

Syllabus update

New repertoire for strings and brass

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- **A different point of view** – looking at your teaching from new perspectives



Good foundations

A solid musical foundation is essential for learning any instrument and for the pupils of one Hong Kong-based teacher, work on the building blocks of music begins early. Lucy North spoke to Ellen Mok to find out more.

Visit Ellen Mok's Hong Kong teaching studio, MusicRoom@Central, and you might be surprised to find some very young children taking part in their first music class. Mok's youngest pupils are a mere 18 months old and she has made a specialisation of teaching children in the up to five age group. In Hong Kong it is quite common for children to take part in general music classes from the age of two, so why does Mok start them earlier? 'Children at this age are sensitive to learning the basic skills that make internalisation of music easier at a later stage,' says Mok. However, this is no ordinary music learning and Mok has adopted a range of teaching methods to unlock the talents of her young students.

Many teachers now use highly individual methods in their teaching and Mok employs dermatoglyphics to identify a pupil's strengths and weaknesses. 'We analyse each child's fingerprints using a computer programme,' she explains. 'This can help to uncover aptitudes and abilities. It's so important to set the right path - their talents are unique, and so are their preferred learning styles.'

Mok then tailors her teaching to the needs of each pupil but in all cases takes a multi-sensory approach that encourages children to internalise and own the music from the outset. 'This helps with aural-listening and

response, musical thinking and feeling, and interpretation and creation,' explains Mok. She also draws heavily on Dalcroze Eurhythmics and Orff. Their holistic approach and, in the case of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, use of whole body movement to explore basic musical elements, are particularly suited to young children.

Teaching the very young does present challenges, as Mok explains. 'It can sometimes be difficult to communicate and young children do have shorter attention spans,' says Mok. However, the rewards are many. 'There are too many to mention them all, but I love to see the children enjoying music, as well as learning and displaying their talents.'

Although Mok has been teaching the piano for 17 years, the focus on this age group is a relatively recent development for her: she began teaching pre-school classes eight years ago. Mok credits ABRSM's Certificate of Teaching course with providing the impetus to reassess her career. 'It was a very inspiring course that changed my thinking on instrumental teaching. New ideas flourished! I started further studies after that, created more group lessons for my students and started to teach little ones - all something beyond traditional teaching.' Mok now has a thriving teaching practice with more than 50 students a week. Around half have general

music lessons in groups, of 3 to 30, while the remainder, which includes pupils up to the age of 14, have individual piano lessons along with regular group activities.

Some of Mok's students move from general music classes to one-to-one piano lessons at around three years old. Mok puts this relatively early transition down to the time spent laying such strong musical foundations. Another distinctive aspect of Mok's approach is the importance she places on the role of parents. 'Parents are my students' home tutors. I convince them that the simple games and techniques used in lessons have a direct effect on learning the more difficult musical skills and theory. The more they practise the games at home with their children the better the foundation for growth!'

Amidst her busy life as a teacher Mok still finds time to further her understanding of teaching and learning, exploring the 'many unknowns' and looking forward to sharing 'more interesting findings' with other teachers. But central to her teaching philosophy is an enthusiasm for helping each child to make the most of his or her musical potential. 'Every little child is unique, with unique strengths and unique weaknesses. It's hard to anticipate outcomes but I try to guide them in the right direction and to encourage their interests and talents.' ■