

BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Executive Summary

Think Tank 23/24 March 2022

Young Musicians Health and Wellbeing

Introduction

For over a decade, there has been an increasing focus on health and wellbeing within the professional music sector. This Think Tank brought together a range of expertise and experience to explore some key questions:

- How is this focus influencing training programmes for young musicians?
- What can we learn about ensuring young musician health and wellbeing across different genres, contexts, and circumstances?
- What are the key factors relating to this topic, and how should we respond to them?
- What challenges are there in relation to this topic and what do we need to overcome them?
- Is it time to articulate a strong national code of practice on caring for the health and wellbeing of young musicians?
- What interesting programmes of support are already in place and how can we learn from them?

This Think Tank, facilitated by Katherine Zeserson included: Alison Bell (Head of Service, Norfolk Music Hub); Rachael Bull (Programme Manager, Aldeburgh Young Musicians); River Codrington Fernandez (Young Musician, Aldeburgh Young Musicians); Claire Cordeaux (CEO BAPAM, British Association for Performing Arts Medicine); Michael Durrant (Healthy Conservatoires Coordinator/ PhD Candidate in Performance Science, Royal College of Music, London); Marion Friend MBE (Life and career coach, mentor and consultant); Angela Lee-Foster (Producer Arts Health & Wellbeing, Britten Pears Arts); Tom Redmond (Director of Music/Joint Principal Chetham's School of Music); Dr Jo Trowsdale (Associate Professor, Education, University of Suffolk); Dr Sarah Upjohn EdD MA MCSP (Specialist Physiotherapist, Performing Arts Medicine, Independent).

Key Findings

- Young musicians are operating in an increasingly uncertain and turbulent climate post pandemic and post Brexit. Blended learning has also engendered isolation.
- There is an increase in anxiety levels and low self-esteem as well as continuing prominent levels of injury in musicians (related to a sudden increase in playing time, change in repertoire with higher demand, additional stress, poor posture, and growth spurts resulting in children being highly vulnerable).
- There is increasing urgency to recognise the physical and psycho-emotional needs of young people involved with music. We need to see the young person first rather than a young musician.
- It's time to stop profiling the arts as a battleground where there is a need to 'win'. Music is a broad sector; we need to see the richness and diversity of roles and opportunities rather than perpetuate elitism where certain roles and instruments are more valued than others.
- There is a need to nurture young musicians and create a culture of compassion and collaboration and shift away from a culture of competition; to make the music industry a kinder place to be, to reconnect with the joy and emotional connection music can bring and cultivate more stability and a space where young musicians can flourish. It is time to build a culture where we all take responsibility for wellbeing.
- We need to normalise and integrate health and wellbeing into the lives of young musicians. Young musicians can be encouraged to take more ownership of their career and more autonomy. They can learn to be their own best teacher, to build curiosity, experimentation, and questioning into their development. This means stepping away from the 'master and apprentice' model of music education.
- Many music educators have been trained in a traditional model of music education which is confined, rigorous, sometimes described as 'brutal' and lacks an underpinning of health and wellbeing. Some tutors are unregulated and are not leading by example when it comes to health and wellbeing.
- To sustain a career, musicians need to be healthy and well, and the curriculum must change to allow people to have a sustainable career from an early stage. Teachers need to have some responsibility for mitigation of risks.
- Families also play a key role in the support of young people and embedding the importance of health and wellbeing here is vital. We need to encourage families to enable young people to have a holistic childhood and a well-rounded identity and to have a more measured approach to expectations.
- There is a need to move away from grades and assessments as the only indicator of achievement or development.
- We know the pressure of achievement and performance and the lack of support and intervention on health and wellbeing is having a negative impact on young musicians. We have a duty of care to young people.
- Communication around the integration of health and wellbeing and music hubs play a vital role in this. Our language around music education needs to reflect the emphasis on flourishing, compassion, and kindness rather than competition and survival.
- We need to identify good role models in this culture shift towards placing health and wellbeing at the heart of young musicians' development.

Quotes

“It is important to learn how to develop young musicians in such a way which allows them to grow into professional life in a healthy way. There is a need to nourish performers, not break them.”

‘In what other profession would it be seen as necessary to receive training to be resilient for such a toxic environment?’

“The biggest issue surrounding younger children is perception of music and expectations from parents.”

“A staggering 75% of musicians will have a health problem in their career – 13% of which are complex. Poor health in this sector means health needs to be discussed at an early stage. Time should be made to look at what health looks like. To sustain a career, you need to be healthy, and the curriculum must change to allow people to have a sustainable career.”

“How do we marry the competitive nature of exams and collaborative playing?”

“We have perpetuated a grade system and now we accept the notion that to be successful is to achieve academically.”

“We need to normalise wellbeing in all different settings of education and performance.”

“Musicians like what they do! How do we equip them with strength of character to be confident, secure, and healthy and cope with a stressful environment?”

“How do we change the collective mindset of the young musicians and remove the competitive and cynical environment so it can be more of a kinder place to be.”

“Music is seen as an unstable career choice, which makes it risky. The excitement is marred by unnerving questions: ‘What is your back up plan?’”

“We see well established musicians who felt like failures because they had dedicated everything to being a musician and ended up working in an orchestra. The detrimental effect of carrying that negative baggage is carried for a long time.”

“Instead of making resilient people, why do we not remove those issues that make it that way.”

“With musicians their own sense of identity is so engrossed with them as performers that they lose sight of their true selves.”

“The music industry is deeply ingrained with comparison and competitiveness. There is an opportunity to emphasize emotive, affective practice. Isn't something core being missed if we are not talking about self-esteem?”

“We need to generate a climate of kindness. How can we shore up the conditions better? How do we change the culture?”

“Currently there are pockets of excellence but until these are joined, not everyone can benefit from them.”

Recommendations

- Map and communicate good practice in health and wellbeing for young musicians.
- Create opportunities with key organisations to harness evidence-based practice and embed health and wellbeing at the heart of music for young people.
- Embed health and wellbeing in training and development for music educators.
- Develop a range of practical ideas and toolkits to enhance the health and wellbeing of young musicians

Conclusion

The desire to help young musicians feel confident, empowered, healthier and happier lies at the heart of this conversation. Music can be a physically, psychologically, and emotionally demanding sphere. A change in culture to embedding health, wellbeing, kindness, and compassion can only be done in partnership with organisations, families and individuals who contribute to this culture. We can take immediate actions to halt any further existing damage to the health and wellbeing of young musicians, identify and address structural causes, dynamics and processes to which lead to this, and we can lay conditions for a fundamental shift in values by creating a new model of music education which embraces wellbeing at its heart. Britten Pears Arts will continue to catalyse conversations and will work with partners to action the recommendations of this Think Tank.