

MUSIC ADDS ESSENTIAL HARMONY TO LIFE'S OPUS

Many parents think learning an instrument or singing in a choir uses up academic hours, but it's time well spent, writes **Andrea Zavadszky**

Students in academic-focused Hong Kong are often overburdened by having to take extra, out-of-school classes. It means they face difficult decisions when choosing those subjects that deserve extra attention.

When it comes to music, many examination-focused parents believe extra-curricular activities, such as singing in the school choir, learning to play an instrument or performing in the school's orchestra, use up precious time, which their children could be using to study core subjects, such as languages, mathematics or sciences.

"The culture in Hong Kong is that many parents get their children to learn musical instruments at a very young age – largely piano and violin – to gain certificated examination syllabus qualifications," says Malcolm Godsman, head of music at ESF's Sha Tin College.

Parents tend to overlook the intangible benefits of music studies, beyond gaining a certification that may help their children gain an advantage in school and college entry interviews.

Lee Siu-mei, a music teacher at Lam Woo Memorial School, in Kwai Hing, puts in many extra hours of

work each day to try to inspire a love of music in her students – most of whom come from grassroots families – and a share in its benefits.

She hopes they will gain emotional release and control though music, which will benefit them throughout their lives.

"You can rely on music to help express your emotions when you are happy or sad," Lee says.

The school's orchestra, band, Chinese orchestra and choir all have about 70 members, with some overlap between groups. Classes are taught for players of eight Chinese and 14 Western instruments.

Lee runs daily a choir practice at lunchtime, and is tough on any student who misses a rehearsal: she says this approach is necessary to ensure students take it seriously.



Music helps you express your feelings if you're happy or sad

LEE SIU-MEI, MUSIC TEACHER



"If you keep up the standards, all the good singers will come, and the ones that have achieved higher grades will help those in lower grades," she says.

Godsman also believes that setting a good example creates interest; the work of the department can become self-promoting and appealing to all students, which generates a strong musical culture within the school.

At Lam Woo, standards are kept so high that about 600 students – more than half of those attending the school – enter the Hong Kong Music Festival each year. The school's students usually win more than 100 prizes; the record stands at 141 prizes.

Lee believes the competition gives students an important goal and direction, which will spur them to be serious about learning music, rather than waste their time.

"During the competition they can see their own standard compared with that of others," she says.

Winning a prize gives them a

sense of achievement and satisfaction, which is very important for developing their self-esteem and self-confidence. It will also encourage them to continue studying music.

Lee says that singing in a choir, or playing in a school band can have countless character-developing benefits for students.

"By taking part they are learning how to be punctual, responsible and reliable," she says. "The groups of different age students have various roles. They learn how to get involved with a large group of people and interact in a group. It teaches all sorts of good values and builds the child's character."

Debra Jones, head of music at ESF's South Island School, says it uses music to help develop its students' inter- and intra-personal qualities such as resilience, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking and open-mindedness.

These same objectives are shared by Kellett School; in addition, the school's students are influenced through projects on world music to

value multiculturalism and accepting differences.

"We have a whole range of instruments to allow our students a realistic experience of these cultures and musical traditions," says Paul Baker, head of senior music, at Kellett School's Pok Fu Lam campus.

Research fully supports teachers' observations about music's beneficial effects on students.

Professor Ho Wai-chung, of Baptist University's department of music, who specialises in research in music education and sociology of music, wrote in 2009: "Music education enables students to appraise music, simultaneously engaging body, mind, and spirit through listening to, performing, and composing music."

"Music education thus makes a valuable and unique contribution to students' emotional and intellectual development, and to their ability to respect the diversity of human experiences."

She also wrote that parental interest in students' musical participation is highly desirable, but

generally quite low, and often limited to financial contribution.

"Parents play an important role in initiating and sustaining their child's interest in playing an instrument," she wrote.

They needed to support the practicalities of paying fees and expenses, taking time to ferry children to lessons, rehearsals and recitals, and supervise musical practice.

Parents speaking to the music

teacher, developing their children's skill and enthusiasm for music, and attending musical activities can create a special bond between them.

Children can be introduced to music at an early age, starting with listening to music, learning nursery rhymes and how to move to music.

Later they can learn how to sing and keep the rhythm of music using simple percussion instruments.

Joyce Ho, head of music at Kellett's Kowloon Bay Prep School,



Musicians, including those in the ESF Orchestra and Choir, learn to be reliable, dedicated and work in a team – all important life lessons. Photo: SCMP Pictures

Music teacher Lee Siu-mei leads the choir at Lam Woo Memorial School, Kwai Hing, during one of their regular practices. Photo: Dickson Lee

says each child is different: some will be ready to learn an instrument earlier than others.

Children gain a wider musical perspective by listening to different kinds of music, including live performances, and sharing among themselves how they feel and what they like about various instruments.

When picking a particular instrument to learn, parents should take into account the size of their child, and the size and weight of the instrument; some wind instruments, such as a tuba, could be too big and heavy for small children to play.

"Generally, with young children, certain orchestral instruments are not recommended because of their size and weight, or technical demands," Ho says.

"However, both the violin and cello are suitable options; they come in different sizes, so are suitable for smaller children. These instruments lend themselves to playing in the school ensemble at a later stage."

However, Godsman hopes that older students may become interested in less common choices.

"Long term, Hong Kong musical education does need to be mindful that orchestras will face some significant deficits in the not-too-far-off future, if we have parents and students who are unwilling to take up learning opportunities on brass and woodwind instruments," he says.