

# Symposium:

## Parental involvement in the piano lesson

Dear Colleagues, how important is the role of the parent in nurturing the success of a piano student? Do you as a piano teacher welcome parental involvement? Do you allow parents their own voice in the development of their child's piano playing? How far do you go in allowing parents to express what may be contradictory views to your own firmly-held beliefs over repertoire choice, and the amount and quality of practice time that a particular child is expected to do?

**Here are some views on the role of the parent in 21st-century piano pedagogy...**



ANDY MCLEOD

### **Margaret Murray McLeod:**

The role of the parent(s) in the support and encouragement of their children is vital if our teaching is to be productive. I always like a parent to sit in on lessons when teaching a new pupil, and they are welcome to continue sitting in later if they wish. Even if the parent is not musical, they can watch and listen to how their child is being taught. They will note posture, height of the piano stool, hand and arm positions and what they should be practising during the days between lessons. The parent's help in encouraging practice at home and of listening to the child's playing and praising his endeavours is so important.

I have two young children, brother and sister, who come for an hour together with one of their parents.

They are beginners so we do a certain amount of things together... aural, theory and soon it will be duets. However, while one has an individual lesson, the other one sits and draws or does some other activity. The parent in this case is absolutely essential. He or she makes sure they don't create a noise or run around (specially the very bright 7-year old boy!!).



HELEN TABOR

### **Susan Bettaney:**

I have no objections to parents sitting in on lessons and over many years I feel it has helped their progress, particularly with younger children. Maybe I have been lucky in not having problems or clashes with "over-ambitious and pushy parents".

However, modern technology is taking over and recording lessons could become an issue in the wrong hands?

A record of the lesson would be advisable in a notebook.



### **Nancy Litten:**

It depends on the parents involved. We want them to be supportive but not interfering. Some students work better with a parent in the room, some worse! I leave the decision up to the parent initially, but occasionally have to suggest that the pupil is old enough to 'go it alone', when the parent's presence is counter-productive. I am grateful to my mother, who sat in on my lessons for the first year, quietly taking notes so that she could direct my practising during the week.

### **Jennie Macmillan (pictured on p11):**

I welcome as much parental support as possible – I consider it vital to good progress.

When the parent of a prospective pupil enquires about lessons, if I see I may have a vacancy coming up, I invite the whole family to observe children's lessons in my studio. After they have observed a few times, I invite the parents to discuss the commitment of





## To be perfect a parent needs a lot of commitment and dedication of time and energy

studying in my studio. This is followed by several months of observation before the child starts lessons. During this period, they see how lessons are conducted and how other families are involved, and they come to pupils' concerts and recitals.

Once pupils start, parents attend all their children's piano lessons. I guide parents over what to do in lessons – sitting quietly, watching and listening, making notes on what is to be practised, how and why, videoing relevant parts, such as child and me working at a particular technique to be practised at home, the parent asking a question only if they are unsure about something. The lesson is very much between me and the child; the parent is, for the most part, a silent observer. At the end of the lesson, where necessary, I will give further instructions to the parent.

I also advise new parents how to guide daily practices. They should always remain positive and supportive of their child's efforts, never critical. And mostly what I ask pupils to practise will be practised because of the parents' guidance.

Children usually start lessons with me around the age of three or four, and parents supervise practices until their children are aged perhaps nine or ten. Then, gradually, children start to practise on their own so, around the time they move to secondary school (the exact time varies from child to child), they are mostly practising independently.

This parental involvement is in keeping with the psychologist Vygotsky's findings that sensitive intervention by adults when a child is on the edge of learning a new task can help children learn the task, such as when a parent "helps" a child clap a rhythm with their hands until the child can clap the rhythm themselves (Kozulin & Vygotsky, 2012: Thought and Language, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press).



### Maxine Windsor:

To answer the points in order:

Yes, parents' involvement is pretty important but mostly in order that they ensure that the pupil practises. They should realise that they can be very supportive in this way even if they know nothing about music. Keeping notes each week of what the pupil is expected to practise for the next lesson, in a medium or large notebook, is essential. I find most parents would rather not come in to the lessons and actually I think it does not help the development of the relationship between pupil and teacher.

Yes, I do allow parents their own voice in the development of their child's piano playing. They know they can discuss things with me. If I need to talk about something, I run out to the waiting car at the end of the lesson (my house is not accessible on foot). If they want the child to play a particular piece of music for some reason, I try to see that this is done (even if it's a simplified version!).

Yes, I do allow contradictory views to be expressed (up to a point); they are, after all, paying the bills. That doesn't necessarily mean that I follow them! Parents may need persuading that classical piano music is better for development than 'easy listening' music, though of course this can be included sometimes and is good sight-reading practice.

I have two sets of siblings which sit in on each other's lessons, without parents. I have a pile of Asterix books which generally keeps them quiet, or they bring their own book.

I should point out that the parents do become involved three times a year when I hold pupil concerts at home, at which parents, grandparents and other family members are welcome. They also get a chance to see how the others develop, and talk to other parents. The concerts are always well attended.



HELEN TABOR

### Beate Toyka:

For young children and beginners parents can play a vital role. A perfect mother or father for younger children takes notes of what goes on in the lessons (I often check the parent's notebook and encourage them to write down specific instructions) and would then implement this at home. The perfect parent also records excerpts on their phones and uses those to help with practices. The perfect parent is always cheerful, always encouraging and always understands the main points in a lesson as well as implementing it at home! But not all parents are perfect, neither is the chemistry between parent/pupil/teacher always perfect! To be perfect a parent needs a lot of commitment and dedication of time and energy and I have found that more and more parents are simply too busy to sit in on lessons and to practise with their children at home. With the Suzuki model that of course is one of the main 'ingredients' and without it a successful outcome is impossible. I do however teach mostly 'traditional' children, youngsters and

adults and have to find a balance of getting the child involved as much as possible and encourage good back-up from home too.

Very young children who have had their parent sit with them in every lesson and practise with them always at home, sometimes for several years, find it hard to wean themselves off this mode of learning and become independent learners. Their learning model has been to be told everything and to be spoonfed everything. I have found that even with the best intentional strategies to overcome this the child will revert back to wanting the parent to tell her what to do and when and how and it will be a struggle to get the child's own commitment to learning.

Most teenagers don't want their parent to sit with them in the lessons. I have a very passionate Bulgarian mother of a 14-year old son who have come to me from another teacher. She would constantly comment on what was happening in the lesson: "I have told him the same thing at home and he simply won't listen!" or, "ah yes, but he simply doesn't practise slowly enough at home" ...all with quite a negative effect on the son! This mother is now gently barred from the room. Ideally she will not be in the house at all, but often sits in another room. I know that she will strain and listen to whatever is going on but her son is relieved to have some peace and quiet – barring a lot of piano music of course! Needless to say his progress is much better...

It can be helpful to phone/text/email a parent if an issue arise. But often time will not allow a regular follow up on a lesson. A practice book with comments for parents I find useful in a school context where I don't see parents at all on a regular basis.

I do welcome any ideas and feedback parents have and encourage an atmosphere where they feel safe and valued to air them. I do not like it when parents enter their children for concerts without me knowing about it – it can lead to a lot of embarrassment! I do let parents know at the beginning of the year that I am to be informed of any events in the future so we can plan together which

pieces are best to prepare for that. On the whole I do not let parents choose repertoire but do welcome ideas and suggestions, particularly if a parent is a musician him or herself, and in discussion we have been able to take these on occasionally, may be with an arrangement of an easier version of a particular parental favourite!

So it is quite important to take into account the personalities of both the pupil and the parent. A parent is a helpful 'tool' but can also be detrimental to a pupil's development with too much criticism or over-the-top competitiveness on behalf of their child. My goal is for every one of my pupils to become an individual learner and be passionate and involved with his or her own playing as well as take responsibility for his or her own achievements, whether this happens when they are 10, 12 or 16 years old!

### **Amy Wakefield** (pictured overleaf):

Last term I 'experimented' with this a little. I planned a series of lesson starters which involved activities for parents as well as pupils. These included listening activities such as linking a picture to a piece of music, conducting and creating a graphic score. I used these activities with children from about 6 to 14 years old and with parents who were usually present in the lessons anyway. I thought the response was great overall as the parents particularly seemed to enjoy it, something which I think really changed the atmosphere in the room. I wouldn't be able to do this every lesson due to time constraints but I feel that occasionally building it in was beneficial. It's a nice 'ice-breaker' at the beginning of the academic year, especially if families have been away all summer. I did overhear parents leaving my studio saying how much fun it was and a couple of parents made notes of the music I had introduced them to so that they could listen to it at home. I certainly got the impression that many of my students' parents welcomed the opportunity to learn more about classical music themselves, something which can only benefit their children in the long-term.

For very young students, I have found parental involvement to be extremely

important and I have asked them to take notes and even film parts of our lessons on their I pads or phones so that they can recreate some of our activities at home. Parents often don't know how to deal with new hand positions and other new technical skills when they're not in lessons but if they have seen it and have an 'exemplar' available they are in a much better position to help their child. I think it's nigh on impossible for a 5-year-old child to reach their full potential when left to their own devices. They can't be expected to plan their time effectively or to objectively look at their pieces and improve them, but with constructive and informed support from mum or dad they are much more likely to succeed.

An incentive scheme I have recently tried demonstrated the benefit of directly involving parents in their child's learning. Pupils aged between 6 and 15 could select 'musical' tasks from a pre-designed 'menu' and complete them in any order so as to fill up a jar with fluffy pom-poms. Whoever filled their jar first claimed a prize. Most of the activities were 'piano-based' but others involved writing, singing, composing and listening. Children needed their parents' assistance with some of the tasks as they involved the use of their phones to send me footage of the work they completed. I have found that parents really stepped up to the challenge of completing the tasks and at times were more competitive than the children! The overall benefit of this challenge has been the marked increase in parental support at home, encouraging a wider understanding and love for music in the students' own time.

I have very rarely found parental involvement in lessons to be 'an issue' in the negative sense unless the parent has been consistently absent from the lessons or has perhaps become too involved in pushing their children to complete exams. I find that if this happens it is usually due to ignorance about the demands of the process and it is quickly rectified if the parent is invited in to the lesson to find out in more detail what is involved.

Overall, then, I would say that parental involvement is to be both welcomed and fostered!