



Old Man's Beard

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Supporting Your Child's Musical Learning

Have you noticed that hardly any child can pass an open piano without playing it?! A violin, for example, needs getting out of its case, sometimes preparing with a shoulder rest, tuning, the bow tightening and rosinning, and quite naturally that puts many people off even getting it out in the first place, as by the time they've done all this the instant touchy-feely desire to play has passed! Whilst a more serious desire to play or practice will not be put off by such mundane problems, those odd minutes of spontaneous playing are essential to a beginner's development of ease and familiarity with the instrument. It can really help to think about simple but effective ways of making the instrument as accessible as possible for these sudden bursts of enthusiasm. A

small corner with everything set up in is ideal.

Whatever the practical circumstances, a positive response to your child's music-making is essential. Anything else is disheartening and often downright cruel. Try to empathise with the music going on in your child's head and feelings, which will not necessarily be the same as the sounds coming out! For true musicianship it is vital that your child develops the art of translating those inner impulses into outward sounds, rather than just learning formulae for producing "acceptable" sounds.

My daughter Ioana, who writes on page 6, is allowed the freedom to explore her natural curiosity and creativity, and comes up with things that amaze me.

All children benefit from the opportunity to be truly creative explorers with the full support of parent(s) and/or carer(s).

It is so tempting to "correct" sounds or techniques we believe we know to be wrong, but "mistakes" are just the texture of the learning path, and it is important to give the child space to explore different solutions for themselves. Our challenge is to be creative ourselves as well as empathic in finding ways of lighting the path.

Your child pursuing their musical journey can be a great time to have another look at your own. We all have the potential for musicality within us, and if your own is un(der)-fulfilled, sharing the process with your child could bring benefits to you both.

- **Make the instrument(s) and all the things they need as easily accessible as possible**
- **Support your child's natural instinct for exploration, rather than criticising mistakes**
- **Practice (supported and independent) should be a part of play, not a piece of enforced work**
- **Don't be restrictive—a great technique and understanding is more likely to be born out of experimentation than simple obedience**
- **Support and share: use music-making to renew the bond with your child**
- **Spend time observing the natural learning process, and contribute your ideas sparingly and with great thought and care**

How to support your own musical learning

Everyone is to some extent responsible for their own learning. The older one gets the more likely it is that one will be less dependent on a parent's or carer's support and facilitation, and more dependent upon one's own resources and organisation. If you are learning to play a musical instrument, or generally pursuing your musical journey, as an adult or more independent and mature person of any age, you will need to be both child and parent/carer to yourself, and to take account of the points in the previous article in finding ways to best nurture your musical development.

This is a very individual process and support with this is part of what I offer in your individual sessions. It is largely about the removal of obstacles and more about mental discipline than physical dexterity. You have to take great care of your approach, beware of assumptions, and be prepared to become a child again in order to learn afresh. The art of **play** (the kind children are so good at) is essential to the art of **play-ing** an instrument. So enjoy looking at musical issues technically and logically with the critical faculties of an adult, whilst letting go of responsibility and frolicking joyfully with the instrument, your toy!

“Broadening the Musical Mind”

My first introduction to a musical instrument was a descant recorder. Although a rather simple instrument, I loved it and learnt to play it very quickly and, by the age of 7 was playing it in the school “orchestra”, although at that age seeing how many sweet wrappers I could throw down the bell of the French horn gave me more excitement than playing the music. Having shown a modicum of musical talent, it became almost compulsory for me to learn a “proper” instrument. As it happened, I had been listening to my Dad's Herb Alpert records and badly wanted to play the trumpet (and I did play it badly!!) so I was loaned a school instrument; a battered thing with peeling brass plating. Within a few months, I had given up. It was too hard, I thought. Bullied into practising, playing the thing became a chore not a pleasure. After a brief fling with a mouth organ, a friend of the family introduced me to the Wigston Silver Prize Band. I was soon having private cornet lessons, and this time I stuck with it chiefly due to the fact that my tutor was not such a stickler for practice and I was allowed to go at my own pace. Eventually I played 1st Cornet in the band for several years and moved on to play the euphonium. I was enjoying my music until one day my teenage hormones kicked in and I became a typical 70's hairy hippy. My life suddenly consisted of Deep Purple, Yes, Led Zeppelin and long hair, flared jeans and platform boots. This didn't sit well with Gershwin, Sousa, Dvorak and peaked cap, straight trousers with a red stripe and plain black shoes. Something had to give and, yes, it was the band. Since then, I haven't played formally and I doubt I could get a note out of a brass instrument. However, my love of recorders stuck with me and I often play around with, and get enormous pleasure from, descant, treble and tenor recorders as well as guitar and most recently, viola.

Looking back on my musical experience, I can point the finger for my lack of progress at poor teaching. I used to think I just wasn't any good at playing any instrument, and I felt very limited in where I could go from there. I was taught the treble clef notes from an early age but never introduced to any other clefs. I was taught the fingering for the descant recorder but never shown how it is different for the treble recorder. I was taught the equal tempered diatonic scale but not made aware of the many other scales in use around the world. The problem was, I was taught in such a confined manner that not only did I lack some very important musical knowledge, but I didn't even know there was so much more to learn. Having known Lucy for a number of years, I was well aware that to be taught by her would not be the same as being taught by my previous teachers. In fact, Lucy doesn't teach, she guides! And through that guiding comes learning... true learning! She has shown me a whole new way of looking at music. I no longer see the restrictive 5 lines of the treble staff but an infinite number of lines with the clef indicating a starting point. And you don't play a C on a treble recorder to get an F....you just play an F with different fingering. And you are not confined to playing dots on a page in order to learn an instrument, but instead you are encouraged to improvise and thus put your spirit into your music. And as for scales, Lucy's enthusiasm for broadening the musical mind has led me to do my own research into the mathematics of music and scales. The challenge for me now is to learn to play the viola. I haven't got very far, but with Lucy's expert guidance I am exploring the instrument and its sounds rather than just learning scales by rote...and it is a very liberating way to learn.

By Dave Johnson

WORKING WITH YOUNGER LEARNERS

Nancy has just turned six, and over the last few months we have been working together on some musical basics. It's not always right for a child to go straight into studying one instrument exclusively, or even two, especially in a formal "lesson" situation, and it's sometimes better to build up musical confidence, awareness, and basic skills first. We've experimented with different ways of working and have recently had greatest success by incorporating musical input into play sessions in my home. To be pressured into participating quite rightly puts Nancy right off, so I very carefully aim to provide opportunities rather than obligations and sometimes we end up doing quite a lot of music, and sometimes very little.

Storytelling has worked a treat in introducing musical ideas (fairly new to me but as my dad is a professional storyteller it's kind of in the blood) and we've had great fun providing spontaneous sound effects, tunes and percussive accompaniments. For her birthday we gave Nancy a tin whistle of her own, and she has been tootling on it almost constantly ever since, as far as I can gather. When she and my daughter Ioana sit in the car blowing away on their tin whistles, Ioana plays various tunes and Nancy joins in freely. I've been very gratified to hear her rhythm and her ability to bring out the shape of the melody progressing beyond recognition. If a straightforward one-to-one formal lesson was the only option, then Nancy wouldn't be getting this musical experience .

Luke (6) and I discovered a mutual interest in goblins, and they have been joining in with our music sessions ever since. At one stage a goblin was appearing beside my bed in the middle of the night before a session with Luke, with wavy lines and other things he wanted Luke to play on his violin. More recently, tiny goblins have been invading our violin cases and causing havoc there, so we have had to learn to play various charms on the violin to get rid of them—and because the goblins soon develop a resistance to these charms we have to think of newer and more complicated ways of scaring them off. We also have to play nice things for the good goblins which tidy our violin cases.

The real goblins of our society, which instil fear of failure into even the most well-adjusted of children, are a genuine threat we need to keep at bay. We've done lots of messing around on fiddles, which is great for building up confidence as well as a relaxed approach to the instrument (not enough play of this kind can lead to a tense and therefore limited and even painful approach to playing), and as he is still very keen to continue, I hope we will begin, very gradually to explore more and more different techniques with which to scare away all the different kinds of goblins!



Pictures

by Ioana

Castle-Hotea

INTERVIEW

Hannah is fifteen and was already quite accomplished on flute and piano when she began music sessions with me to learn to play the violin. I asked her first about her piano playing...

All the stuff I play is mostly Classical. In fact it is all Classical music. I do sonatas and things. I did a Mozart recently, and I have books full of Classical music... Romantic music.

Mostly my teacher decides what I will play, but I always say whether I like it or not. But she just advises me and buys the book and says well this is what I'm buying you is that ok?

About flute playing...

I haven't had lessons in a long while, so I mean it may have gone downhill a bit because I haven't practised. I was about the same level with flute and piano. I'd like to go back to playing flute.

About playing in groups...

I joined an orchestra for a little bit, but then that got really, really boring. It was really, really easy music, and really, really boring, so I was quite ...(laughs)...I found it too easy! ...and I didn't like the people either. I had some friends but I didn't like the people who ran it.

And in the future...

I think it would be quite nice to play with other people.

So why add violin?

Whenever I did performances for my choir or dance, often they had orchestras, and I always saw the people playing violin and I always wanted to play. Saw them and thought I want to play the violin.

I'm not actually sure how I decided to start learning it. I just decided I wanted to play, that I was ready to play a third instrument, that I could cope with three instruments. I want to play more, more instruments! I'd like to do guitar one day. It looks like a cool instrument to play!

About learning violin...

I think it's made me listen to the notes more, because you have to tune it, and it made me think about how, like... it's made me think about like when you're on the flute or the piano you just...the notes kind of come out for you, but when you're on the violin you have to find the notes and really think about it. And you have to use your ears a bit more.

About family...

They're all pretty musical. They all play some form of an instrument, or have played an instrument.

Having my mum playing the piano helped me. Well she helped me with my flute when I used to do exams and she used to do the accompaniment for me. I used to ask her questions and I used to ask whether the timing was right and things, and she'd help me out with that.

...They may not necessarily play an instrument well but I think they do know quite a lot about music.

About music exams...

On the piano I think I did Preliminary, Grade One, Grade Two... On the flute I did One and Two and Three. I stopped doing exams on the piano after Grade Two and I was going to do my Grade Three and decided I couldn't do it. I think I'm way above that now.

I didn't enjoy the exams at all. I found them really stressful. Instead of enjoying playing I was worried about getting everything right and getting a good grade, and when I didn't get a good grade it would make me upset, so I realised that it was about playing an instrument, not the exams.

Hannah is home educated...

I think I enjoyed flute a lot more when I came out of school, because I didn't like my teacher at school, and I was in a group so it wasn't one-to-one – I didn't have the attention that I needed to progress. Yes, in school it wasn't really working with my flute teacher because there were three other people in my class, so when I came out I felt that I progressed a lot more. (*On being asked whether having a private teacher would have solved that problem...*) I'm not sure. I don't think that generally as my instruments go, I don't think I would have put so much attention into my music, because I had other things to worry about. And I had more time, whereas in school, music wouldn't be quite such a big thing – there'd be other things. And I think that I'd just play what I was told to play: I'd take the exams and I'd be told what to play, instead of exploring different ways.

A few weeks ago, Hannah had a brand new violin purchased for her...

Well, I needed a violin because I didn't actually have my own violin, and I thought it was important to have my own violin, because I plan on carrying on playing and I don't want to keep using other people's violins. I wanted to have my own violin that was "my" violin and it fitted me. Then I might feel better about playing it... more enthusiastic.

Originally I might have got my great grandfather's violin, because he used to teach violin, and I think other instruments, and my grandma has it, but it needed renovating as it's very, very old. And I might have got that violin, but she took it to a few people and decided it was too expensive to renovate it, I think, and too much time, and I think in the end we just decided it was best if I had my own violin instead of my great grandad's. It was a very, very old violin. I think it was old when my great granddad got it. Probably quite a good violin.

Sheehans was the only place we knew of until we asked around. My friend had got a new violin. From Tim Batchelar. Yes, I really liked his violin. So we went along to Tim Batchelar and played about six violins! They were all really nice. You can tell when there's a violin you don't like, but I can't always tell when there's one that I like because when they're good violins they start sounding the same after a while. Too many violins! After a long, long time of looking at loads of violins, I knew it was a good violin and I knew that I wanted a violin, and I mean initially I thought it was just that I thought well I'm fed up of looking and I want a violin now! But I thought it sounded nice, and it ticked all my boxes, so I thought that was the right violin. And I heard from you that it was good, so I thought it must be pretty good.

When I first got it, a couple of times I got frustrated because I thought I still sounded horrible, but I realised that I should just practise more, and the more I practised, the more I liked it. I think it sounds really nice, and it feels nice to play and I think it does improve my sound a bit... a lot! And I think it's becoming "my" violin now. Makes me want to play it more and more.

About learning with me...

When I first started having lessons with you, I thought it was really hard, because it was a lot more ... well, it was different from my other lessons. I had it fed to me more in my other lessons. I had the music in front of me in my piano lessons and things. And it was very much more kind of...I don't know... in piano it's always "stick to the music and play what's there" and I never really did anything without the music ever. I never really tried to do it by ear and I never did any improvisation. So that was really new for me, and I quite like the idea of being able to play without music. And sometimes I found it a bit weird... some of the stuff we did! And quite embarrassing, having to just play anything, and I did find it really challenging. But I am starting to do a lot more things without music. It definitely opened my eyes more! I think it's useful to be able to read music, and I think I read music pretty well, but I think it's also useful to be able to put the music down and play by ear, or play, you know, whatever you want. Be able to make a song out of nothing.

Sheehans provide a good all round service, and are very helpful if you want to try out instruments with a view to purchasing. See <http://www.sheehans.co.uk/>

Timothy Batchelar specialises in setting up and repairing string instruments and has an excellent workshop and practice room where he can offer you friendly and personalised service. See <http://www.batchelar.com/>

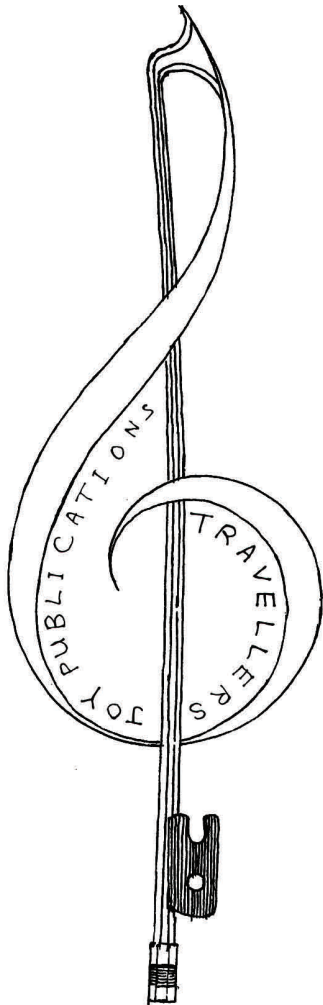
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Learning by myself

My name's Ioana. I've been doing music all my life and I play several different instruments, although at some points of my life I haven't had an instrument—I've just copied my mum. I play:-

Piano

Guitar

Violin

Tin whistle

Harmonica

Fife

and I like composing and song-writing.

I think it's important for people to have music in their lives and if I have children I hope they would play music as well. Even though my mum is a music teacher I often learn by myself. Because I've had so much music in my life I find it easy to pick things up by ear and I can read music too.

By Ioana Castle-Hotea, age 9