



Richard Morrison...

how best to teach our children music

Philip Larkin made a famously blunt (and, in a family magazine, famously unprintable) assertion about the psychological damage that parents inflict on children. I wouldn't go as far as he does. Nevertheless, if I rummage in that increasingly dusty compartment of my brain labelled 'childhood memories', I can recall seven parent-inflicted traumas, the echoes of which still turn my innards to jelly.

Why seven? Because after my Grade VII piano exam I rebelled and vowed never to do another. Two years later, when I had to sit a university entrance exam in music, I was still so knotted up about the piano that I chose to be auditioned on the trombone instead – an instrument I had learnt informally, sitting in my dad's brass band, and had never been tested on. I breezed through. Why? Perhaps because I associated the trombone with having fun, rather than with the dread business of stumbling through arpeggios in front of some hatchet-faced examiner. (Either that, or the university orchestra desperately needed trombonists that year.)

I offer this vignette of prehistoric autobiography not because my childhood was particularly unusual, but precisely because I suspect that it wasn't. I meet all sorts of musicians, professional and amateur, young and old, who express all sorts of opinions about the training they received. But I cannot remember anyone ever saying: 'Gosh, I really loved doing Associated Board exams.'

Okay, the grade exams have been slightly humanised since my day. (I know this because, conforming shamelessly to the Larkin thesis, I have inflicted them on my own children in turn.) But only slightly. I still believe that these cold, artificial proceedings – still following a format laid down, incredibly, in the days when Tchaikovsky was a living composer – seem far more likely to repel children than to unleash their creative juices.

Which is why I welcome the Associated Board's most radical innovation in 115 years:

a new assessment system called Music Medals. Rather than using an external examiner, this will require the pupil's teacher to conduct the assessment in normal lesson time, though a video of the proceedings will be checked by 'moderators'. More startling still, pupils will be tested in ensemble pieces, rather than as soloists. The thinking is clear: most musical activities are communal (including, these days, most instrumental lessons in state schools), so the assessment process should reflect this.

The classical-music world being the fogeyish place that we all know and love, such an upheaval is bound to cause apoplexy in the usual quarters. I can predict the loudest objection right now: that the Associated

perhaps those destined for top youth orchestras or conservatoires – graded exams will continue to be a spur. But the majority need different motivation. Music Medals – with their populist echo of sporting medals and Duke of Edinburgh awards – seem likely to hold students' interest in a way that graded exams never did and never will.

No one who has listened to recordings of British orchestras in, say, the Twenties can doubt that instrumental standards in this country have improved out of all recognition over the past century. It wouldn't be hard to find a present-day youth orchestra that plays more virtuosically than any of the orchestras Henry Wood conducted. The last thing

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Board has 'dumbed down'. Doubtless anticipating this attack, the board has declared that Music Medals will complement graded exams, not replace them.

Even so, many will fret that this is the thin end of the same sort of 'everyone's a winner' wedge that has diminished the nation's faith in GCSEs and A-levels. And it's certainly true that a teacher-assessed test – one that can, if necessary, be repeated week after week until the 'right result' is obtained – is a far less daunting challenge than a fixed-date audition in front of an independent examiner.

But that's exactly the point, isn't it? Music education should be, first of all, enjoyable not terrifying, and secondly a matter of realising each child's potential, not of branding some as successes, others as failures. For a comparatively small proportion of pupils –

anyone would want is for those hard-won technical gains to slip away.

But this isn't an argument about the intensive training of the elite few who will form the backbone of the orchestral profession in the mid-21st century (always assuming that orchestras survive that long). It's about finding a way through to the hearts and minds of millions of children who, at present, dismiss the rigmaroles of classical music as 'boring' before the music itself has been given a chance to weave its magic. With this new scheme the Associated Board has demonstrated its determination to be a relevant player in that wider process. I applaud its boldness. In fact, I even forgive it for casting a cloud over so much of my own childhood.

Well, almost forgive it. I still carry the emotional scars. ■