

Quick Information Guides for Educators





SNAPshot No 3 **Challenging Able Musicians:** **Advice for non-specialists**



High musical ability

Just like in the wider high ability research, attempting to define musical ability is difficult. At the heart of much of the research literature lies the nature/nurture debate, with a common view that you either possess musical ability or you do not. How a teacher views ability influences the way in which it is identified. Stollery and McPhee (2002) argue that we all possess musical talent and it is our interactions with the context that determine how good we become. If a child's family has an established musical background, they will have had an earlier exposure to music than their peers. Their parents will also know which attributes of high musical ability to look for in their children. For other pupils, musical experiences and the opportunity to play instruments at home might be limited, therefore school music acts as a way into learning about various instruments and basic theory, however the quality of this can also depend on the skills and confidence of the classroom teacher! There will always be late bloomers who discover that they are musical in the latter stages of Primary School and beyond, so how can we make this experience worthwhile and 'find' these musically more able students at the same time?





Joanne Haroutounian (2000) identifies four main elements of musical high ability:

-  Musical awareness of sound, pitch and rhythm
-  Creative interpretation
-  Dynamic of performance
-  Motivation and commitment

This SNAPshot will discuss these four areas in relation to the more able musician.

Musical awareness of sound, pitch and rhythm: What should I look for?

The more able musical child may:





-  Have a steady sense of rhythm and can identify a pulse easily
-  Pick up on musical sounds from the surrounding environment
-  Recognise patterns (at the same and different pitches)
-  Hear differences in pitch and recall melodies and repeat them

The musically able child may tap or sing along (sometimes spontaneously) to the music and sound they hear. They may become excited or engrossed in these sounds and notice (with relative ease) differences in timbre (sound colour). Even from a very young age, the musically able can recognise different instruments and recurring themes on specific

instruments, perhaps associating with other events and experiences in their lives. This is more to do with the emotional response to music, how the person perceives sounds and responds to it. When an individual is particularly moved by a sound or piece of music, this is called emotional transformation, also known as the tingle factor. Prepare activities that encourage *all* children to develop awareness of sound, pitch and rhythm (for ideas see SNAP publication 'A Little Class Music').

Creative interpretation: What should I look for?





The more able musical child may:

-  Like experimenting with sounds
-  React and become more involved in musical activities
-  Like working with musical ideas
-  Find expressions in music

A musically able child can understand, replicate and recreate in their own style what they hear. This does not have to mean that the pupil performs on an instrument or composes a tune, but can be in the way that they talk or describe pieces or musical experiences. They see music as a chance to explore and experiment with sounds. Creative interpreters are sensitive to sounds and may be prone to singing or making up their own sounds in response to what they hear. Listen to what children do with simple tunes. Do they change any part of it? Incorporate in your teaching activities that can extend the interpretive and creative skills of pupils (for ideas see SNAP publication 'A Little Class Music').

Dynamic of performance: What should I look for?

The more able musical child may:

-  Have natural ease in performance with a good sense of rhythm
-  Have an emotional response to music during performance
-  Listen and respond to the notes on the page
-  Be sensitive to performances

Dynamic of performance in music is all about communication, how the musician reads the notes of the composer and relays these to the audience. This allows us to recognise and catch the spark of musical ability. The musically talented person is one who shows a natural ease with their instrument, who can relay this information comfortably, listening and responding to the rhythms and pitch. It can be quite easy to spot the highly able musician during performances as their skills usually make them stand out from their peers, however attention to also be paid to those who develop these skills over time. Some children do not have the opportunity to take part in musical activities until Secondary school therefore the teacher should keep an eye (and ear!) ready for the 'hidden' abilities. Group performance is a great opportunity to get pupils working together and to enable these 'hidden' skills to emerge.

Motivation and commitment: What should I look for?

The more able musical child may:

- * Have high levels of focus when taking part in musical activities
- * Have a long concentration span
- * Persevere in musical tasks
- * Enjoy working individually (can often find working with others frustrating)
- * Have high standards and be self-analytical

Highly able individuals have a higher interest and motivational drive than their peers. There is a deep interest and almost infatuation with the task. The most effective way of identifying the musically motivated is to set a task and see how the child engages with it. As per any other aspect of musical learning, musical motivation can be developed to a degree, however this relies on careful development on the pupils' skill, building gradually and gaining their trust and interest through challenges which meet their needs (for ideas see SNAP publication 'A Little Class Music').

In Summary

- * Creating interesting lessons and an ethos for achievement can ignite a passion for music not only for the pupils, but also for the teacher. Being creative, allowing space for the child to practice and respond to the experience can be an effective tool for many pupils, including highly able musicians.
- * Musical awareness of sound, pitch and rhythm; Creative interpretation; Dynamic of performance; Motivation and commitment are several of many possible skills that a child may demonstrate. For example, passion, drive, concentration, self and personal identity are other possible outlays of the highly able musician.
- * Although a child may be more able in one area of musical expression does not mean that they will be just as able in another, similarly, a musically able child may chose not to participate or develop their skills to a higher level.