

OPINION

Children need to be exposed to music – their self-esteem soars and their sense of purpose grows

Learning an instrument is not for everyone, but for many it is the start of a lifetime of pleasure

'Music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without'
Confucius 551

AS we return to normal life with events, concerts and festivals taking place across the world again, musicians can leave behind the silence of lockdown. At the beginning of April I conducted the Jersey Island Singers for their first concert in two years and I was struck by the journey we made.

The first few months of rehearsals were very much about exercising the voice and developing stamina. Our first rehearsals had to be short as voices tired quickly and bringing the music together was tough as singers and musicians struggled with the continuing pandemic. Getting match fit was an enormous task of which the singers and musicians must be proud.

This journey for an established choir is in contrast to schools where music has been virtually silent. Senior pupils have not had opportunities to perform and develop together: we have lost a generation of young musicians.

Those opportunities which we provide for our children should build on the legacy of the past while embracing the new. I keep in touch with many music teachers here in Jersey and a general feeling is that in the classroom technology and innovative music-making have brought us a goldmine of opportunity which we should embrace, but we should not bypass the traditional: because we can offer more, then we are in danger of providing less. Music requires the long game, with commitment and hard work, which does not easily sit with the current trend where life is fuelled by phones and media which can disturb and get in the way. The Primary sector is where it should all start.

With 30 years of teaching and examining behind me in both the independent and state sectors, the gradual loss of opportunity has, I feel, been the biggest sadness. The independent sector in the UK has embraced music as a force of good within a school, with vibrant and exciting programmes of music-making in addition to that which goes on in the

Francis Murton



classroom. Sadly many state schools have focused only on the classroom, with the opportunities of bands, ensembles, orchestras, choirs with events and concerts becoming a thing of the past and many music services being a fraction of their former selves.

However, put on a performance at school and parents want to hear it. Provide them with an interesting concert and they will go home impressed, supportive of the work you are doing, encourage their children and want to come again. The more you do it, the more that opportunity develops and our interest in a diverse range of music grows.

Children need to be exposed to music – whether it is being part of a singing group at school, joining a youth choir, learning an instrument, it is about the ethos and fun. Good musicians foster a team spirit and children want to be a part of that. They may not all be great musicians, but it is about engagement, striving for good quality and ensuring that what we do is interesting and challenging enough for them not to get bored. Parents want the best for their offspring and will quickly become a part of that.

One of the best state music departments in the UK has maintained its status for 30 years with its bands regularly winning national and international music competitions and regularly performs in the Royal Albert Hall. This school sits in one of the most deprived areas of its town and the parents work tirelessly to raise funds for them to attend these competitions and tour.

The biggest encouragement was the accreditation of Rock School exams. In 2008, when I was responsible for

performing standards at GCSE across the UK, we noted a significant jump in the quality of guitar and drum kit GCSE performances across the country. This change has continued. Students and teachers recognise the value of something good which has promoted diversity, with students who will play drums in a rock band, sing in the school choir and help with the percussion section of the orchestra. We are still making a difference – it's just harder.

In the UK, the decline in children learning instruments in the state sector has created a cultural division which the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain has made headlines about. They don't have the resources to turn the situation around fully, but they are trying to make the point that we must support our young musicians. It should not be down to an ability to pay.

The greatest thrill in work is to see the changes in children when they discover music: the love of an instrument, becoming a part of a team of players, growing together. That magic of music has been lost to a generation of children. If we pay lip service to it, we give tasters: music is hard, music is a challenge, and music is the most beautiful escape that a musical child can have.

At Victoria College, our response has been the Orchestral Challenge, which for the past three years, provides every boy in Year 7 with a musical instrument and free lessons for a year. The journey is hard, full of new opportunities (having a specialist teacher to teach, playing in groups, and performing in concerts) and while we already know that learning an instrument is not for everyone, the



cognitive and emotional development is more than enough to support us in our challenge.

Teaching music to children who are doing this reaps benefits in all areas. 'Making Music Makes You Smarter' was the headline when a group of studies were brought out in the Noughties, following years of testing with tens of thousands of students.

In the classroom, the effect has been that they cope far more easily with classwork and more often than not we provide them with more challenging things to do. I know that the Jersey Music Service and Jersey Academy of Music have instigated similar programmes; I do hope that we see a difference.

Get children engaged with singing and other musical activities and their self-esteem soars, their sense of purpose grows and we have healthier happier children. I can remember a discussion with a group of older teenagers and a headmaster many years ago. The head wanted to stop whole-school singing in assemblies and in particular the weekly singing practice.

What he did not expect was the passion and excitement that these students would exude as they articulately ripped apart the head's plans. They exclaimed it to be the best thing for getting ready for the day, clearing their heads, putting them in a good mood, and raising their game as they embarked on their lessons. The head gave in and the school sang three times louder for months afterwards!

Do you want your child to achieve? Then provide purpose, engagement and fun. Learning an instrument is not for everyone, but for many it is the start of a lifetime of pleasure. Learning, building confidence, having instant feedback from playing a good melody. Joining in with friends, meeting regularly to practise together, building confidence for a performance. Inviting people to come to hear you. Supporting others with your love of music.

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