

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

PARENTS FREQUENTLY ask me what I consider to be a good age for a child to begin an instrument and for advice regarding the type of instrument they should purchase. It is difficult to make hard and fast rules but most children would probably be ready to cope with the demands of learning an instrument by the age of seven. Rest assured, child geniuses would already have made their presence felt given the availability of an instrument so no-one need worry lest they are concealing a potential Mozart!

Certain skills should have been mastered; reading and mathematical ability should be appropriate for their age for instance. Recent research in America has demonstrated a clear connection between the understanding of maths and music, and an ability to understand patterns and fractions is invaluable to any musician. Tunes are arrangements of the first seven letters of the alphabet and a music student must develop the skill of juggling these backwards and forwards in less than predictable sequences if he or she is to distinguish the rise or fall of a melody.

On a practical level I have devised a series of games involving arms, legs, feet etc., so that a pupil can quickly identify the right or left side of his or her body.

With regard to the choice of instrument it is safe to say that a keyboard is not a good substitute for a piano unless one then engages the services of a specialist keyboard tutor. Despite outward appearances they are vastly different instruments and should be taught by those with expertise in whichever field. Naturally, one would not give a clarinet to someone wishing to learn

the trumpet although both require to be blown and we might wonder about the fortunes of Yehudi Menuhin if his violin teacher had taught him the banjo. We shall never know.

Several years ago the Associated Board introduced an assessment for piano students in the early stages. The average pupil may take several years before beginning grade I studies. Nevertheless they respond well to some degree of testing during that time. The Preparatory test, unlike examinations, does not result in a pass or a fail delivered weeks after the event but an on-the-spot report on the performance given.

Candidates have to play from memory a series of exercises and one short scale in addition to a set piece and a short work of their own choice. The examiner then comments upon accuracy, touch, tone, posture and the use of dynamics and expression marks. I have been entering pupils for this for a couple of years now and my experience has been that this has been a positive encouragement to children at a time when they are acquiring a great deal of information whilst simultaneously developing new skills and levels of co-ordination.

The Chipping Norton festival this year provided an opportunity for many young Wychwood pianists to radiate their talents. Under the strict adjudication of Christine Lees, an internationally renowned violinist and festival adjudicator, local children were awarded seven out of the twelve special certificates and commendations.

With his performance of a Mazurka by Grechaninov and "The Zephyr" by Walter Carroll, Christopher Catling took part in the final concert, the climax of the festival.

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Festival Results

1. Preliminary

Certificate Rebecca Gidman (Highly Commended)
David Ridley

2. Primary (Grades I&II)

Certificate Elysia Ridley
Christopher Catling (Highly Commended)
Hannah Pitman

3. Elementary (Grades III&IV)

Certificate Carla Miskin (Highly Commended)
Penny Croxson

Other worthy performances were given by Matthew Gidman, Amy Bradshaw and Claire White.

Examination results from the Associated Board of the Royal School of Music 1997.

Pianoforte

Preparatory Anthony Webb
Rebecca Gidman
David Ridley
Eleanor Murphy

Grade I Matthew Gidman (Merit)
Oliver Croxson (Merit)
Hannah Pitman (Merit)

Grade II Christopher Catling
Elysia Ridley (Merit)
Penny Croxson (Distinction)

Grade III Clare White (Merit)

Theory of Music

Grade I Amy Bradshaw (Distinction)
Matthew Gidman (Distinction)
Rebecca Gidman (Distinction)
David Ridley (Distinction)
Eleanor Murphy

Grade II Christopher Catling (Distinction)
Jack White
Amy Bradshaw
Clare White

Grade IV Duncan Smith
Carla Miskin

Grade V Adam Smith

Pauline Carter A.Mus LCM.