

Instrumental Learning for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children and Young People

Tips, Information and Good Practice

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Yorkshire Youth & Music and Bradford Music and Arts Service have been working together to increase instrumental learning among deaf young people; these notes are from the project, contributed by instrumental tutors, music leaders and specialist staff. No challenge or barrier is insurmountable, as long as tutors have a 'can do', a 'what do I need to do' attitude, and know where to go for support and advice.

There are degrees of Deafness and Hearing Impairment - mild, moderate, severe and profound. Hearing aids, implants and other devices are specific to individuals, with the aim of raising hearing levels towards 'mild'. Hearing Aids are programmed to the specific hearing loss of the individual. Hearing Aids have a capping mechanism – if the sound is too loud they cut the level, but it takes a split second, so the pupil might be shocked until the cap kicks in – care may be needed or warnings given. Some sounds (eg whistles) can be unpleasant to Hearing Aid wearers.

Some young people have a radio aid or FM system; a transmitter is worn by the teacher, and receivers are attached to hearing aids, to amplify close sound and reduce background noise. The transmitter and microphone should be around the neck, centrally placed, and not more than a hand's length from the teacher's mouth, not covered by clothing. You may need to move it when you play depending on the instrument.

School, parents and young people can provide precise information on the pupil's hearing loss – ask at the start, and then develop a relationship where you can ask 'can you hear this OK'. Sometimes, D&HI young people may have other needs (eg speech and language difficulties) which also need accommodating. If a child needs BSL then a BSL interpreter should also be in the lesson; the interpreter may need additional information from the teacher to convey musical concepts and ideas accurately. Where there is a BSL interpreter, more time is needed in the lesson, or the lesson plan should accommodate the need for extra time.

Because Hearing Impairment is individual, D&HI young people will hear and respond to music differently. It is felt through the body as well as heard through the ears. This affects instrumental choices more profoundly than with hearing children – D&HI young people should try different families of instruments, and choose which they prefer. In Bradford, brass instruments were popular, but flutes (resound in the head) and guitars (felt through the body) also featured as choices.

D&HI young people may need more time to process speech;

- Use fewer words, but speak fluently. You may need to adjust your style according to the needs of the pupil
- 'chunk' your sentences into phrases and allow time for processing the information
- Make sure there is light on your face, and your face is towards the young person, preferably at eye level.

Explaining musical concepts and ideas will be made simpler by using clear visual signals. Clapping and beating pulse and rhythm patterns with D&HI young people is helpful, as it using a whiteboard to add more visual signals. It may take longer for a pupil to establish a strong sense of pulse and to learn rhythmic patterns. For hearing children, we usual visual signals as a starting point, then often continue with vocal signals and sounds – this is unlikely to be as effective with D&HI young people.

We use visual signals all the time to convey the feeling of music, to help children to get an idea of how it should be played; marching is the most obvious example. Again, the visual signals may need to be maintained for longer, and a greater variety invented, to convey different moods for music. There aren't standard examples for this, but colleagues may have good ideas.

Dynamics can also be communicated with visual signals, and commonly are. The difference in working with D&HI young people is a question of precision, and of scale, and consistency. So you might (for example) hold thumb and index finger a couple of millimetres apart to convey *ppp*, and as far apart as they can go for *fff* – make the signals always the same.

Pitch precision and intonation are more complex – and finding tips which suit all instruments is difficult. For everything, it's a case of getting the notes to start with and worrying about fine intonation later. For Flutes and similar – fingering should get the right note, and blowing changes register by an octave, reasonably straightforward. Brass instruments are more complex and there's the added difficulty of not being able to see what a tutor is doing because the mouthpiece hides the demonstration. But hand or index finger – parallel with the ground where intonation is correct, pointing upwards for too sharp and downwards for too flat – is an option. Again, consistency matters. It might be a place where judicious use of apps can help – and certainly this will help as intonation becomes more precise. There are quite a few available – from ClearTune to iStroboSoft. Sean Chandler (brass player) told us it took him a long time and a great deal of practise and repetition to get pitch perfect.

Some Charanga resources will be useful for all of the above.

In group work, D&HI children may need to be at the front, so they can hear and see a tutor. Working in a circle might not be the best idea unless there are plenty of other (hearing) participants; the D&HI children need to see the tutor's face so need to be opposite the tutor in a circle. Again, strong, repeated visual and other sensory signals (stamping, clapping, tapping) may be much more use than verbal instructions. Ensemble work will probably need higher levels of staffing than with hearing children, to keep everyone visually focussed. Overall volume of sound and noise may mean large groups are unsuitable for some D&HI young people

As with any group activity, learners will progress at different rates, and there will be normal issues of discipline and keeping order.