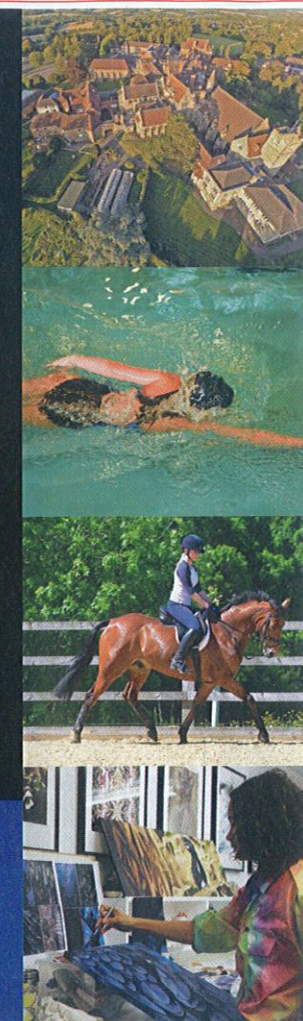



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The sound of music



Playing the violin at Bryanston School

Image: Matt Austin

Evidence shows that playing a musical instrument or singing in a choir improves academic performance and makes learning easier. **Julie Henry** investigates

So convinced is Bryanston School of the positive benefits of music tuition that it is mandatory for pupils to learn an instrument – every year 9 student at the Dorset school has one-to-one instrumental or singing lessons for the entire year.

“We encourage our pupils to continue learning the instrument they started at prep or junior school,” says Xavier Iles, director of music at the co-ed day and boarding school. “We give them endless opportunities to join one of our groups or ensembles and to perform in various musical groups, recitals, and concerts. We also support our pupils to learn if they’ve never had tuition before. It’s really important that they keep learning and enjoy their music lessons at whatever level they are at – from the elite high-level musician to someone who is playing in a group for the joy of it.”

Bryanston’s commitment to music is born of an intuitive conviction that immersion in music and musical training can turbo-boost children’s cognitive, social, psychological and spiritual development.

However, while the link between music tuition and doing well at school seems pretty apparent – the music scholar and

“There’s kind of a feedback mechanism – if you can train your abilities through music, they will become even greater”

the academic high-flier are often the same student – the question mark remains as to whether it is a causal relationship.

Now new research, in the form of an ongoing study at Goldsmiths, University of London, seems to suggest it is. Involving more than 4,000 children, including pupils from Putney High School GDST in south west London, it is casting new light on the links between music training and adolescent brain power.

According to Professor Daniel Müllensiefen, one of the lead researchers, musical training has a significant association with – and a small, positive, causal effect on – both musical and cognitive growth.

“When people receive music training, and stick with music training, these differences become exaggerated over time,” he explains. “So there’s kind of a feedback mechanism here; if you can train your abilities through music, they will become even greater.”

The processes at work in this relationship are complex. Studies suggest that musical training can enhance neuronal communication between the left and right hemispheres of the brain and fire areas involved in language skills and executive function. It may also facilitate how the brain encodes and maintains memories. “There are near transfer effects, so anything that has to do with auditory processing gets some sort of boost from musical training,” says Professor Müllensiefen.

The research findings come as no surprise to Dr Jane Brandon, deputy head co-curricular and outreach at Putney High. “We, as teachers, have got to those conclusions ourselves but the research is a way to actually quantify some of those connections that we see every day,” she says.

She is particularly interested in how the rewards reaped by music practice can encourage a “growth mindset”, the belief that talents, intelligence and abilities are not fixed but can improve through hard work and good relationships.

Early work by Professor Müllensiefen found a “very strong association” between musical abilities and the realisation in children that, “I’m not stuck with the



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Piano practice at Putney High School GDST

skill level I'm born with and I can develop this over time and can then transfer it to other areas".

Inspired by the Goldsmiths' research, Putney High looked at its own GCSE data this year and discovered a strong correlation between musical participation and better results. "There are exciting concrete connections between music and helping pupils flourish in different ways," says Dr Brandon. "Some of them may be intellectual, but some may be about developing a positive self-image or the prosocial benefits of collaboration or community."

This music-inspired collegiality is on display at Lancing College, in West Sussex,

"There are exciting concrete connections between music and helping pupils flourish in different ways"

every Tuesday morning. "We have a short hymn practice known affectionately as 'Congo', where the entire school comes to chapel to sing together," says Alex Mason, the director of music. "Music enriches life at Lancing in so many ways; some of our music scholars aim for music college and Oxbridge choral and organ scholarships, while others simply play for pleasure and relaxation."

Improving onsite music facilities becomes not just about music for music's sake but an

investment in the wider benefits of self-discipline, time management and the confidence that comes from mastery and performance.

Benenden School's new Centenary Buildings comprise the 800-seat Centenary Hall plus a music school featuring more than 20 practice rooms and a smaller 120-seater recital hall. As well as supporting students at the Kent boarding school for girls aged 11 to 18, the investment is intended to provide an inspiring space for pupils from nearby schools.

"We've had hundreds of children through," says Samantha Price, Benenden's headmistress. "One of the most memorable moments of many was a row of previously fidgety little boys at the front, watching the Kidenza Orchestra play *The Carnival of the Animals*, completely focused and absorbed in the music."

The new facilities have boosted the take-up of music. Some 400 individual music lessons a week has grown to about 550 and more student bands can be heard jamming away in the practice rooms.

"People rightly question financial investment into facilities and I concur that the quality of teaching is what inspires, but inspiring spaces also make a difference," says Mrs Price. "There is no doubt that the acoustics and the collegiality around the design of the music hub is important to pupils – it's a cool space to hang out. There's real breadth; girls are writing mixes of different songs, performing and developing their creativity."

FROM BEETHOVEN TO ABBA

For choristers at Salisbury Cathedral School, singing in front of up to 2,000 people in the splendour of a building that dates back to the 13th century is a regular extra-curricular activity. It might be all in a day's work but emerging from the blaze of candlelight into the evening air after the first of three beautiful Darkness to Light Advent Processions, the children are giddy with excitement.

"When they walk back over to the school, they're as high as kites, with big grins and sparkling eyes," says Susie Lamb, director of music at the co-ed school for three to

13-year-olds. "They'll probably struggle to drop off to sleep and then they get up and do it all again the next day; they are exhausted by the end of it but it is so worth it and the whole school community shares the exhilaration with them."

Boys and girls start learning to be choristers in year 4 or 5, practising for an hour before school every day, apart from Wednesday. At weekends, they take it in turns to perform in the cathedral choir. They are, in effect, professional musicians.

But they are not the only pupils who sing. There are five school choirs and the music

director is convinced that being part of the various choirs improves wellbeing but also literacy.

"The language in lyrics can be so rich," she says. "Whether it is religious music or pop music, you are learning new words and rhymes all the time. And of course choristers may have to sing in four or five different languages."

The school also boasts 14 or 15 instrumental ensembles, from string quartets and a full size orchestra, to a jazz band and a ceilidh band. "We will play Beethoven alongside Abba; all music is valid," says Mrs Lamb.



The joy of music at Benenden School

The head is also a strong advocate of music as a healthy way to switch off from academic work.

"It can help students relax," she says. "There is just the joy of music; listening to music, playing music, singing and being a part of something. It releases really positive endorphins that are good for wellbeing. It is as good as sport is for the mind and body but in a different way."

Music GCSE and A level entry figures at the school are healthy and many girls work their way through their music grades in piano, violin, flute, clarinet and a plethora of other instruments, reflecting the subject's firm footing in the independent sector generally. Nationally, however, music in the curriculum has been in persistent decline, with 37,700 GCSE entries last summer, down from about 50,000 entries two decades ago. Critics blame the omission of creative

"They were up there taking part, learning so much and having fun, and that is the most important thing of all"

subjects from the government's EBacc performance measure for state schools. A similar depressing trajectory characterises music A level numbers.

In the high-tech digital world that young people are growing up in, music is not just about traditional instruments or classical music. At Bryanston, timetabled music lessons include composition work using software that enables pupils to work on and record their own music and produce printed scores that can be used as part of music GCSE.

"Our composition work software enables pupils who might not have gone through the

traditional route of learning the piano or the violin to access music in a way that has only been possible in the last five or ten years," says Bryanston's Xavier Iles.

Amongst the 48 visiting music teachers at the school, there's a DJ who gives one-to-one DJing lessons and group sessions in one of Bryanston's 30 practice rooms.

While many of the school's best musicians are also academically very able, Mr Iles makes the point that enjoying and pursuing music can allow pupils who might not be high-fliers in the classroom or on the rugby pitch to shine.

"We've just done an amazing production of *The Addams Family* musical and there was a real selection of kids up on stage doing the parts," he says. "They were up there taking part, learning so much and having fun, and that is the most important thing of all."

INSPIRING YOUNG MUSICIANS

From composer Benjamin Britten to singer-songwriter Florence Welch, independent schools have a long track record of inspiring talented, young musicians.

Born in 1913, Britten boarded at Gresham's School, in Holt, Norfolk. Online school archives show the scores the youngster booked out of the music library and details of pocket money spent on a "bow restring", "music extras" and "jam".

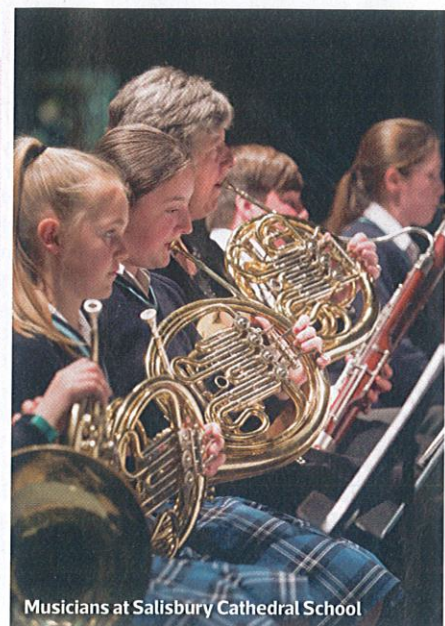
Welch, lead vocalist of Florence and the Machine, attended Thomas's Battersea and Alleyn's School in Dulwich. Meanwhile, Exeter

Cathedral School instilled an early passion for music in the young Chris Martin, the lead singer of one of the biggest bands in the world, Coldplay. A cassette tape discovered in 2020 features a three-minute instrumental piece entitled *Electric Thunder*, composed by Martin when he was just 12. He went on to attend Sherborne School in Dorset, where he met Phil Harvey, who has managed the band and is now its creative director.

Genesis were formed at Charterhouse in the 1960s, while critically acclaimed Radiohead

were formed at Abingdon School in Oxfordshire in the mid-1980s. More recently, Mercury Prize nominee Tahliah Debrett Barnett, known as FKA Twigs, attended St Edward's Cheltenham, a co-ed Catholic school, on a scholarship.

An independent school education also featured in the back stories of James Blunt, Lily Allen, Sophie Ellis-Bextor and Marcus Mumford. And let's not forget *The X Factor* creator and kingmaker Simon Cowell, who attended Radlett Preparatory School in Hertfordshire and Dover College.



Musicians at Salisbury Cathedral School

Image: Ash Mills

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