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## Brain training

Can learning a musical instrument have a positive effect on a child's mental health? Players and teachers give their thoughts on the psychological benefits for young people

By Peter Somerford



Much has been written about how learning an instrument such as the violin can benefit children in areas such as mathematical ability, literacy, memory and spatial reasoning. But what about their mental health? In the wake of a major mental health awareness campaign, launched by Public Health England in the same week as World Mental Health Day, it is a good moment to consider how the potential mental health benefits of learning an instrument can add to the powerful arguments for making musical training more widely available for children.

A scientific basis for the idea that instrument learning might help children control their emotions and lessen their anxiety was evidenced in a 2014 study by a team at the University of Vermont's Larner College of Medicine. In what was billed at the time as 'the largest investigation of the association between playing a musical instrument and brain development', the team of researchers studied brain scans of 232 healthy children aged between

6 and 18. As children age, the outer layer of the brain – the cortex – thickens, and the researchers wanted to see if music training correlated with the rate of cortical thickness development in specific areas of the brain. They were not surprised to find that playing a musical instrument affects the motor areas of the brain, but they found that music training was also associated with cortical thickness in 'brain areas that play a critical role in inhibitory control, as well as aspects of emotion processing'.

As for practical evidence of the benefits of music training for young people's mental health, string teachers point to the experience of seeing how learning an instrument can build resilience, impulse control and self-discipline in children and increase their self-esteem and confidence; how regular lessons and practising can provide stability and structure; how music can be a refuge for children who are experiencing a mental health issue; and how orchestras and ensembles give students the opportunity to make social connections. But there is also acknowledgement of the complexity of mental health, and external factors such as a child's environment, parents and peers. Teachers recognise that studying a stringed instrument to a high level can also bring its own pressures, and that this is an area that requires sensitive handling.

Violin teacher Deborah Harris, who founded and heads the North London Conservatoire, a Colourstrings programme with around 1,200 students, says that music training can be a refuge and a centring or stabilising activity for children who are experiencing mental health issues or personal trauma. 'Some of the children who have had mental health problems use music as a refuge – from other people, or even from their own negative thoughts. Some children might be too anxious to go to any other group at school or outside school, but are happy to come to lessons and orchestra. Music can also provide enormous stability to children who are experiencing problems at home, for example a divorce, or the illness or death of a parent.'

Violinist and teacher David Scott Binanay, who is based in Durham, NC, US, founded an organisation called Music Over Mind which

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– Deborah Harris, founder,  
North London Conservatoire

helps people with mental health and other health problems experience live music performance as therapy. Binanay has had his own mental health challenges, associated with the trauma of having four open-heart surgeries, and credits violin playing and songwriting with helping his recoveries. 'When I had a mental health episode, the pathways in my brain were severed,' he says. 'I couldn't speak or communicate normally. But playing music creates new pathways and thought patterns, and I learnt to speak again through my violin and my music. I found that as I began to play, the anxiety and fear I had would dissipate.'

With string players at a physical advantage over other instrumentalists in being able to start their training at an early age, there is arguably more time for them to build resilience and self-discipline, and for them to enjoy the social benefits of ensemble and group playing. But can playing an instrument also help teenagers cope with the pressures of academic exams and the unrealistic expectations often associated with social media exposure? Harris says that music can be especially useful in helping to address the feeling that you have to be perfect in schoolwork and everything you do: 'It's impossible to be perfect at an instrument all the time, if ever. So playing an instrument is a good way of establishing the idea that mistakes are OK, and that's how we learn. You build resilience in children by allowing them to make mistakes, but then you help them become more resilient by showing them how to solve those mistakes.'

Violinist and teacher Alex Laing, who is a former professor at the Royal College of Music in Manchester and is now artistic director at the King's High School in Warwick, warns that 'studying a stringed instrument can add to the pressure on children, unless it's handled carefully by a very good teacher'. He explains: 'Many students, under the pressure of achieving excellent exam results, are conditioned to getting the correct answers to everything, and that's the complete opposite to what a healthy musical education should be about. We should be developing a culture where students are using their music and instruments in a therapeutic way, rather than constantly worrying about whether the notes are right or wrong.'

Harris sees student orchestras and ensembles as not only an environment where focus is deflected from the individual to the collective endeavour of a team, but also as a place where children can release tension. 'Social media pressures have encouraged the projection of another self, instead of the inside self,' she says. 'I see young teenagers come into orchestra practice still very much in their school personas, wanting to project a strong, even belligerent, image. But within 10 or 15 minutes of playing, all of that falls away. Music lets them release a lot of tension and anger.'

## NEWS IN BRIEF

Renaud Capuçon raises €100,000 for Notre-Dame [bit.ly/32P27vC](http://bit.ly/32P27vC)

Violinist Renaud Capuçon raised more than €100,000 towards the restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris, during a tour of six French cathedrals in September. He performed the string trio version of the *Goldberg Variations* alongside colleagues including violists Gérard Caussé and Adrien La Marca. A portion of the money raised also went towards the maintenance funds of each host cathedral: Chartres, Reims, Lyon, Amiens and Bordeaux, plus the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris.

Paris street inaugurated as Promenade Yehudi Menuhin [bit.ly/31CXinY](http://bit.ly/31CXinY)

A street in Paris has been inaugurated as the Promenade Yehudi Menuhin, in honour of the legendary violinist. The inauguration took place on 1 October at the Place de Fontenoy in front of the Paris headquarters of Unesco, overseen by Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo. The date marked the 44th anniversary of International Music Day, first held on 1 October 1975 and instituted by Menuhin during his tenure as president of the International Music Council. The Promenade Yehudi Menuhin runs parallel to the Avenue de Lowendal from the Place de Fontenoy to the Avenue de Suffren.

Shanghai Quartet appointed to Tianjin Juilliard School [bit.ly/2BC1Cte](http://bit.ly/2BC1Cte)

The members of the Shanghai Quartet have been appointed as resident faculty at the Tianjin Juilliard School – the New York institution's new Chinese enterprise – effective from autumn 2020. The players (left) will coach chamber music students and give individual lessons to graduate students in Tianjin, as well as perform with students majoring in chamber music and other resident faculty members from the school.



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