

Letter

from Jenny MacMillan



I enjoyed the structure of Faith Maydwell's thoughtful article *Reflections on philosophy of teaching from the music room* - eight headings which, it later becomes apparent, form the mnemonic ART MUSIC (Aural, Repertoire, Technique, Memory, Understanding, Sight Reading, Improvisation, Chords) - all valid aspects of the music lesson.

However, I find it hard to agree with her five suggestions for why we teach piano:

To help students through piano exams - certainly not - at least, not as my first priority.

To provide a living - well yes, but not near the top of my list of priorities.

To pass on tradition, accumulated experience and knowledge - partial agreement - there is an element of this.

To have fun - yes, but there's more to learning than having fun.

To help students become musically independent as quickly as possible - again, to some extent, but that's not my reason for teaching.

To me, these points don't really capture the joy and impact of teaching. I teach children the piano in order to develop their potential to the fullest extent. I am helping children develop their concentration, memory, co-ordination, self-discipline and self-esteem through the study of music. These skills, and others, such as learning how to tackle problems by breaking them into small chunks and mastering each before putting them back together again, are all essential life skills. The degree to which we teachers are aware of our ability to develop these life skills in our students may vary according to our style of teaching (I teach according to the Suzuki approach), but certainly these skills are an important aspect of my work with every student.

And secondly (or perhaps first!), I am developing a love of music in each child. Not a love of taking exams, nor a love of being pushed as fast as possible to become independent. A love of listening to music and, through that, a desire to make their own music.

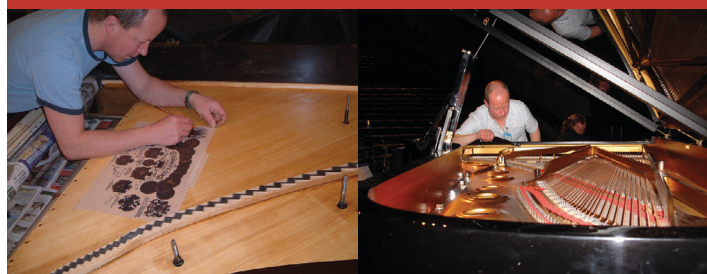
Here is the response to the article from the mother of two of my pupils - a five-year old who started lessons two years ago and a three-year old just now starting:

"When I first thought of music for my children it was, quite simply, because I wanted them to know music, to love music, to have music in their lives. I didn't as a child and I was determined they should. I also wanted, if I'm honest, for them to take grade exams - people are always so impressed by grade exams. Two years into Suzuki piano, I have the first of my wishes. Our house, our day, our lives are filled with music. I didn't, of course, get my second wish. As I discovered fairly early on (and to my great surprise), Suzuki teachers tend not to teach grade exams. But I'm not disappointed. What we get is, in my view, even better. My children are learning to play, understand and appreciate music - in the whole sense of each of those words. Every day, following clear, simple instructions, taking small, manageable steps, we hone our skills. Whether it's listening, clapping, memorising, trying to make beautiful sounds, learning to read notes, enjoying performing, being part of a group, keeping on trying even when it's hard and we're tired... I could go on and on. These are lessons in life, not just in music. I think the school my children go to is a super school - and that they're lucky to be there - but I strongly suspect Suzuki piano will shape their social, emotional and academic development as much, if not more."

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