

Why Not Put Music At The Heart Of Education?

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One of the most exciting commitments of the general election campaign was made in Jeremy Corbyn's wonderful eve-of-election speech in Colwyn Bay, north Wales. The promise to give every child the chance to learn a musical instrument. There is surely no greater gift for a youngster.

Corbyn has always been good on funding for the arts, especially as it applies to children. It was part of his second Labour leadership campaign and is there again in the Culture for All section of the 2017 manifesto, though the specific promise he had made previously to pay for every child to get the chance to learn an instrument and act on stage has been massaged somewhat into an "arts pupil premium" presumably designed to let schools determine cultural priorities.

But I prefer the purity of the Colwyn Bay version: let's give every child the chance to learn an instrument. Yes, let them act and paint and write poetry, too, but learning to read and play music gives you access to a new language, other worlds. It is one of the greatest gifts, along with security and self-belief and simple love, that a child can be given.

Finland has one of the best education systems in the world, where teaching music and learning to play an instrument are the foundation of children's schooling; it should be the model for us to follow. The principle is that a child is never too young to start a relationship with music; creative play is the key and it should never be a chore; musical exploration will feed into other disciplines; children should be allowed to develop at their own pace and go into music as deeply as they wish. It is fantastically successful, and Finland has produced a stream of extraordinary musicians over the past 30 years – making it surely per capita the most productive country for churning out great classical conductors and soloists.

Yes, I am mainly thinking about classical music here, because that's what I know and revere. Actually, I revere Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen too, and like lots of light music, and 1930s crooning, and jazz and pop; even – on the very few occasions when I hear it – more modern "pop" offerings. But for me classical music is the cornerstone, and I want children to be introduced to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and Brahms as early as possible. Mahler and Stravinsky may have to come a little later; Bartók, too, except for the piano pieces he specifically wrote for children to play.

Perhaps my evangelism on behalf of classical music and getting involved early is a result of my own failure as a child to learn an instrument. My grandmother was a professional pianist – playing popular rather than classical music and accompanying singers on stage – but had been worn down by life by the time I appeared on the scene and was in no state to teach me. My mother was a capable pianist with a taste for ballads and popular repertoire but had no pedagogical skills; and I was just too damned lazy to explore the old piano we had in the house for myself. What a wasted opportunity; what a condemnation of my lack of curiosity.

Almost every other person you meet says one of their greatest regrets is that they didn't learn to read music or play an instrument. That's certainly true of me: there were no lessons on offer at my big comprehensive. Good though it was, it didn't offer too many frills. It had enough to do getting you through the curriculum. There was no school orchestra; no tradition of teaching – properly teaching – music. The only real players there were – I remember an ace pianist and a very good trombonist – were middle-class kids being taught in private lessons paid for by their parents.

Like a typical parent, I tried to right this wrong done to me by getting my son to learn the piano. He ploughed on for 10 years and got to grade seven. I'm not sure he ever particularly enjoyed it and doesn't play now, a decade later, but I hope he got something out of it. Access to that world, the rigour of learning to play, the chance to play duets with my mother – Mozart meets Mrs Mills. My mother certainly enjoyed it.

Not every child is going to become a Finnish-style musical superstar. Some, like my son, will drop away. But every child should, as Corbyn says, be given the opportunity. Why should it just be the kids of thrusting middle-class parents and pupils at public schools? Music and playing an instrument should be an integral part of Britain's education system, and once it is we will have a healthier attitude to learning and a greater appreciation of classical music.

At present, the latter is marginalised and treated like some rarefied activity, whereas in reality it is emotionally powerful and potentially universal in its appeal. The Proms start next month and for a moment classical music will flicker into a more general public consciousness, but that moment will quickly pass and once the football season starts it will be put back into its traditional box – a place for nerds, weirdos and flag-waving greybeards from the home counties. Putting music at the heart of education will improve children's lives and, slowly but surely, improve all our lives, by making classical music seem relevant, necessary, intoxicating. Just ask the Finns.

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