

The place of music in education

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

Essay written by Francis Bennion in December 1946 as an undergraduate at Balliol College Oxford when reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics (Modern Greats).

Music is important in education. Children naturally take to singing from the earliest age, and music in school can, when properly arranged, add much real pleasure to the education process. Children nowadays are far luckier in this respect than were their predecessors of even ten years ago. The attitude that music is a discipline, to which every child must be subjected, irrespective of inclination or ability, which was so prevalent in the past is now out of date, with most teachers, if not with most parents. Many people can relate how they developed a fierce hatred of music, or at least an indifference to it, purely because it was made a burden to them in childhood. The fingers which crawled, numb in winter – moist in summer, but always reluctant, over the piano keyboard for the allotted eternity have probably never found their way back to it in later years. The violin, which was once tucked so uncomfortably under the youthful chin, has long lain forgotten in some dusty corner – its once tortured strings muted into decay. So has the solace and joy of music been denied to many who had need of it – just because 'practice' – that purgatorial word! – was made the synonym for duration vile by unthinking teachers and mothers.

Nowadays, as we have said, children are luckier. Kind people make films for them especially for the purpose of illustrating the properties of the various musical instruments, their place in the orchestra, and how they are used by different composers. Other kind people organize concerts for them, at which music suitable for children is played and interestingly described by the conductor. At most schools music is taught in an enlightened manner, and those who show no interest in it are not forced to 'practice', but are told how pleasant it is in later life to be able to play an instrument, and are encouraged to make their own music in the way they prefer. If there is still no sign of interest then the subject is dropped – perhaps to be raised again at a later stage in their development.

What effect is this new treatment having upon people? It is widely known that the popularity of serious music has increased enormously in recent years. Never before have there been such unflinching large attendances at concerts and recitals. Works which were formerly thought to be only capable of appreciation by the enlightened few are now given a wide hearing. Much of the credit for this must be given to the BBC. Broadcasting has brought high-grade musical performances within the reach of everybody and the evolution of a more highly-educated populace has enabled the band of music-lovers to grow ever wider. The only doubtful effect of this is the tendency for what might be called 'domestic' music to die out. Many people used to expert performances on the radio and in the concert hall, feel diffident about their own comparatively clumsy efforts and executive ability tends to be neglected.

This brings us to the point of the double aspect of music in education. A child may be taught the history and theory of music. He may be lectured on that which has become a favourite topic with lecturers – musical appreciation. All this will help him to understand the music he hears on the radio and in the concert hall. On the other hand the child may be taught to make music for himself. In the past it has been the latter aspect which has been favoured by parents and teachers, who regarded it as admirable training in concentration. 'Musical appreciation' is a very recent development of music in education. Now it is obvious that executive ability is of prime importance. The child who has talent should, and must be encouraged. There is always the possibility that his talent may emerge as genius. But this should not mean that the child who is without talent should also be without any instruction in music. So we reach the

conclusion that *all* children should be taught to understand and appreciate music in general, but that only those who evince a talent and a desire for it should be taught the actual playing of an instrument. A love of music can be of great value to men and women; it is vitally important that it should not be killed in them when they are boys and girls.