

# STEPPING NOTES

## Advice Sheet for Parents #3

### ON STARTING INSTRUMENTAL LESSONS

[N.B. Throughout this sheet, the masculine personal pronoun doubles as the epicene. This is purely for grammatical convenience.]

#### when to start

An early start to instrumental lessons is not necessarily a good start. My recommendation is not to start any kind of instrumental tuition with a child until he is *at least* seven or eight years' old, *unless* he *repeatedly* expresses a strong desire to learn a *particular* instrument. Some of the best musicians in this world started their instrumental learning relatively late.

Remember that playing tunes on an instrument is not the most important, but merely the most obvious, part of being a musician. There are many essential sub-skills which a child needs before being formally taught to play an orchestral instrument: first, *musicality* (internal, body-based, subconscious understanding of the elements of music - pulse, rhythm, melody, harmony, phrasing etc.); then, *musicianship* (conscious understanding of these elements through symbol - note-names, hand-signals, written notation etc.); finally, translating these now-conscious elements into instrumental sounds. All these processes form the backbone of the Stepping Notes curriculum. If a child rushes into playing an instrument before his musical foundations are secure, a time will come sooner or later when his progress will grind to a halt. It is the same mistake as a builder who tries to put up fancy spires before the concrete is dry in the foundations: sooner or later the whole edifice comes crashing down.

Therefore, the most important way to help your child be a good musician is *not* to start instrumental lessons too soon, but instead to support and encourage the development of his musicality and musicianship. See my sheet entitled *SUPPORTING AND ENCOURAGING YOUR CHILD'S MUSICALITY* for advice on this.

Also, it is essential that before your child decides to start instrumental lessons, he is well-informed about what instruments there are to choose from, and which ones he prefers. Therefore it is essential that you use your child's early years to expose him to a variety of orchestral sounds, preferably live, so that when the time comes he really makes an informed choice and doesn't merely select the most obvious instrument on offer.

#### choosing an instrumental teacher

If and when your child is clear that he definitely wants to take instrumental lessons, *and* he is sure which instrument he wants to play, *and* he is mature and committed enough to practise that instrument daily, *and you* are sure that *you* can sit in on his instrumental lessons with him and supervise and help him in his daily practising, *then* it will be time for you to find him the best teacher you can.

The criterion is simple, though not always easy to recognise: A bad teacher has no greater goal than to get his children to play pieces. A good teacher teaches children to be musicians. In other words a good teacher recognises the importance of the musical foundations (musicality and musicianship), and ensures that these priorities continue to underpin the child's instrumental learning. He does not try to erect fancy spires before he is sure that the foundations are reliable. And he knows how to lay good foundations.

One place to find a music teacher is through one of the local county music services which offer instrumental tuition through schools and local music centres. They do their best to hire properly qualified musicians, and there are many fine teachers working for them. Unfortunately budgetary pressures often mean that they can only afford to offer very short (10-20 mins.) lessons, or shared group (3-4 pupils at a time) lessons, which are *far* less satisfactory than having an individual lesson for a proper length of time - no matter how brilliant the teacher. They often also have a very fast rate of staff turnover, which of course will do your child no good whatsoever. Do not be fooled!

A private teacher may be more expensive. And you must do a lot of tough questioning to make sure that any teacher you try is properly qualified and experienced, and most importantly knows exactly what he is doing! Do not be afraid to ask difficult questions of prospective music teachers: if they are truly professional they will be happy to answer them. A bad private instrumental teacher is a total waste of money. But a really good private instrumental teacher will be able to do far better for your child than most of the options offered by the county music trusts, and, though more expensive in purely monetary terms, is a far better investment in the long term: properly taught, with unhurried one-to-one attention from a really good teacher, your child is far less likely to come up against obstacles which cause him to lose courage or interest.

The following are four private instrumental teachers in Egham whom I am happy to recommend. This of course does not mean that they are the only good ones. However they are all familiar with my style, and with the building blocks which I use to lay the foundations of musicianship, i.e. Kodály rhythm names (ta titi etc.), relative solfa (do re mi etc.), and the use of singing and body movement. They are also familiar with many of the Colourstrings songs, which Stepping Notes children know well. This means that if your child moves on to one of these teachers, he will probably immediately find that they have a rapport through the use of common musical language, repertoire and methods.

- Angela Dally (01932-241196) teaches violin.

- Elza Lusher (01784-437801) teaches classical piano.

Note: Keyboard (and digital piano etc.) are *not* substitutes for the piano. They are different instruments, and require a different finger technique. If your child learns piano from the start, he will later be able to cross over to keyboard with little difficulty. If your child starts on the keyboard, adapting to the piano later will be far more difficult.

- Dorothee Schack (01784-438983) teaches recorder, flute and saxophone.

Dorothee suggests that children should not start to learn flute or saxophone until they are c. 10 years old, because the sheer size of those instruments can induce tension which will in the long run be damaging. But recorder, when taught properly, is an excellent foundation instrument for prospective wind players, from which children can progress later. Dorothee is happy to give small group lessons in recorder.

- Nikhil Dally (01932-241196) teaches piano musicianship classes.

These are not conventional private classical piano lessons, in that their principal emphasis is not on learning to play correctly classical pieces written out note-for-note in absolute-pitch standard stave notation. Rather, their emphasis is on continuing the style and methods of Stepping Notes (singing, movement, solfa, relative notation and chord symbols, scale and harmonic analysis), but gradually applying these tools to the piano. By these means, children will learn to write and improvise piano accompaniments to songs, "play by ear", play from chord symbols and figured bass-lines, transpose pieces at sight, compose for the piano, accompany others effectively and play in vocal and instrumental ensembles.

Please feel free to ring me any time if you need any further advice!

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