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Music and dyslexia.

The publication of a book with this title has sharpened people's interest in how dyslexia affects musicians and how those with the familiar traits need to create strategies to help them through their problems. These difficulties will not be the same in each person, any more than the insights they often show.

One of the major achievements in the last decade has been examination bodies' recognition that more time is required for aspects of a music examination like sight-reading. The oft-heard, and very revealing, cry is "It looks like sight-reading every time I return to it". Unsurprisingly the major tenets of neurological research in the general field of dyslexia concerning e.g. lack of fast processing, limitations on working memory, or an assumption of automaticity skills, reveal themselves in musical activity.

In the professional world, opera singers are a good example of strategies needing to be organised, simply because they (together of course with concerto players) cannot have recourse to the music during performance. Some may devise grand audio-plans which remind them of the progress of stage activity, succession of arias, and chorus work, onto which to place their previous hard work at learning their own part with maximum security.

At another level the personal disorganisation which often accompanies dyslexia has its manifestations in music. Losing track of time of lesson, instrument and music to be brought to it may be examples here. The frequent inability to complete a task in the normal space of time leads to frustrations as often in music as elsewhere, and we must remember that there are five things that must be brought to bear, (the music notation, the eye, brain, mechanical manipulation and control of resultant sound) when music is played, and keeping the pulse. The first two are not requirements of course when jazzers, or an Asian music ensemble, are improvising, and the fourth is a different kind of manipulation for singers.

It has become accepted that young pupils make greater progress in the long run if their early days in music are full of variety. There is often more than one way to approach a critical learning point, and the step by step approach, with no assumptions made, pays dividends.

The term 'multi-sensory' comes into its own and the good teacher tries all sorts of angles through which to embed easy recall of fingerings, recognition of rhythmic patterns, the understanding of pitch, and relation to notation etc. Teachers also need to be wise to pupils trying to give the impression that they are reading the music when in fact the latter have tried to memorise it, and not done so accurately.

We have to acknowledge that music's own arrangements are potentially unhelpful. The time signatures look like, but are not, fractions. Directions can be in one of at least four languages. There is a great deal on the page. And there are graphic signs as well as notes.

It may well be that choosing a single line instrument rather than piano for the first attempts is a good idea, particularly if music notation is also being encountered for the first time. Electronic keyboards may cloud this general advice as initially they may not require either

two-handed playing or two-stave reading.

Individuals will need to devise some strategies of their own to surmount some of the problems. Some projects link colours to letter-names. (That is different from using coloured transparencies to minimise the black-white glare from the page.) A percussionist, moving between stands in an orchestra to play the gong just after the triangle, may need to mark his part or get a colleague nudge him at a certain point. 'Diminuendo' can be aligned with dimming the lights. There may be a way of remembering how many sharps a scale has, or the names of the treble clef lines, so, not 'Every Good Boy.....' these days surely, but in the vernacular of ex-England soccer coaches,

Excellent Game Beckham Done Fabulous.

The most helpful mnemonics might be those devised personally.

Other strategies will include avoiding the obvious left-hand-right-hand laterality problem, overloading the pupil with too many directions, or the slightest evidence of impatience. Also, helping pupils to analyse their learning styles will assist the teacher to go hand in hand with the pupil in charting the best course to bring pleasure rather than frustration.

It is pleasing to record that success in music activity can boost dyslexics' self-esteem enormously and can encourage re-visiting of other learning areas which might have seemed difficult earlier. We also know that singing and choral experiences can be supportive as, if arising from the music text rather than learned by rote, they involve the separation of syllables, which is one of the main areas of difficulty in reading itself.

1. Dyslexia and Music, Opening New Doors,

edited by Tim Miles & John Westcombe. April 2001.

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The book shows how some dyslexics can be highly gifted musicians. It is important, however, that they should not be put off from studying music just because - at least in the early stages - many of them find it difficult to read and remember the symbols of musical notation.

Many of the 21 contributors to the book are on BDA Music Committee and 10 are dyslexic. Each relates their personal experiences (whether as amateurs or professionals) and in most cases of their eventual success. The other contributors are teachers or researchers who have wide experiences of dyslexic musicians of all ages.

The book's message is one of optimism. Dyslexic musicians can succeed provided only that they are given sufficient encouragement and understanding.

2. Special arrangements in music exams. idelines have been established for the examination of dyslexic candidates.

Music teachers will have details.

Syllabuses and the guidelines are available from the Head of U.K. and Ireland Administration

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music

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