

CHOOSING MUSIC FOR CHILDREN

OUR VIEW OF 'GOOD' MUSIC

Like most things, music comes in all shapes and sizes, and on the face of it, parents seem spoilt for choice when finding music for their children to enjoy. But is it so simple? What should parents look out for when choosing music? Can music be particularly beneficial for children, and if so, how, and why? Here we talk about quality in music, how different music can be helpful for different situations, and how to encourage the love of music in your child.

-
Defining 'good' music
-
Music fit for purpose
-
Strictly classical?
-
Shaping children's tastes
-
Participation
-
Helping children listen
-
Our recommendations
-
Further reading



Defining 'good' music

What is 'good' music? Experiencing music is usually contextual. Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, for example, is unquestionably 'good'—it was a chart-topping commercial success and its compositional qualities and superb performance deservedly earned it a place as a 20th-century masterpiece. However, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is unlikely to send children to sleep or to work as gentle background music. Brahms's *Lullaby*, one of the most famous and recognisable melodies in the world, has been sung by generations of parents to soothe their infants, however perhaps it isn't such a good choice for motivating children to dance around and burn off energy. Clearly, when selecting music for a given situation, we pay regard not only to its quality, but also to its suitability.

Naturally, we would hope that all music that we select for our children will be 'good', meaning of a high compositional, performing and recording standard:

*"Perhaps one of the most important attributes of any music, a great tune is one you can listen to over and over and over again and still enjoy. Better yet, when you can go back years later and still enjoy it. Even if a CD's primary audience is children, the musicianship and production should not be any less than that found on an adult album."*¹

We agree. Whatever its style and intended audience, in our view the music we and our children listen to should be well written, not dumbed-down, or over-simplified. Badly written classical music is just as off-putting as badly written pop music. The great classical composers such as Mozart and Beethoven (and many, many others) have stood the test of time and we can have confidence in their quality and appropriateness for our children, once the right mood is taken into account for a given occasion. At babymusic.com, however, we take a broader view of what makes good music. Our recordings incorporate jazz and popular pieces, so long as they are written with conviction and style, performed with passion and sensitivity and recorded with skill and nuance. Such music makes a more than worthwhile contribution to our babies' listening repertoire. Here too, the safest judge of quality is the test of time: from Gershwin to the Beatles and Queen, from Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra to Mariah Carey, there are 'classics' in almost every musical genre, and all add to the rich palette of music our babies can enjoy in the right circumstances. On the mass market, recent offerings of both classical and popular music for children are diverse and plentiful, especially now that the findings of research into the benefits of listening to music have been reported in the media. We must be careful, though, when selecting music for youngsters, and ensure that it really is of the highest quality, not simply reflecting the highest marketing budget!

"Whether it's colours, numbers, self-expression, self-awareness, socialisation, communication, or any valid concept you may be attempting to introduce to children through song, the performance must be believable in order for children to learn and derive pleasure. The singer should sound honest, trustworthy, serious, encouraging, and stimulating... Songs may entertain and teach but we

*must differentiate because our primary objective is to teach. There is nothing wrong with recordings that only entertain children, if they are in good taste. However, some recordings that were meant to entertain are not recorded well, not sung well, and do not carry a positive message to children... The songs you choose to play in class or at home should have simple lyrics that are to the point, have positive messages, and melodies that are easy to sing for all children. Once these basic elements exist, sonically (the sound of the instrumentation), depending upon the song, may be very sophisticated."*²

Music for different purposes

In choosing music for children, parents might aim to select pieces which inspire creativity and imagination, motivate them to exercise their bodies and minds, or to rest when appropriate. They would find music which will help their children to develop emotionally, physically and intellectually. This is such a wide set of criteria that almost any piece, in any style, could fit in at some stage in a child's musical education, as long as the selection is made with reasoned thought and the quality is assured.

In order that they experience variety, and to allow them to learn to express their own tastes and preferences as their personality develops, we recommend that children should be exposed to as many different types of fine music as possible. Children will then benefit in the fullness of time from being able to make up their own minds about their musical likes and dislikes, rather than having ideals imposed on them by their parents or teachers. Music intended for children to participate in will obviously have different qualities than music intended for children to listen to, and in turn, music created especially for children to listen to, such as television theme tunes, will be different in composition to music which happens to be suitable for a child's early listening experience.

Music is, by its nature, a social pastime, and our instincts are to join in with a piece of music, by singing, clapping, or tapping to the beat. Children love to sing action songs, which help them to develop their vocabulary and memory skills, along with their sense of spatial reasoning and awareness. Young children also thrive on familiarity and repetition, so will enjoy singing the songs they know well, with occasional new pieces introduced gradually to add to their repertoire. Participation in musical activities, as much as passive listening, will encourage true engagement with the music.

*"The voice is our most personal musical instrument. And singing is one of the most natural forms of communication. We often say things in songs that we do not speak of in conversation. Singing songs helps children develop communication skills, self-expression, socialization, and the self. This prepares the child for a greater understanding of himself/herself, others, and the world he/she lives in as well as the many specific subjects taught in school."*³

Strictly classical?

In determining what kind of music is 'good' or suitable for a child to listen to, many adults, particularly those with a musical upbringing, will be inclined to suggest that classical

music is the most beneficial to a developing child. Certainly this view is backed up by research into “The Mozart Effect” and other ways in which classical music can positively influence our physical and intellectual development. Other articles in “Music In Our Lives” address this topic in greater detail. We believe classical music should play a significant role in the early life experience of children, but we wonder whether, amongst the general population, it really receives the attention it deserves.

Dr Alexandra Lamont conducted a study into the significance of music for young children, along with their experiences of, and reactions to, various musical styles. Her research found that while classical music is a part of many children’s musical lives, it is a relatively small part when compared to other styles:

“Musical styles such as classical music or folk music are very rare in [these] children’s lives, and would not typically be chosen by them. One example of the relatively rare occasions when children might listen to classical music is at school nurseries. Many play calming classical music after mealtimes to help children wind down to rest. This hasn’t changed much in the last 30 years—many of the children’s parents would have had similar musical experiences—but it is only a small part of children’s musical lives today.”⁴

We appear to have a conflict between the fact that classical music seems to be becoming less present in children’s lives, and the fact that research and popular opinion suggests that this is the best kind of music to play to them. It is our responsibility as parents and caregivers to ensure that our children’s musical diet is rich in quality and beneficial experiences. There is a place for all kinds of music, and undoubtedly the child will grow to develop their own favourite listening styles. However at least to begin with, their listening will be guided by the adults who are caring for them. Here is the ideal opportunity for parents to establish a productive balance between classical music and other styles, and to embrace and explore worthwhile music together with their children.

Can we influence children’s tastes?

The process of introducing music to a child can begin even while a baby is still in the womb, and in a form of musical ‘imprinting’ you can begin to help your child to associate a particular style or piece of music with a particular feeling. Expectant mothers often play soft classical music or lullabies to their unborn child (see our article, [Music in the Womb](#)), in the hope that, once they are born, the baby will associate this music with the comfort of being warm, safe and close to their mother.

The idea of imprinting and association can continue as the child gets older also; always playing the same music at bedtime and naptime for example, or while the child does a particular activity, helping them to associate the music with good feelings and familiarity. In this way too, your understanding of ‘quality’ and ‘value’ in music can be communicated to your child.

Before they’re able to communicate verbally, babies of a surprisingly young age are capable of expressing their music preferences and demonstrating recognition. In a study on the effects of playing music to unborn foetuses,

Dr Alexandra Lamont found that babies can remember and show a preference for familiar music for up to a year after birth.⁵ Older babies and toddlers show their appreciation by ‘dancing’ and jiggling to the music, smiling, clapping and other body language. It has been a delight for me, as a trained musician, to see my own son responding to music in this way, and clearly having ‘favourites’.

With advances in technology, children of pre-school age and older are becoming more and more able to put on music for themselves, deciding what they want to listen to and when:

“Most of the time the children are hearing music in recorded format, from the television, children’s websites (CBeebies is a popular choice), CDs and tapes, and the radio. This is a marked change from 30 years ago, when young children would rarely have been allowed to put on a gramophone record. Children today have access to high quality recordings on relatively durable child-proof formats like CDs, and many of the children [in the study] put on their own music for themselves.”⁶

Until a certain age of independence, these children are still relying on their parents or carers to actually play the CDs for them or gain access to online content, so there are limitations to the degree of autonomy they can really have over their own listening experience. Even so, the independence and control they feel, even at this tender age, will heighten their own enjoyment of the music because to a certain extent they did choose it themselves.

Whilst we can hope that our children will grow up to benefit from ‘good’ music and share our personal enthusiasm for particular kinds of music, trying too hard to impose our own influences on them could inadvertently have the opposite effect. It may encourage them to rebel, and could even be detrimental to their wellbeing. We should be careful, says conductor and Royal Academy of Music Professor, Jeremy Summerly:

“If a parent believes that music is first a mirror of the soul or secondly that it can actually encourage good behaviour or that it is a major part of educational development, then it stands to reason that the parent will try to foster the child’s engagement with a particular kind of music... Every father wants his son to follow his own football team, and I imagine that every parent has some kind of innate desire to want their child to enjoy the same kind of music that they did. The sort of music that was fashionable to the parent may have become distinctly unfashionable by the time the child is of the same age. You have to be very careful that if you introduce your child to [classical music] and they do follow you, they might alienate themselves from their friends at school. You could be stopping your children from growing up in a normal way with other children whose musical diet will be that of CBeebies.”⁷

Clearly, a balance needs to be struck, and care taken, to gain the maximum advantage on offer when music is in our children’s lives.

Participation

We are very much of the opinion that participating in music-making is at least as important as listening. If a child

is enthusiastic about classical music and is supported and encouraged to join an orchestra, choir or other group of like-minded young people, they will gain friends, support, and the self-confidence to follow their own path in life, regardless of the social 'norms' of the time.

Musical involvement strengthens and enriches us physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially, across each and every one of our faculties. It's hard to find a substitute amongst other pastimes that can engage and enhance us as people in such a broad sense. Many of the health and educational benefits of music cannot be gained solely by listening, and for many children the early routines of music lessons and playing in groups during school lunchtimes, after school and on Saturday mornings provide such a good grounding. Studies show that people with even a small amount of musical training, just a few years in childhood, say, continue to show positive effects long into adulthood. Indeed, unless your child is one of the minority who plan to go on to study music at a higher level, or to make their living from it, in many ways their purely musical ability and technical skill can be of secondary importance: whilst of course an appreciation of good music and a musical and artistic sensitivity are valuable accomplishments, it's the education in self-discipline, self-awareness and self-confidence—not to mention motor skills, memory development, physical coordination and the ability to communicate and express emotion—that they will gain as an integral part of their musical training, which is priceless.

How to help children listen

Assuming that we want to give our children a broad and varied musical diet and education, it is therefore still of crucial importance, in our view, to make classical music a part of their lives, to a sensible extent. Some adults who are not classical music advocates say that they don't enjoy the music because they find it elitist. This is sad for them, but ultimately it is their prejudice, and surely not one that should be passed onto their children. It is sadder still for the children of parents who say that they dislike classical music because they find it confusing or impenetrable. These parents themselves have probably never been properly introduced to classical music in an appropriate way, and therefore their relationship with it has become one of misunderstanding. They may recognise the benefits of the music for them and their children, but not know where to begin.

We can aim to avoid this situation arising for future generations by ensuring that today's young children have the opportunity, be it at home or in other settings, to be provided with a good background of well thought-out, appropriate listening and participation activities. In this way they will hopefully grow up to appreciate and benefit from quality music, and in turn pass that appreciation on to their own children.

There are plenty of ways you can gently introduce some classical music to your child, and by incorporating it into your daily routine it will soon become just as familiar and beloved as other favourites. In addition to **babymusic.com** there are a number of excellent websites with ideas for activities you can do involving specific pieces of music, or

just classical music in general. See the "Further Reading" section for more information.

*"Taking an interest in children's musical tastes can help parents and other family members really get to know what's going on in their lives, and it can be a good way of talking about feelings as well as activities. Ultimately musical preferences are individual and personal, but they are also something we can explore and talk about as a way of sharing something important with others."*⁸

Our Recommendations

There are a huge number of recordings available with music selected specifically for children, in various styles. At **babymusic.com**, we promote music in a wide variety of styles, and although most of the music on our CDs is played by orchestras, it is by no means 'strictly classical', and we feature pieces in folk, jazz and pop styles as well as more traditional orchestral music. Our in-house speciality, giving rise to our "Unique Musical Formula", is orchestras of the same instrument, such as [Baby Cello](#)—twenty-four cellos—or [Baby Harp](#)—sixteen harps.

Whatever your aim in choosing music for your children, we can help. *Baby Cello* and *Baby Harp* will soothe your baby to a gentle sleep, while [Baby Symphony](#) gives them an introduction to a full but gentle orchestral sound and classical styles. [Mother Goose](#) and [Peter and the Wolf](#) provide excellent opportunities for you to listen with your child, talk to them about what they are hearing and encourage them to ask questions and interact with the music. We also carry the best in children's music from respected colleague labels around the world. We hope you will have confidence in our judgement of 'quality' music, both in our own releases and those we have selected from amongst our colleagues'.

- [1. An Offbeat Guide to Kids' Music](#)
- [2. Choosing Songs for Children: Do You Believe the Music?](#)
- [3. Choosing Songs for Children: Do You Believe the Music?](#)
- [4. What is the significance of music for young children?](#)
- [5. Babies' musical memories formed in womb](#)
- [6. What is the significance of music for young children?](#)
- [7. Can you shape your children's taste in music?](#)
- [8. What is the significance of music for young children?](#)

Further Reading

Websites

[Youth Music](#)

Youth Music is the leading UK children's charity using music to transform the lives of disadvantaged young people.

[English Songs for Kids](#)

Suggested songs for children learning English as their second language, with free printable lyrics and sheet music.

[My Musical Talent](#)

The blog of Maya Liberman, a professional cello player, music lecturer and cello teacher. Lots of interesting and informative articles on fostering musical intelligence and appreciation in children.

[Kids Music Corner](#)

Musical notes for school children aged 7-12.

[The Mozart Effect Resource Center](#)

Books, articles, music and resources on "The Mozart Effect" and using music for enhanced health, relaxation and mental stimulation.

[Classics for Kids](#)

Classical music's great composers come to life through music and stories on this fun website.

[Maestro Classics](#)

Maestro Classics presents Classical Music for Kids performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra—Stories in Music CDs available for download.

Online Articles

[6 Ways to Get Your Child to Appreciate Classical Music](#)

Some useful tips for getting children from toddlers to school-age to learn to love classical music.

[An Offbeat Guide to Kids' Music](#)

Author Christine Yanicek gives us an insight into her view of what makes certain music 'good' for children.

[Build a Classical Music Library for Children](#)

The writer of this article tells us about her top ten composers of music for children, and explains how and why she chose them. Includes information on how to approach classical music with a child and some free printable worksheets and activities.

[Can You Shape Your Children's Taste in Music?](#)

A recent piece by the BBC with comments from some well-known names in music.

[Choosing Songs for Children: Do You Believe the Music?](#)

This is an artist website by a singer-songwriter of children's music, but includes some useful tips for what qualities to look for in choosing music for children.

[Classical Music for Children: Radio 3's Choice](#)

Radio 3's rival list to the Classic FM Children's Hall of Fame, which the BBC describes as a "completely unscientifically received set of favourites sent in by our listening kids."

[How to Choose a Baby Song for Your Child](#)

A blog post offering guidance on choosing a special song to share with your child, even while they're still in the womb.

[How to Introduce Classical Music to Children](#)

An e-How with ideas for an introduction to classical music for your child. More suitable for school-age children than for toddlers.

[Seven Starter Steps for Listening to Classical Music With Your Kids](#)

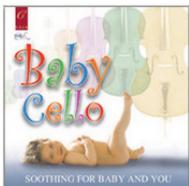
An article from the blog of cellist Maya Liberman with suggestions for repertoire and activities.

[Using Classical Music with Young Children](#)

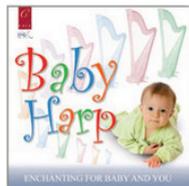
Very specific ideas for pieces to enjoy with pre-school age children, particularly focusing on music and movement.

[What is the Significance of Music for Young Children?](#)

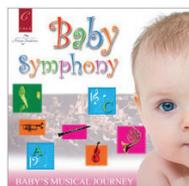
An Open University article by Dr Alexandra Lamont with the results of her study of music in the lives of young children.



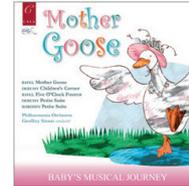
Welcome to Baby Cello, the award-winning CD which calms you and your baby when you most need it to, yet captivates listeners when in a receptive mood.



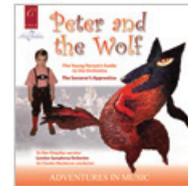
Beloved lullabies and softly flowing music from our sixteen wonderful harp players will waft baby to calming sleep and sweet dreams.



Gentle music by 12 great composers spanning 300 years, performed by the major London orchestras. Perfect for listening and for play.



Ravel's Mother Goose Suite, Debussy's Children's Corner Suite and other delightful delicacies for little listeners. Performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra.



Sir Ben Kingsley narrates Peter and the Wolf and The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra.