist, Pablo Casals, was asked why he continued to practise at the age of 90. "Because I think I'm making progress," he replied.

It takes enormous self-discipline and dedication to learn an instrument. Nobel Medicine Prize-winner, Thomas Sudhof credits his most influential teacher as his bassoon teacher, "who taught me that the only way to do something right is to practise and listen and practise and listen, hours, and hours, and hours." Quoted in The Lancet:

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(10\)61210-X/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(10)61210-X/fulltext)

There is much debate about whether 'natural talent' actually exists at all. In his compelling book *Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*, Matthew Syed argues very persuasively that there is no such thing as natural talent: all successful musicians, athletes and artists only *appear* to have natural talent because they have done at least 10,000 hours of focussed practice. Claiming that a child has 'natural talent', may be detrimental – you may be playing their efforts and implying that they can rely on their mysterious god-given gift rather than continuing their hard work. It is also giving a convenient excuse for someone who doesn't practise so much: 'well I don't have so much natural talent, so it's harder for me.'

Would you like to increase the value for money spent on music lessons seven-fold?

Easy – practise seven days a week! Easier said than done, as I know with my own children. Music practice always seems to be put off until there's no time left in the day. If practice can become part of a daily routine, (like it or not – rather like cleaning your teeth, it's just something you do) then hopefully the resultant progress will provide motivation to continue this routine. Try setting the challenge of practising every day (or maybe 6 days a week) for a month (preferably at the same time every day) and hopefully it will become habit. This approach worked very well for one of my own children who went on to practise for hours without being asked. For younger children, try sticker charts and rewards.

I send lesson notes with hints and things to practise – please read these and support and encourage your child.

Suggested amounts of practice:

Grade 1 - 10 mins a day

Grade 2 - 20 mins a day

Grade 3 - 30 mins a day

etc...

Grade 8 - 80 mins a day

...or try the number of hours per week equals the grade you're working towards, so if you're working towards grade 4, you could aim to do 4 hours a week.

Some suggestions about how to practise (some of these points are expanded in the 'musical development' section):

- A little bit frequently is far better than a binge the night before a lesson. Try to get into a regular routine.
- For brass instruments, building up endurance is essential. Don't have more than 2 days off in a row, or your stamina will suffer. A famous band-leader once said, *'if I have one day off I know; if I have two days off my band knows; if I have three days off everybody knows.'*
- Technical exercises and scales are vital aspects of learning an instrument. They're a bit like medicine – you might not like it, but it's very good for you.
- Although it's sometimes good to play pieces all the way through, it is good to break it up into bite-size chunks (the 'pieces of the jigsaw' I mentioned earlier).
- Don't just practise what you can already play – push yourself outside your comfort zone.
- Focus on the hard bits and practise them very slowly. Slow and accurate is better than fast and messy. Mozart said, *'it is much easier to play a thing quickly than to play it slowly.'*
- Keep to a steady tempo – don't speed up for the easy bits and slow down for the difficult bits. A parent can help by tapping a beat, or use a metronome.
- Pupils shouldn't be limited by just playing things set by their teacher – explore other pieces, look on the internet and play through old tunes.
- Think of constructing a large complex Lego model. However daunting and difficult it might look, you just build it up methodically piece by piece - each individual step is actually not hard. Likewise, a complex piece can be built up systematically, note by note. Patience and perseverance is the key.
- Some children like their parents to sit with them when they practise, which is good, though also try to encourage some independence.
- Mistakes are good. That's how we learn. But repeating the same mistake will ingrain it. Make sure that you play a difficult passage more times right than wrong. Imagine you are Andy Murray, practising serving right into the corner. If he hits the perfect serve, does he stop and think, 'great, I've nailed that – I'll go and have a cup of tea'? Of course not – he'll try over and over again, gradually building up consistency. There is a saying, *'an amateur practises until he gets it right; a professional practises until he can't get it wrong.'* Take the pro's approach.

- Always encourage your child, however bad you might think they sound. Believe me, I sometimes sound pretty awful when I practise and I play professionally!
- Make sure your child has somewhere where they feel comfortable to practise – sending a child to the garden shed because they make such a horrible noise isn't going to help.
- I've sometimes had pupils tell me that they're not allowed to practise due to waking up the new baby. I've got four children and often the only time for me to practise is when they've just gone to bed. It doesn't keep them awake – they've been used to the noise since before they were born. Get everyone in the house used to the sound, so it just becomes a part of life.

Musical Development

Scales and Arpeggios

are important for building strong technical skills and musical understanding. By practising them, pupils start to build an 'instinct' on their instrument, so that their fingers seem to develop a mind of their own and know what to play without conscious thought. This gives pupils confidence and security when sight-reading and learning new pieces. Scales and arpeggios develop many aspects of technique, including articulation, tone and intonation and help pupils understand keys. As with all aspects of music, scales should be performed with a sense of line and direction. Try not to make them mechanical. **Even if a pupil doesn't wish to take exams, scales are still essential.**

Scale books are useful on the piano for fingerings, but I don't like using them on the trumpet. The scales need to be learnt by memory, so why not learn them by memory straight away, rather than getting used to reading them first?

Musicality and phrasing

Music is so much more than just a series of notes; it is all about how the notes link together with a sense of line and direction. Just as one word merges into the next when you talk, so one note should flow onto the next when you play. A phrase is like a 'musical sentence' and phrasing is like musical punctuation. Think about the mood you want to convey: the music should be painting a picture or telling a story. It is great to visualise a scene in order to convey the mood and emotion in the music. Just as an actor can bring his lines to life, so you can do this with the music: different notes also have a different level of importance or weight. Even if you don't like the music or it seems to make no sense, it is the performer's job to give it meaning and emotion. A good actor can captivate you even if the script is bad or uninspiring, but a bad actor will kill even the best-written script. This is why good technique is so essential.

Singing

is a great way to develop musicianship and a sense of phrasing. Learning to sight-sing (which involves anticipating 'intervals', or the gaps between the notes) is an essential skill for an advanced musician.

Frank Sinatra said, *'it was my idea to make my voice work in the same way as a trombone or violin - not sounding like them, but 'playing' the voice like those instruments.'* Similarly, instrumental musicians can use the voice as model for their performance.

Theory

is also useful for developing a secure musical grounding. A pass at Grade 5 theory is required before moving on to Grade 6 practical in ABRSM exams. There is little time in an instrumental lesson to cover much theory, though I do try to incorporate it into lessons. Some schools have theory clubs or separate theory classes, which are well worth attending.

Improvisation and Composition

It is always good to try to make up your own tunes, but it can be daunting. Think about 'doodling' a picture. You might start with a small shape or pattern and gradually develop this – see where it takes you. Try using just a couple of notes or a simple rhythm to experiment with, and just allow it to grow organically. If you have a tune with a CD accompaniment, try embellishing and changing the tune so it still fits with the accompaniment.

Aural

Regardless of the instrument, developing good critical listening skills is a crucial part of developing a musician, which is why aural tests are included in music exams. Good ways to practise aural skills are singing along to anything you hear on the radio or TV, clap along with rhythms or the beat and listen to what time a piece is in. Higher up the grades, you need to develop an awareness of different musical styles, so listen to Classic FM and look up details of the composer, so you build up a knowledge of how music sounded in different periods of history.

There are lots of aural books available with accompanying CDs (try 'Aural Time' by David Turnbull (pub. Bosworth), or for mock ABRSM aural tests, see:

<http://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/preparation-for-exams/mock-aural-tests/>

There is also an ABRSM aural app and a good series of books for each grade: 'The Aural Test Survival Book' by Caroline Evans (Peters Edition).

Technique

is a means to an end, not the end itself. A good film sweeps you up in the story, not merely making you wonder how they made it. Stunts, explosions and CGI effects can feel contrived and gratuitous, even tedious, if they have no purpose in the narrative. Afterwards you can wonder how they managed to construct the film, but while you're watching it, a good film should transport into a different world. As a child I used to listen to recordings of the legendary trumpet player, Maurice Andre, and wonder why everyone made such a fuss about how good he was - he only played simple stuff. Then I realised that my immature ears had been fooled – he just made it sound simple.

Pablo Casals said, *'the most perfect technique is that which is not noticed at all.'* Developing a good technique is essential – all too often a poor technique doesn't allow musicality to shine through.

Performing

Nothing is too easy for you - you're not above anything! Take any opportunity to perform – school concerts, assemblies, church, family events etc. An easy piece played expressively and fluently sounds much more impressive than stumbling through a piece which is too hard. If your child is working towards grade four, don't think that a grade two standard piece is beneath them. If they can play it completely securely with a beautiful tone, nicely shaped dynamics and a rock solid beat, that will wow the audience far more than trying to impress by playing a grade five piece which is scratchy, out of time and frequently breaks down.

Any ensemble playing gives sight-reading practice builds up knowledge of repertoire and of course gives an opportunity to make new friends. Some student ensembles go on exciting foreign tours. Ensemble playing can be especially good for modest, nervous or shy pupils who don't want to be the centre of attention, but none the less can feel engaged and take more pride in their achievements.

Sight-reading

If a piece which has been thoroughly prepared is like a painting with colour, details and light and shade; sight-reading is like a quick sketch. Obviously the more detail you can get in, the better, but the general outline is the most important thing. If you're doing a quick sketch of a castle, at the very least it should be recognisable as a castle. Beyond that, the more details and shading you can get in, the better, but there's no point in spending all your time drawing a detailed doorway if you can't tell that it leads to a castle. The general musical outline is more important than all the right notes.

A good musician can tell how a piece should sound by just looking at it. Even if you don't play all the right notes, focus on the rhythm, which will keep the music flowing, and try and follow the contours and textures of the music. **The Golden Rule: DON'T STOP!**

Mistakes

We all make mistakes. Mistakes are a good thing! That's how we learn. I often see mistakes in lessons as a positive thing: I see a pupil play something, identify where they went wrong, and come up with a solution to correct the problem. It often reveals far more than a pupil playing something right. It reassures me that the pupil will be able to problem-solve independently. What alarms me is when a pupil doesn't notice when they make a mistake, or persistently makes the same mistake. Every time they make the same mistake, they are reinforcing it. Pencil markings by the teacher on the music, such as circles around the problematic area are supposed to draw the pupil's attention and make them focus extra hard. I am always disappointed when a circle has not been acted upon and the problem remains. Pieces can quickly have a large amount of pencil markings building up, so each one has less impact. When a problem has been solved, it might be a good idea to rub out the associated pencil mark. All musicians mark their music and pupils should feel free to make their own marks to help themselves, though always use a pencil, not a pen. Try to use markings sparingly, just to jog your memory at a particularly difficult section. Marking in every fingering or note-name is just being lazy and will hinder progress – you end up just looking at the fingerings rather than reading the music.

Listen

to as much music as you can, with open ears. Go to concerts; think about how the music in films creates different moods. 'Contemporary' music often doesn't sound very nice on the surface (just as contemporary art doesn't always look very nice!) BUT it is often immensely powerful, with interesting sounds, patterns, textures and moods. Often very complex contemporary music is used in films, but it makes sense because of the images attached. If you play or hear a contemporary piece, try imagining an image, mood or story to go with it - this can make it more comprehensible.

Enjoy!

Enjoyment is the most important part of musical study – hopefully it will lead to lifelong love of listening to and playing music. Enjoyment can come through having fun and playing pieces you like; it can also come through finally achieving something you have been working very hard at, or indeed

through the satisfaction of regularly applying yourself to a task diligently and making progress in small steps. There will inevitably be short-term frustrations, but when these are overcome, it makes the achievements even more rewarding. If your child is not enjoying lessons or the repertoire being covered, please talk to me - I take all feedback on board, positive and negative and can adapt my approach if necessary.

Section 2: 'Admin Stuff'

Are Missed Lessons Made Up?

- I need to be paid for my time, regardless of whether a pupil actually shows up for their lesson. If your child is absent from school, their class teacher is still paid; if you sign up for a course of swimming lessons at the local pool, you wouldn't expect the teacher to come along for an extra week if for any reason your child misses a lesson. Likewise, I need to be able to pay my mortgage if my pupils are off sick or on holiday and I cannot be expected to come in on an extra day at my own expense. Here is an article by an economist explaining more: <http://ottawasuzukistrings.ca/makeuplessons/>
- I am normally paid for around 30 weeks of teaching, which means that there are 22 weeks a year where I do not receive income from teaching. My other main source of income is from professional playing, which does not fit neatly into the 22 weeks when I am not teaching. In order to sustain this career, I need to take work when it is offered. If I need to cancel a lesson due to a performing commitment, this is not a sign that I'm not 100% committed to my teaching; it's just the nature of the job that I do. The missed lesson will be made up.

Timetabling

In the first section, *Why Learn Music?*, I mention research which shows beyond any doubt that children perform better if they learn a musical instrument, despite missing the odd academic class lesson. Far from distracting pupils away from their academic studies, music is enhancing their studies, giving them a model for concentrated hard work and making new connections in the brain. Suffice to say, when schools publish the names of the highest academic achievers, you'll usually see many of the same names in the school orchestra.

Music lessons are usually rotated throughout the school day, so that the same subject isn't missed each week. It is not normally possible to offer a fixed lesson, as this will make the rotation smaller for everyone else, and it isn't fair to have one rule for one person and a different rule for everyone else.

Buying Sheet Music

There are many retail and online music shops, such as www.musicroom.com or Amazon.

Photocopying music is theft and is illegal. Composers, arrangers, publishers, typesetters, printers, distributors and retailers all deserve to be paid for their work. As someone who makes part of my

living from publishing royalties, I can say that although sheet music might seem very expensive, the margins are actually very small and composers earn relatively small royalties after everyone else has taken their cut along the way.

Whilst on the subject, recorded music isn't free either - illegal downloads are not a victimless crime - they deprive musicians of their rightful earnings. If you like a recording, please buy it!

Communication

I value good communication with parents – please feel free to ask anything.

If your child has any special needs, please let me know. Again, don't assume that school will have briefed me - you are best placed to advise me of any strategies I may need to adopt to aid progress