

Staccato! in the News!

PART C

Life!

THE STRAITS TIMES
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Empty houses

Poor attendances at arts festival

C5

Happy prints

David Hockney works on show



C7

The Sperminator

Arnie impregnated housekeeper same time as wife Maria

C10



Tinkler tots

Kids as young as three are attending music classes. AKSHITA NANDA reports.

C2&3

Children and their parents take music lessons together at Staccato! music school.

DESIGN: SALLY LAM PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN, JAMES CHUNG, SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Never too young for Mozart

Parents are enrolling children as young as six months old in classical music lessons



Twinkle fingers: Ms Yan Hui Boon (right), 34, observes her two-year-old daughter Vera being taught by a music teacher at Staccato! music school. Children learn to recognise notes and develop a sense of rhythm. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN



akshita nanda

Once a week, Mr Joseph Tan guides his 3½-year-old daughter Jolene as she plunks the keys of a mini piano in a class with six other children her age.

He is part of a growing cohort of parents signing up their children for classical music lessons even before the young ones fully develop the use of their fingers and other motor skills. Apart from the occasional child prodigy, pianists and violinists mostly begin their musical training at the age of five or six, according to music educators.

The increasing demand for music education for younger children is seeing new private schools set up, offering lessons to toddlers and even infants barely six months old. Established institutions such as Yamaha and Cristofori have also expanded their existing programmes to cater to the very young.

The Music Suite, opened in January this year at Mountbatten Square by Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts graduate Jeremiah Chong and former finance executive Lam Hwee Lim, offers piano, violin and music appreciation lessons to students aged three and above, capturing their attention by imitating cat cries or sirens on the piano and violin. It already has 40 students, two-thirds of whom are below 10 years old.

Staccato!, set up in October 2009 by Dr Lee Pei Ming, an assistant professor of piano performance and pedagogy at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, has more than 100 students at its Turf Club Road studio, some as young as six months old. Its curriculum was adopted early this year by Carpe Diem Kids Academy at Watten Park and Vince Music Art Studio at Goldhill Plaza to meet growing demand for early music education.

The most popular classes offered by Staccato! are those for children aged between 18 months and three years. These involve parents such as Mr Tan guiding their young ones as they learn to recognise notes played on a mini piano or hit drums to develop their sense of rhythm. As an incentive, the children win stickers or small prizes when they remember a note or rhythm.

Mr Tan, 40, owns his own distribution business and rarely attends symphony concerts. He never took a classical music lesson in his life but was moved to let his daughter try, after reading an article about the benefits of exposing children to symphonies. He has seen Jolene grow more confident and talkative since she started taking lessons at Staccato! at age two and says: "She loves music, loves singing and can express herself better."

He also thinks music has a "calming" effect on children and plays symphonies on CD to Jolene and his younger daughter Joelle, one, as they sleep. He says both tend to sleep soundly through the night and he plans to start Joelle on music lessons in a few months as well.



At The Music Suite, children learn to play and harmonise in a group. The school which opened in January already has 40 students enrolled, of which two-thirds are less than 10 years old.

PHOTO: THE MUSIC SUITE

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Starting them young

From facing page

Requests from parents like him have led long-established music school franchises such as Cristofori Music School and Yamaha Music School to start courses for toddlers in recent years. Yamaha offers sing-along keyboard lessons to children aged three and older, while, since 2006, Cristofori has adapted its curriculum to those as young as 2½ years old.

A spokesman for Cristofori says that demand for music lessons is increasing by 10 per cent every year and “the starting age is getting younger”. The school opens one new branch a year on average, the latest in Tampines Junction in March. It takes in 5,000 new students a year at its 31 schools, with “queries coming in mainly from parents of younger kids”.

While teaching songs and rhythm have always been part of early childhood education, the focus on classical music is more recent. It can be traced to reports in the late 1990s and early Noughties about the Mozart effect, in which experts from the United Kingdom and United States said classical music could help babies’ brains develop, boost their IQ and even possibly produce a child prodigy.

Such reports inspired Australia-based conductor Peter Moore, a father of two, to start concerts specially for babies, who might otherwise interrupt performances for adults.

He has been conducting annual performances for children here with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) since 2002. An SSO spokesman says that tickets for the Babies Proms, concerts for children up to the age of six, usually sell out within two days. “We’ve had to add an extra fifth session over the past few years due to overwhelming demand,” she adds.

While taking children to a concert is a one-time, fun excursion, some parents question whether it is wise to give children lessons before they can even hold a child-sized violin. Cost is another issue: Monthly fees at Staccato! start at \$380, The Music Suite’s courses range from \$120 to \$400 a month, while at Cristofori, the fees range between \$75 and \$360.

The Music Suite’s co-founder Ms Lam, 42, has two daughters aged 15 and nine and suggests that parents play music CDs to younger children but enrol them in lessons when they are at least three years old. She says: “We get a lot of calls asking for classes for two-year-olds but we are still trying to develop a programme which is meaningful. They can barely sit still, there is little we can teach them.”

However, Dr Lee of Staccato thinks it is never too early to get a child started on classes. The mother of a three-year-old daughter and two-year-old son says: “I think music lessons really help them develop their motor skills. We also teach one- and two-year-olds to establish a sense of pulse and identify different notes.”

The promise of a well-developed ear for music may attract parents who want to nurture a young Mozart, but more are content to see their child’s social skills develop at an early age.

Accountant Woei Shiuan Lee says her 2½-year-old daughter, Viviana, has been taking lessons at various music schools since she was nine months old, and joined Staccato! a year ago.

“She enjoys it, she seems to have a good sense of rhythm and she has learnt to share instruments and wait her turn,” says the 39-year-old.

Ms Lee plays the saxophone for fun but says she will not mind if Viviana does not eventually take up an instrument. The side benefits are more than enough, she says. “Music will hopefully help her destress in later years. It will also help her develop another area of knowledge and help her talk to people. When you go to a social function, if you have a background in these things, it makes interaction easy.”

Mr Tan echoes this sentiment when asked if he wants his daughters to eventually become musicians. “It will depend on their interest. Whether they eventually pick up a musical instrument is not important. I think music will help cultivate good characteristics and help them appreciate the finer things in life.”

✉ akshitan@sph.com.sg



Conductor Peter Moore (above) has been conducting Babies Proms with the SSO every year. It is a concert for children aged six and below which makes classical music engaging and interesting with lots of balloons and colours. PHOTO: SSO

Classical music for tots

Various private music schools and kindergartens around Singapore offer early music education, catering to children from newborns to five years old. Here are some of the courses available.

NEWBORN TO ONE YEAR OLD

BABY BACH

What: Children, guided by parents, learn to identify rhythms and notes while playing with instruments such as the mini piano

Where: Staccato!, 100 Turf Club Road, HorseCity

Info: For fees and more details, go to www.staccato.com.sg or call 6466-9497

ONE TO TWO YEARS OLD

BABY MOZART

What: Children, guided by parents, learn to sing notes and play on keyboard and percussion instruments

Where: Staccato!, 100 Turf Club Road, HorseCity

Info: For fees and more details, go to www.staccato.com.sg or call 6466-9497

TWO TO THREE YEARS OLD

MUSIC FOR BABY MOZART

What: Children learn to identify sounds and rhythms and play percussion instruments

Where: Cristofori Music School

Info: Go to www.cristofori.asia or call 6338-0009

THREE TO FIVE YEARS OLD MUSIC KIDS!

What: Children learn about different instruments played in an orchestra and play notes on the piano and violin.

Where: The Music Suite, 02-43 Mountbatten Square, 229 Mountbatten Road

Info: Go to www.themusicsuite.com.sg or call 6348-1338



PHOTO: THE MUSIC SUITE

MUSIC FOR LITTLE MOZART

What: Children learn to play notes on the piano and study musical terms and notation

Where: Cristofori Music School

Info: Go to www.cristofori.asia or call 6338-0009