

Practice – Music's bug bear



Papers from a series of seminars
given in 2011

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Introduction

This paper is the result of many years of teaching with the ethos that playing at home should be an enjoyable experience and not a prerequisite to learning an instrument. I will touch on various aspects of practice and ask why practice is always the biggest issue when talking about learning an instrument? And look at how teachers, parents and children deal with practice.

In wanting the best for our children we often can’t see the wood for the trees and practice is a great example of this. We want our children to enjoy making music, we know they will enjoy it if they build their skills, we are told that practice helps with this and so practice becomes a holy grail and music making becomes secondary.

It is the responsibility of the music teacher to ensure that children have gained the knowledge to enable them to play successfully at home and to understand that at different times in their lives music will be more or less important to them. It is for parents to have their children’s music making in their minds so that they can facilitate playing at home when children are ready.

DaCapo teachers are trained to work with children who are not ‘expected’ to practice and to enable children to make the most of their music making regardless of the amount of playing at home that is done.

I question the preconceptions about practice and will make some suggestions as to ways of looking at the issue. I hope to help you to question your own view of the role of practice in teaching children to enjoy music and perhaps live more comfortably with the idea that music making and practice do not have to be fundamentally linked.

What’s so special about music?

Why is something that should be such a pleasure – playing an instrument - loaded with such pressure, guilt, rules and traditions that we seem to take for granted, no questions asked?

How often do you hear “oh, she never practices, she should give up” and how ridiculous would it be to say “she never practices swimming (horse riding, ballet), so she may as well give up”. She never practices her French, German, Maths, so she may as well stop having these lessons at school.... “She doesn’t read much so there’s no point in continuing with the English lessons”. What makes music so VERY SPECIAL and a ‘must-do-every-day’ thing?

It is stating the obvious to say that the more you do something the better you get, but why is ‘getting better’ the main goal of music making? Shouldn’t the main goal be enjoyment? And generally the by-product of doing something that you enjoy is that you get better at it.

From a parent's perspective

Parents who work full time can find it very hard to share in the playing /practice with their children. It is hard enough to manage the extra curricular activities and feed the family! Parents who have no musical knowledge may find it difficult to help out as they can't tune the instruments, help with reading notation or even ensure that the child is comfortable sitting with the instrument. Even parents who have some musical knowledge do not necessarily know the teaching strategies and need to be very careful when helping. Parents are often not the best teachers for their own children. However parents are often made to feel bad if they don't make their children practice. Because they then can't help with the practice in practical ways, they get frustrated.

Competitive parenting and the school gate conversations are all hard to resist. We want evidence that we are spending our money on music lessons wisely. We are led to believe that practice is the answer and will make our children good musicians – it is never suggested that we ask HOW this is being done. Tradition dictates that learning an instrument is difficult, hard work and only a pleasure when you are good enough. Even where there are new more enlightened methods of delivery, it is still presumed that the bottom line is the pupil's responsibility to practice and your responsibility as a parent to make them. DaCapo believe very differently.

In attempting to persuade, cajole or gently insist that our children practice, parents get frustrated and it starts to become an issue. We think that if they are enjoying playing an instrument they will want to do it at home and we can get ourselves wound up, children pick up on this and things can go very wrong.

The hidden requirements of playing an instrument

The most important thing about playing an instrument, which makes it possible to play it at home on your own, is the ability to hear the music inside your head.

This very simple statement is easy to write; however in practice it needs time. Teaching in the way that we do, our pupils are taught to sing and relate everything to their instrument through singing. If you can sing a tune then you are more likely to be able to work out how to play it on an instrument. Over time and with a carefully written syllabus, children are taught to inner hear from the music – so that they look at the music and they can read it – hearing it inside their head. This skill takes time to become secure and the path to this is to sing everything before we play it. It is just like learning to read words – we start by reading aloud and 3 gradually we are able to read inside our heads. This is an ongoing process and is becomes increasingly more complex, so the reading skills of the youngest children may be a few notes and rhythms, whereas the teenagers are reading music in different keys, modes, multiple parts and different clefs. Rather like their school reading list - the youngest reading Horrid Henry and the teenagers reading Dickens.

Until a child can hear the music inside their head they will struggle to play their instrument effectively on their own.

What does it mean to practice?

For those of us who have studied music to a high level, practice means working at the difficult bits, memorising and perfecting in a quiet space on our own – usually for a performance. If we apply our grown-up version of practice to children we are asking them to work at things that they are finding difficult, often in a room on their own.

Music instrumental practice is something that children are often made to do before they are allowed to do the things that they want to do. Why don't they want to practice? I think practice means different things for different aged children.

The benefits of playing at home

The outcomes of good and positive feelings about playing at home, under the right conditions (ie through choice and not a strict 'half hour regardless' regime, are many. It is in the quest that we often lose sight of them!

Children can:

- become more comfortable with the feel of the instrument
- consolidate information and skills
- play what they want!
- make up their own music
- memorise
- identify and solve problems faster
- develop a positive attitude to their own ability
- build true independent learning

The negative outcomes of enforced practice in an arbitrary timeframe (i.e. half an hour)

- Children can:
- cease to think or make decisions about what they are doing because they are doing it routinely
- not think about how they are using their time
- develop negative feelings about and the instrument
- get frustrated when they have done what they want to but have to fill time
- feel guilty when they don't practice
- not enjoy playing because they associate it with 'nagging'
- make their 'mistakes' perfect

We often confuse not wanting to play at home (solitary and revealing as to what you can't do) with not wanting to play the instrument, which, when done in a lesson or a group is so much fun!

The DaCapo Lesson

What we should be doing as teachers, is playing music with our pupils and giving them repertoire that they can do and do well so that they are keen to go home and play (with) their instrument, play to their family and do lots of what they can do and leave the nasty bits for the teacher to deal with in the lesson. It's just like driving - we get better at driving by doing the easy things – up and down roads in straight lines and not endlessly doing parallel parking, three point turns and emergency stops!

If the music lesson contains playing, singing and learning to read the music, then the child will start to hear the music inside their head when they leave the lesson. Then the chances are that they are taking things away from the lesson that mean a) if they want to play at home then they can.

By having fun in a lesson and including humour, asking them about what they think and engaging them in the process, pupils will learn that music is something that they can and want to do.

And what else did they learn in the lessons?

Individual lessons build confidence, vocabulary, ability to follow instructions, give the opportunity to ask questions and work at a speed appropriate to the child's way of working.

Group work builds social skills and learning from peers as well as building listening and ensemble skills. The way that we teach music mean that the skills are transferable and so children can apply the knowledge gained onto other instruments and in different situations of music making. A teacher has a lot of power in the instrumental lesson and can make a child feel very inadequate. The number of adults who say to me "I gave up because I was no good at music" makes me very angry. Who said they were no good? And then it is usually followed with "my poor teacher - I never did any practice, I don't know how they put up with me". That 'poor teacher' was being paid to do a job and it was their responsibility to ensure progress and not the pupil's....

There is one guarantee: once a pupil has given up they will not get better.

Exams and Quality control

In wanting the best for our children we also want assurances that they are getting better. Currently the only way of measuring this is through the graded exams system.

We all understand the desire for an exam, hopefully it gives us reassurance that progress is being made and an exam with a good result give pupils a very good feeling about their own ability. However they are time consuming to prepare for and need to be thought about carefully. For some pupils they provide motivation but often they are used as a tool to 'make' pupils practice and this can backfire.

The exams syllabus is often mistaken for a learning/teaching syllabus. Grade exams are structured from the instrumental perspective and the musical element is not consistent across the instruments - what a flautist learns for grade 1 is not the same musically as a cellist at grade 1.

Why do we accept the current goalposts for assessing success as an instrumentalist/teacher? I think it is because we have no others markers and you have to have some; exams have never been properly challenged!

What can the teacher do to encourage practice/playing at home?

Firstly teachers need to get to know and understand the family and accept that pupils play at home if they are happy with their music making. They need to ensure that the activities that they are giving the child are appropriate to their level and trust that if they cover the right variety of activities that there will be inevitable progress. Teachers should not judge the decisions being made at home or the way that the family chooses to live.

And we should all remember that what is good for me is not necessarily good for you!!

What can a family do to enable playing at home

Bring children to lessons on time and make the most of the teaching.

All pupils:

- o Ensure that children have the correct tools- chair, stand, rosin, footstools
- o Clear a space at home to leave the instrument out and ready to play
- o Encourage them in all the playing that they do, including the experimenting that may sound less than convincing
- o Get them to perform for you

Youngest pupils:

- o Call/skype grandparents and play to them
- o Ask them to show you or to teach you
- o Allow them to play anywhere that they want to - small children do not want to be alone to play
- o Read their notebook to them
- o If the instrument is not working (untuned strings, reed broken) you can sing the songs, clap the words (rhythm patterns) and play just on one note.

Older children:

It is important to remember that teenagers also sometimes struggle with their time and don't manage to fit everything in.

Conclusion

I have explored many aspects of practice and I would like everyone to question the presumption that playing an instrument and practice is inexorably linked. We have to ask ourselves what it is we really want our children to take away from the experience of learning and understand that there are many ways of participating in music making.

Practice can mean many different things to children and parents have reported to me things that their children do while playing at home: taking a sibling's music and playing it at pitch/octave to suit their own instrument, getting together with a friend who plays a different instrument and playing the lower part of their piano accompaniment, making up a poem and singing the accompaniment. Children will come up with 'extended learning tasks' for themselves if we give them the tools to do this and they will apply their knowledge in ways that interest them.

In my 30 years teaching I have seen so many different ways of working:

- * the child who did nothing until he joined a youth orchestra at 14 and went from playing very simple music to being a competent sight-reader and enthusiastic player who could find his way round the instrument well.
- * children who never play at home ever but love the lesson and do progress and enjoy playing songs - show tunes, classical, popular...
- * one pupil who, from very first lesson at the age of 5, played every day and was unhappy if she didn't, reaching impressive musical competence (of grade 8 by 12) joining the National Children's Orchestra and devouring music faster and faster as she learned!!

The one thing that all of these pupils had in common is that they enjoyed what they did, were constantly learning, built a good relationship with me and with classical music and loved making friends through other musical activities. They could sight-sing and so could easily join a choir or take up another instrument; they get more from a concert than the average concert-goer; some have gone on to study music as adults; others may play again as adults. When they have children they will be in a position to join in or help with their music making. They have music in their system for life.

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