

The art of listening helps children tune into their potential

Arts therapy

Music lessons help children through tough times, says *Griselda Murray Brown*

After the second world war, my grandmother, who had been a student at the Royal College of Music in London, gave piano lessons to schoolchildren. Later she would tell us about the therapeutic effects of music on shell-shocked children who had lived through the Blitz. On her 80th birthday, we arranged for a recital at home. She was in a wheelchair and unable to communicate clearly, but tears rolled down her cheeks as the young cellist played.

Ahmad Naser Sarmast knows all about the power that music can have to unlock and guide our emotions. “Music is a human right,” Mr Sarmast tells me, speaking from his office in Kabul. He is the director of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (Anim), a coeducational school he founded in 2010.

Afghanistan’s once-thriving music scene was wiped out during the civil war of the 1990s and, between 1996 and 2001, music was banned under Taliban



Anim students rehearse for a concert

rule. Mr Sarmast wanted to reintroduce music education to his homeland.

Music is not part of the school curriculum in Afghanistan and Anim is unique in its size and scope. At the institute, pupils, who range from 10 to 21, begin by learning the recorder before choosing another instrument the next year. Both Afghan and western classical music are taught alongside traditional academic subjects.

“Our aim is to train professional musicians for the country,” says Mr Sarmast, but many of his pupils go on to

become doctors, lawyers and teachers. He speaks animatedly about music’s “soft power” to transform children’s lives and communicate values such as gender equality in a country where 70 per cent of the population is illiterate.

There is soft power at work. The school’s orchestras and chamber ensembles have toured the world, playing at London’s Royal Festival Hall and the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. In January, the Afghan Women’s Orchestra, formed at Anim and known as Ensemble Zohra, performed at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Mr Sarmast’s primary interest is in the power of music to transform difficult lives. Half of the pupils admitted to the institute each year come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many are street children or orphans, and many of them are girls.

This has made Anim a target: in 2014, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive during a concert in Kabul, killing one man and injuring others, including Mr Sarmast, whose hearing was severely damaged. But the attack has only hardened his resolve, he says.

Thousands of miles away in London, a charity set up a few years before Anim is working towards the same goal. Apollo

Music Projects runs year-long programmes with primary schools designed to give children who would otherwise be unlikely to encounter it an appreciation of classical music.

Established in Hackney in 2004, Apollo works in classrooms across five London boroughs, often in schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged children for whom English is a second language. The children start by listening to small ensembles of professional players from the Apollo Chamber Orchestra in their classroom, and eventually attend concerts featuring full orchestras.

Music education provides a balance to the heightened emphasis on literacy and numeracy in UK primary schools, but it has come under threat as budgets are squeezed. Findings from the University of Sussex suggest that between 2012

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and 2016 the number of schools in England offering GCSE-level music fell from 85 per cent to 79 per cent. Following recent government reform of the A-level system, the number of students taking AS-levels in arts subjects fell, with music entries down by 50 per cent.

Contrary to the received wisdom that it is more important for children to play an instrument than learn to listen to live classical music, Apollo’s chief executive and programme director, David Chernaik, says the sessions he and his colleagues run are about “listening as an active thing”. The children are encouraged to touch the instruments, feel the vibrations travel through the wood and see for themselves how sound is made.

The aim, he says, is to help children understand “why they feel like they feel” about, say, a Beethoven string quartet. Often, they instinctively sense the drama in the music. He encourages them to realise that, for example, that it is the repeated quavers which give the Beethoven score its scary, ominous feel.

Educators say learning about music can have benefits such as building confidence and developing concentration, especially for children who struggle with learning, for example those with behavioural disorders.

“The biggest challenge is concentration,” Mr Chernaik says. Many of the pupils Apollo works with have complicated lives outside school, with family responsibilities or parents working long shifts. Yet over the course of the programme, he has seen improvements in pupils’ ability to sit quietly and focus.

Mr Sarmast sees a similar transformation in students who show symptoms of trauma. “We did not use music for therapy on purpose,” he says. “However, we witnessed [its] therapeutic power. We had a student who was not able to laugh or smile, but after enrolling in our music programme she became very social and began making friends.”

Another student was afraid of loud noises, “but thanks to music he became a normal young man not scared of any noise, regardless of its level”.

For some students, projects such as these can be the start of a life-long interest in classical music. Mr Chernaik maintains that children can handle complex pieces if they are introduced to them in the right way.

“Music is very complicated, but it’s also very simple. The key is not to oversimplify the complicated parts and not to overcomplicate the simple parts.”