

SPECIALIST MUSIC SCHOOLS: A FIVE-STEP GUIDE

In September 1962, the first specialist music school opened its doors in the UK. The Central Tutorial School for Young Musicians (now known as The Purcell School) was established in order to provide talented children with the best possible environment for developing as musicians. Fifty years on, there are now five specialist music schools in the UK from which our budding young musicians can take their pick.

Whether to send your pupil or child to a specialist music school is a big decision, and there is a great deal that needs to be considered. This five-step guide takes you through all the important information you need to know when judging what's best for each young musician.

Step one: what are specialist music schools, and how do they work?

At a specialist music school, a regular academic programme is served alongside a high-level musical education. This means that in addition to completing GCSE and A-Level exams in a range of subjects, pupils also achieve at the highest possible level on their instrument(s). Not only is practice time incorporated into their timetables, but pupils also receive regular one-to-one tuition, play together in a variety of ensembles, and give frequent performances. The school day is long, starting early and often not ending until 5pm – excluding rehearsals and concerts! In order to fit everything in, most of the music schools put a limit on academic qualifications; up to seven or eight GCSEs and two or three A-Levels are offered, which doesn't hold back those wanting to go to university but also doesn't detract from maximum focus on music.

Each of the five specialist schools in the UK has cultivated its own unique atmosphere and approach. The Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey focuses solely on string players and pianists, and all of its 70-odd pupils are boarders. St Mary's, in Edinburgh, is of a similar size but around half its intake are day pupils, and students play a wide variety of instruments – including folk fiddle and bagpipes! The Purcell School (Hertfordshire) and Chetham's (Manchester) are comparatively larger, with 170 and 290 pupils respectively – but bearing in mind that music schools accept children from the age of eight or nine, class sizes are always small and the students can thrive on plenty of attention from their academic teachers.

Wells Cathedral School in Somerset is unique amongst the music schools because its specialist musicians are integrated into an 'ordinary' all-rounded school system. Wells has both a junior school and a senior school, and its musicians comprise around 30% of its 700-strong pupil population. In the words of Director of Music Dorothy Nancekievill, 'The Music School at Wells is all about becoming the musician that you want to be. For some students, this means realising their potential in the practice room and at concerts; for others it's more about developing rigour and a high level of motivation'.

Step two: who do specialist music schools cater for?

The simple answer to this question is 'musicians!' However, some of the schools have special provisions for choristers as well as classical singers and instrumentalists.

St Mary's, Chetham's and Wells are all part of the Choir Schools' Association, which represents 44 schools attached to cathedrals, churches and chapels across the UK. This gives you an idea of just

how many schools offer high-level choral training in the country. As far as these three specialist music schools are concerned, each works alongside its local cathedral; choristers sing in cathedral services whilst receiving their musical education at the school.

For regular instrumentalists, admission to music school starts at the age of eight at Chetham's and Menuhin, and nine at Purcell and St Mary's. Most of the schools don't have formal entry standards as general musical potential is more important than past achievement; prospective pupils are invited to audition and the children are assessed very much on an individual basis. There may be one or two rounds of auditions, and tests in all-round musicianship as well.

Not every musical child will thrive in a specialist music school; expectations and demands on their time are high, and intense concentration on music can sometimes have the effect of dampening other interests. However, many talented children in mainstream schools can feel alienated by their love of classical music and commitment to practising. There is no doubt that many such children thrive when surrounded by like-minded young musicians, and a number of ex-pupils have commented on the strong sense of community they experienced during their school years. 'The atmosphere at St Mary's is one where each student is nurtured and encouraged to develop their own musical personality,' says Christina Marroni, who left St Mary's in 2007. 'I found it to be a positive, personal and incredibly intense social and musical experience.'

Step three: can I afford it?

All of the UK's specialist music schools are independent, and fees are amongst the highest in the country. Taking the figures on their own, attending music school can work out as more expensive than an education at Eton! However, substantial financial support is offered to parents by all of the specialist schools, and very few end up paying the full price. At Menuhin, St Mary's and Purcell last year, 100% of pupils received financial support; at Chetham's only 18 out of 290 paid full fees, and most of these were international students. A number of students receive 100% financial assistance – at Purcell, for example, 60 of their 175 pupils paid nothing at all last year. 'We strongly encourage prospective parents to come in and talk to us about their financial concerns,' says Purcell School bursar Aideen McNamara. 'We don't want anybody to be put off by the figures – the situation is different for each family and it's often better than you think it will be'.

For choristers wanting to attend St Mary's, Chetham's or Wells, the schools work in partnership with their respective cathedrals; the cathedral pays for the musical education of each chorister, and parents pay the balance of the remaining fees. This works out as an approximate 50% remission in total fees for the choristers, which can be topped up by the school if needed.

For UK and EU pupils, or those who have been living in the UK/EU for over two years, help is provided by the Department of Education (DfE) under the Music and Dance Scheme (see below for more information about this scheme). Help from the DfE, however, can only cover a limited number of spaces at each school. Once a school has exceeded its number of aided places, bursaries and scholarships must be found from within the school's resources. Moreover, as a result of the recession government funding for the arts has either decreased or been frozen over the last couple of years – so support must continuously be sought by the music schools from other means. St Mary's prides itself on never having turned away a pupil for financial reasons, and the schools work tirelessly to provide all the financial assistance they can.

Wells operates on a slightly different basis from the other music schools, as it is also a mainstream institution. In addition to funding from the DfE, the school is able to offer a variety of sporting and academic scholarships for those attending the senior school. In addition, children of members of the clergy or the UK armed forces qualify for a 10% bursary.

Step four: the Music and Dance Scheme (MDS) explained

Initially, financial support for pupils in specialist music schools was provided by local education authorities. In 1973, however, the Royal Ballet (Lower) School and the Yehudi Menuhin School were awarded the status of 'Centre of Excellence for the Performing Arts', which entitled them to a fee remission scheme from the government. This remission is means-tested and works on a sliding scale, mirroring the old direct grant grammar school scheme. The four other specialist music schools were awarded the same status within five years, and the MDS currently provides support for 2,200 students across nine centres – five music schools, and four dance schools.

There are two parental scales of contribution at MDS schools, one for aided boarding pupils and the other for aided day pupils. The level of the parents' contribution is calculated solely from pre-tax family income. This can pose a slight problem for some families, who may have several children, a mortgage and therefore very high expenditure – and in those cases the family should apply to the school for extra help, or try their local education authority. All the specialist music schools have further fee remissions for two or more siblings studying at the school.

For aided day pupils, any pupil whose parents have a relevant income of around £15,965 or less is entitled to a free place. The threshold for aided boarding pupils is around £12,620. For all incomes above these amounts there is an increasing level of contribution towards the fees, up until an income of approximately £170,000 – although this can differ considerably with each school, depending how high its fees are.

Choristers who are not at one of the five specialist music schools but who attend one of the 36 independent choir schools across the UK can also receive help from the DfE. There are currently around 100 choristers from low-income families attending cathedral and church schools who are receiving grants from the Choir School Scholarship Scheme.

Step five: life after music school

What are the prospects for graduates of a specialist music school? The good news is that the vast majority – up to 95% - of music school alumni have jobs in the music profession, ranging from conducting, performing and teaching to music technology and arts administration. Many take up places at top universities; others go to music conservatoires in the UK and some further their musical studies abroad in Germany or America. There is no doubt that the specialist music schools of the UK achieve what they set out to do: nurture and train a significant percentage of the country's – and the world's – finest musicians.