

TINKLE TWINKLE OR PING PONG

Jenny Macmillan compares learning a sport with learning a musical instrument

After a lifetime of playing table tennis I have recently taken some coaching. I'm told I've progressed from being a "social" player to being a "beginner". I now aspire to become an "improver"!

As an experienced Suzuki piano teacher, I've been struck by the similarities between learning a sporting skill and learning a musical skill. The obvious ones are the intense focus required in order to improve, and the regular practice in order to do more than just hit the ball over the net or pick out a tune.

But there are so many other similarities. There is the thorough learning of basic technique, such as the bat hold - firm but loose, not stiff and not floppy - akin to holding a bow or flute, or having supple wrists at the piano. There is the position of the body, arms and feet to create a balanced posture for optimum results. And the essential ability to prepare in the head and body for each movement.

Watching great performers, both sportspeople and musicians, one senses that they always seem to have plenty of time. I believe this is because they are constantly aware of the relaxation (rest) position of their bodies between movements, they prepare very quickly and then have lots of time to play. Because they know how to use their bodies efficiently, and have prepared mentally, nothing seems rushed.

A difference between playing sport and performing music though is that, in classical music, the musician knows what happens next - the performer is recreating what the composer wrote. By contrast, in sport, the player doesn't know how the ball will come - speed, direction, type of spin - so the decision how to return the ball has to be made on the spur of the moment.

What is the musical equivalent? Every good musician will respond to the acoustic of the concert hall, the audience, and, depending on how one phrase sounds, how they will interpret the next. If playing in an ensemble, performers respond subtly to how their fellow musicians play.

Or, of course, if improvising, they will invent the music on the spot.

Just as it's useful to listen to fine performances of music one is studying, and other music by the same composer, and generally immerse oneself in plenty of good music, it's invaluable to watch sport. Even though I know this, I was amazed when I played table tennis with one of our sons recently. The first time I just managed to beat him. The next time, a couple of weeks later, he'd not touched a table tennis ball in the interim, but he beat me easily. What had he been doing? He'd watched table tennis games online! A good lesson which shows us musicians that we must always listen to plenty of music!

We play our instruments and we play sport, always seeking to improve whilst having fun.