

Personalised Learning.

A perspective on music education, written by Andrew Eales

Every aspect of music is personal. A good performance depends on the player's personal interpretation of the music. Enjoyment for the listener depends on their personal response to the music, which is informed by personal musical taste. In the same way, learning to play a musical instrument is a highly personalised experience.

Musical Ambition

Every individual who takes up an instrument has their own reasons for doing so, their personal agenda for learning. It may be the desire to play a particular favourite piece of music, join a band, work through graded examinations, or perform in public. Many learn purely for pleasure, simply enjoying the musical journey.

Some love playing classical music, while others prefer to play contemporary pop songs, jazz, or music from shows and films. Some start aged 6, others aged 60+. Older learners may have more concrete goals and tastes, but even the youngest learner will have started to develop a personal response to music.

A good teacher will always take account of a pupil's prior learning and musical ambitions. This is why I always offer prospective new pupils a free consultation before starting lessons. It is important to establish why any pupil wants to learn, what music they enjoy, what they can already do, and what they hope to achieve. This informs the teaching that follows, providing the basis for personalised learning. And this in turn enables students to make their best progress and stay motivated.

Learning Styles

As well as having personal tastes and goals, it is widely recognised that different people learn in different ways. For example, some learn particularly well by listening to and following instructions, while others learn better by reading, watching demonstrations, applying logic, or by "trial and error".

Once again, a good teacher must learn to spot and develop the best approach for each individual in order to help students learn as effectively as possible.

Overcoming Obstacles

Playing the piano or keyboard involves a large number of skills at the same time. Players must be able to coordinate each hand separately and together, apply awareness of movement, balance and relaxation, read music fluently, listen to the sound produced, make judgements about the quality of interpretation, and more.

For one pupil, coordination will be an issue, while for another the chief difficulty might be staying in time. Each pupil will encounter different obstacles and learn at a different pace. Only a personalised approach is satisfactory for helping pupils overcoming common difficulties, especially during the beginner phase of learning.

What about Group Lesson?

Many children who take up an instrument do so at school, and learn in groups. The group might consist of three carefully matched pupils, or could be a class of a dozen or more children. Outside school, many attend keyboard schools where group tuition is the norm, such as the Yamaha and Suzuki schools. Adults may well start their lessons at a local night class. Is it possible for personalised needs to be met within these groups?

Any musician will want to applaud efforts to provide wider opportunities for music tuition in schools. For this reason I am happy to teach some small groups in primary schools. I know that by doing so I am often making it possible for children to have a first encounter with music which might otherwise be unavailable. I have recognised too that there are a few unique benefits to learning in a group, including the social interaction that takes place, shared motivation, and the chance to play pieces actually written specifically for groups and ensembles.

However, when working with groups I still recognise the need to provide personalised learning for each student. In reality, one child in a group might find it hard to read the notes, while a second may read well but struggle with finger independence. The third child, meanwhile, may find timing really difficult. Playing music games as a group may help all the children towards overcoming such challenges, but each of the three would really benefit from individual input. Unfortunately, due to time constraints it is often simply not possible to meet these individual needs in a group lesson.

Good instrumental teachers all admit this is a genuine problem. One commonly suggested "solution" is to use "differentiated learning materials", for example with musical parts written for different levels of ability. However, it is rare to find musically inspiring material that genuinely reflects the unique mix of students in any particular group, and challenges each player to fully reach their potential.

Honesty requires that I encourage all students to learn individually at the earliest opportunity. Anyone who is experienced in teaching both groups and individuals will testify that individuals learn much faster and more effectively than pupils learning in a group. Not only that, but pupils receiving personalised tuition usually also remain more focussed in their development and enthusiastic about their musical progression and goals.

The Challenge we face

Unfortunately this contrasts with the many thousands of children who learn their instruments in groups at school. Most simply don't reach a level where they become confident players or gain sufficient satisfaction to carry on. According to Ofsted, around one in every four pupils in Primary School (Key Stage 2) learns an instrument. But eventually, only around half of one per cent takes Music at A Level (which involves playing an instrument at Grade 6 level or above). This is just one person from around 50 who started playing an instrument in Primary School.

This reveals the full extent to which the current system of music education in UK schools is letting us down. Any parent will naturally want a far better musical education for their children.

The Solution

I believe that personalised learning provides the only answer to the challenge we face (which is, interestingly, the same solution as that commonly proposed and used in Primary Schools to improve standards in reading).

Of the students who learn in my studio, most continue learning music through to the sixth form and beyond, often going on to further education in music at University or Music College. Adults too enjoy learning here from one year to the next, developing a growing love for music. As one parent recently wrote in a review of my teaching:

"My daughter has been learning to play the piano with Andrew for 18 months now. She has made excellent progress, thoroughly enjoying her lessons. In addition, Andrew has broadened her appreciation of music by introducing her to a wide range of composers and styles" (Viv Hollis).

At the time of writing, the girl in question was 8 years old and had already passed Grade 3 piano with 138 marks (Distinction). She is now aged 9, and is working towards Grade 5. She is a great example of what can be achieved by a gifted youngster who receives the personalised tuition she needs.

In the same way, personalised learning will help you and your children become confident independent players with a lifelong love of music.

It is – and it will remain – the core priority for all students of Keyquest Music, and I urge you not to settle for less.

Andrew Eales

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