

# A GOOD WA

**G**OLF has been described as 'a good walk spoilt', attributed to Mark Twain, and there are some parallels with the recorder, 'a good instrument ruined' through the now largely abandoned practice of teaching it to whole classes of primary age children.

A vivid memory remains with me to this day of a rival group in the school ensemble class of the Mid Somerset Music Festival in Bath (circa 1968), who all played the same notes on their recorders – nearly. If, as a year six primary age pupil I noticed it was bad, then it must have been *really* bad. Fast forward to 2007, and there seems to be the real possibility of a class of thirty children attempting to play the trumpet. Hence, having heard at such an impressionable age the questionable result of what was effectively whole class teaching, it is with trepidation that (as a recently re-employed full time teacher on *local* pay and conditions), I anticipate the call from my office-bound leaders who attend such high powered meetings as the National Federation of Music Services organise, where the implementation of 'wider opps' is discussed. Graham Standley in his article mentions noise levels

as an issue. The impartial observer might consider it irresponsible for an employer to develop schemes for instrumental learning that can only be delivered by teachers wearing ear protectors! I sustain myself with the thought that music services are responsible employers, managers will realise the health and safety implications for the teachers who are in the front line attempting to implement this idea, and it will wither away as common sense prevails.

A former brass teaching colleague of mine settled in England from the USA in the late 1970s, and he expressed real admiration for the British system of instrumental teaching which was then in operation in most parts of the country. He had endured the American

Band Method as a pupil at his local high school, succeeding in music despite rather than because of it. Should Wider Opportunities become our version of whole class teaching, and be the way forward for music in Britain? As musicians we make

noise, but as responsible teachers, we owe it to the children in our care to educate them about the beauty and dangers of music. By teaching whole classes to play at the same time, are we both encouraging the dangerous volume levels inherent in, say, thirty children all trying to play the trumpet, and by default, guilty of low expectations?

Since about 1990, when instrumental teaching began to descend further and further into the primary age range, I have noticed that children often give up once they go to secondary school, putting away "childish things". There are many reasons for this, but a crucial part of it is a lack of progress because they started too young in the first place. We are attempting to teach adult instruments (yes, some have been adapted to suit smaller bodies) to students whose motor skills, co-ordination, breath control, general strength and cognitive development (remember Jean Piaget?) still have a long way to go.

A pupil who starts at the age of eight in year four, making slow progress for three years, would in all probability make the same amount of progress in six months or less if they started in year seven at the age of eleven, as motor skills, co-ordination and cognitive processes have had three years to develop. The argument is that by starting young you can motivate children, and once drawn in they will get hooked. The opposite is often true, as youngsters can perceive that it is something else they are "no good at", and they avoid practical music for the rest of their lives. The excitement of going up to the big school where 'proper' instruments can be played has gone. The box has been ticked, and the student can move on to scuba diving or karate.

Nursery rhymes and other elementary tunes are just not sung in schools as a matter of course any more (or by parents at home!), and often the instrumental teacher is the first adult to introduce these simple melodies to the student, judging by the responses from many of my brass pupils. A background knowledge of music gleaned from home and/or school prior to learning a 'proper' instrument makes the assimilation of musical understanding



# LK SPOILT

so much easier and natural. Singing as part of the curriculum, and belonging to a good school choir is essential for the development of aural awareness. As a lad I sang in my parish church choir, rarely an option for boys these days, making singing in school even more vital.

The much maligned recorder is actually very suitable for primary age children to gain their first experience of playing an instrument, where breath control, finger co-ordination and music notation are combined in a relatively straightforward way (no extended problems with embouchures or tricky hand positions here). That it is also a 'proper' instrument is not in dispute, as ably demonstrated by the recorder virtuoso Michaela Petri. Many schools

have over the years produced very impressive recorder ensembles, and I still reckon it to be one of the best ways to start your musical journey.

Perhaps the much put-upon primary teacher is sometimes secretly glad to pass on the responsibility for music to specialist music teachers, but all children can sing (*yes they can!*), clap rhythms and play the recorder, enabling them to learn about music, before those who are really interested embark on the serious but fulfilling task of learning a 'proper' instrument - but when *they* are ready for it. Getting everyone to 'have a go' at primary school may salve the politicians' consciences, but it is not the answer.

If my only experience of music at primary age had been that rival school's terrible recorder group, I know that I

would not have treated music as a subject worthy of sustained and rewarding study. Do we really want the next generation's only experience of playing 'proper' instruments to be a cacophonous racket? If it had been mine, maybe I would have taken up karate instead...

**CODA:** In the time between writing and proof-reading this article, I happened to speak to a London-based rep who told an alarming tale. He supplies instruments to music services across the country, and asked one Head of Service how many children opted to carry on learning the instrument in individual/small group tuition once the free 'wider opps' class lessons stopped. The answer was a nice round figure - 0.

Box ticked, move on. I rest my case.

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