

## **Mini Maestros and Infant Instrumentalists: When should we start children on formal music education?**

When Maria Anna Mozart (better known as 'Nannerl') was seven years old, her father Leopold began giving her keyboard lessons. Her three-year-old brother Wolfgang looked on enviously, and started to spend time exploring chords on the keyboard. When little Wolfgang was four years old Leopold decided to start teaching him short pieces – and the rest is history.

While the vast majority of us are unlikely to be harbouring mini Mozarts under our roofs, there is no doubt that all children can gain a great deal from a musical education, regardless of their aptitude or ability. Given that our brains are wired to respond to music from the earliest age, does this mean we should start playing instruments just as soon as we're physically able to hold them?

### **Start them young?**

There are two possible reasons for starting a very young child on an instrument. The first is that the child displays a genuine, strong interest in playing music – as did young Wolfgang. The second is that the parent would like their child to learn an instrument, and believes that starting young will give them a good head start. After all, the path to greatness often starts at a young age, and many of today's leading musicians were acclaimed prodigies by the age of six...

Playing a musical instrument requires motivation and a fair amount of discipline. A child under five is unlikely to display these traits of their own accord, but there's something to be said for the idea of helping them develop these important characteristics as early as possible through formal musical training. Learning how to concentrate, how to listen, and how to enjoy progress that comes from hard work – these are all valuable lessons for life that are cultivated by learning an instrument.

Nevertheless, parents and teachers who are itching to bring up the next Vengerov should take care. If a child has never displayed any genuine interest in playing an instrument, then enforced lessons (and enforced practice!) can lead to the child feeling unhappy, pressurised and stressed. Under such circumstances, the benefits of formal music education on the child's overall development risk being outweighed by its dangers. By all means, encourage your child to love music – take them to toddlers' music groups and children's concerts, introduce them to different sounds – but take care not to commit them to something they will find burdensome. Slightly older children are often more motivated, can concentrate better and progress faster – so starting young is not always necessarily the best answer.

Animator Rachel Leach presents children's music events for the LSO, Wigmore Hall and BBC Proms. She's a firm believer in the benefits of formal music education from the earliest age – but only as long as the child is interested. 'Formal music education isn't just about becoming a skilled instrumentalist,' she says. 'Classical music has tremendous scope for opening up different sound worlds for children, teaching them how to listen and engage their imagination with the music. There is no 'right age' to learn these skills – if a child is receptive they can absorb it at any age.'

### **Pedagogical practicalities: what are the options for young children?**

If a child under five responds well to music, and you are keen to start their formal music education, there are a number of routes you can take. One option is the 'traditional' way: learning how to play

an instrument. The average instrumental teacher follows a method which would be inappropriate for a very small child, as they would need to be able to read, concentrate for the duration of a lesson, and be responsible for independent practice. In addition, the vast majority of instruments are physically inaccessible to children under the age of five. Nevertheless, instrumental tuition is still viable for the very young – and a possible route is through Suzuki.

The philosophy of 20th-century violinist and pedagogue Dr Shinichi Suzuki is based on the idea that people are the product of their environment. The earlier we start our education – not just in music, but in all areas – the better equipped we are to achieve at the highest level. Suzuki believed that if a child is surrounded by music whilst growing up, and learns to play it himself, then he develops ‘sensitivity, discipline and endurance’, which makes him a good citizen and a noble human being. Suzuki education begins before birth, with music played in the home every day. Then, just as a child learns to speak before learning to read, music is introduced first by ear, with notation introduced at a later stage. For Suzuki, learning to play music before the age of five is optimum, ideal – and his method is crafted especially for pre-school children. The British Suzuki Institute has been training teachers and running events since 1978, with great success.

Suzuki requires a huge amount of commitment from the parents as well as the child, and it is certainly not for everyone. A completely different way of introducing young children to formal music education is through Dalcroze, which teaches musical concepts through whole body movement. Children under five can start with the ‘Stepping into Music’ programme, which teaches pulse, pitch and rhythm through physical experiences. A great deal is taught through song, with musical examples taken from cultures all over the world. Musical concepts become internalised, and children learn how to improvise using their bodies, voices and instruments. The Kodály method is applied, with syllables assigned to rhythmic patterns. Intervals, scales, harmony and tonality are also taught by ear. Dalcroze programmes follow an increasingly challenging course, with optional exams along the way. Because such emphasis is placed on movement and self-expression, Dalcroze is also extremely popular with special-needs children, who may never be able to read but can enjoy ‘feeling’ music with their whole bodies.

### **Views from above: what do the professionals recommend?**

In recent years, emphasis has been laid on the value of general musical education before specialising in any one instrument. Music education is not just about learning how to be a musician; it’s about using the unique power of music to stimulate a child’s development in all areas. Laborious struggles with note-reading can hamper a student’s progress, and dampen their love of music.

Murray McLachlan is Head of Keyboard at Chetham’s School of Music, Chair of EPTA UK, and an established concert pianist. In his view, general musical education begins while the baby is still in the womb, with musical stimulation continuing throughout infancy. ‘There is no reason why dancing, musical games and elementary improvisation cannot be introduced in groups – or even one-to-one sessions – from the age of two,’ he says. ‘All children are different of course, but it surely makes no sense to learn notation and how to play an instrument unless they can show a basic sense of rhythm, a love of sound and the ability to sing. Once these ingredients are in place, ‘formal’ lessons can then commence.’ He cautions against teachers employing a uniform method of teaching, and highlights the importance of taking each pupil’s needs into consideration. ‘There are many books designed for

young children,' he concludes. 'A personal favourite is Sharon Goody's excellent 'Playing by Colour' course, which simplifies notational angst and leads to quick results with the minimum of frustration.'

Lincoln Abbotts, Teaching and Learning Development Director at ABRSM, agrees that formal music lessons should be based on a foundation of the child engaging with core musical ideas like singing, clapping, call and response. He emphasises the need for flexibility when thinking about the best age to start an instrument: 'Music sense and development are extremely personal,' he advises. 'While it is clear that music can bring enormous benefit to children from their earliest stages of development, it is hard to pin-point 'the best age' to begin formal instrumental lessons. You will know when your child seems ready, and a good teacher will always be able to guide you!'

### **Making the decision**

There are clearly a number of factors that must be taken into account when deciding on the 'right' age to start a child on formal music lessons. If the child is passionate about a particular instrument, then they have to be sufficiently physically developed to be able to play it. If they are very young, progress may be slow and concentration limited; if they are older, there are more distractions to contend with and more demands on their time. Ultimately, the answer is far from 'one-size-fits-all'. General music appreciation begins in infancy, but formal music lessons should only be started when the child shows a strong interest in learning. For some, this might happen at the age of three; for others, not until they are significantly older – but formal music education can only be truly beneficial when the desire to learn comes from the child, whatever age they may be.

#### **Starter String Instruments by Stentor:**

- Violins: full range of sizes, down to 1/64 for very small children
  - Violas: 12" starter size, equivalent to half-size violin
  - Cellos: 1/16 models available
  - Double basses: 1/8 models available
- Top tips: models are not made for any specific age, but for a certain height and arm length. Make sure your child tries out the instrument in person before you buy it!

#### **Starter Woodwind Instruments by Howarths (for ages c.6-7):**

- Flutes: can buy curved head-joints for younger players. 'Kinder flute' for Suzuki beginners (ages c.4-5) – check availability.
  - Oboes: 'Junior oboe' available, lightweight with fewer keys.
  - Clarinets: 'Clarineo' – also lightweight with fewer keys. Beginners could also start on Eb clarinets.
  - Bassoons: Mini-bassoons and 'fagonellos' for young beginners; 'tenoroons' and short-reach bassoons for slightly older beginners.
- Top tips: If very young children are keen on playing a wind instrument before the age of six, they might like to try the recorder. Take care that young children are capable of looking after their instrument – keeping it clean, and treating reeds with care!

### **Starter Brass Instruments by John Packer (for ages c.8-9 upwards):**

- Kelly mouthpieces recommended for beginners: made from plastic, come in bright colours, no need to warm up, not effected by cold weather.
- Trumpet: 'Pocket trumpet' has same range as full size, but tubing is more compact. Smaller, so weight is closer to body. Children often start on the cornet, progress to trumpet.
- French horn: 'Kinder horn' available, with smaller diameter wrap.
- Trombones: can get Eb trombone with shorter reach for all seven positions; 'tromba' is a full size plastic trombone (also made by 'P-bone') – good sound, much lighter and cheaper. Available in range of colours.
- Tubas: Smaller model (JPO77) available for young beginners, from c. age 9.  
Top tips: Children must have adult front teeth before learning a brass instrument. If children start too young, or are not properly taught, there is a risk of them pressing too hard against the mouthpiece, which pushes their teeth backwards over time.

### **Recommended Beginner Methods:**

- Oxford University Press: '**String Time**' series for beginners on all string instruments ('Fiddle Time', 'Viola Time', 'Cello Time'). Method books include quizzes and games, and are supplemented by repertoire books of corresponding levels ('Joggers', 'Runners', 'Sprinters'). Scales, sight-reading, ensembles and themed collections are also available. '**Piano Time**' series is similarly well-paced, with plenty of content in each book.
- A&C Black: '**Abacadabra**' series is extremely popular with students. Books are available for piano, violin, viola, cello, double bass, recorder, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, saxophone, trumpet, French horn, brass treble clef and brass bass clef. Lively approach, with familiar tunes. Duet books also available for some instruments.
- Faber: '**Waterman and Harewood Piano Series**' for the older beginner; less colourful, moves quickly. Excellent repertoire pieces at the back, with studies and exercises throughout.

### **Books for the Younger Beginner:**

- Hal Leonard: '**Play Today**' series has books across a wide range of instruments. Emphasis is on learning to read music by interval. Plenty of improvisation pieces, with rhythmic patterns introduced early on. **Hal Leonard student Piano Library** has sets of stationary useful for teachers of beginners – including achievement stickers, flash cards for treble and bass clef.
- Alfred Publishing: '**Alfred's Kid's Piano Course**, designed for age 5 and up. Lots of pictures and activities. Dog, cat and alligator characters guide you through the course in easy steps. 'Notespellers' books are full of activities teaching how to draw musical notes and symbols.