



MUSICAL moments

Susannah Warren INVESTIGATES MUSIC FOR BABIES



Miaomiao Yu, founder of Bach to Baby

Nobody puts Baby in a corner – certainly not at a Bach to Baby concert, where little ones are given the unlikely opportunity to experience top-quality, classical music concerts in spectacular venues alongside their parents or carers. “We don’t dumb down the music just because it’s for babies. It’s for people. It’s about giving everyone the opportunity to hear, to feel, however young,” explains Miaomiao Yu, the founder of the critically acclaimed series. A concert pianist herself, Miaomiao came up with the idea after having her first child.

“I was leaving my baby in the green room while I went and performed for other people and that was just a bit unfair really,” she explains. “And when I had to go to all these baby classes I felt like I needed something that was really good.”

After a trial run with her baby group mums, she put on her first concert in 2011, which attracted a huge crowd. “We realised people wanted it and so we got down to work.” Today, there are more than 30 Bach to Baby concerts a month across London and the South East, including a monthly concert series at Buckingham Palace.

With varying themes, the hour-long concerts offer a carefully thought out programme of chamber music with featured instruments that caters not only to young babies – the youngest audience member to date is just three days old – but also to professional musicians looking for some top-quality classical entertainment.

“We choose contrasting pieces and change the pace [to suit our audience]. Our performers make the concerts. There may be a performer whose skill is drawing in the audience with a quiet performance. Then there are those that let rip and everyone starts clapping and stamping, things you wouldn’t normally see at a regular classical concert.” ▶



Indeed, she is a firm believer in the power of music to help children develop. "It's like language, isn't it? Language is complex, but we still talk to children. Music may be complex, but you put it in front of them and the synapses in the brain fire up and connections are made. The mind works in mysterious ways."

At the end of the concerts, the audience can make requests, be it a favourite nursery rhyme or even something popular like Disney's bestselling *Let It Go*. Babies and toddlers can interact with the instruments and experiment with plucking strings, familiarising themselves with classical instruments. Miaomiao continues, "It's really about everyone coming together and gathering around the musicians and emphasising that music-making is really a part of the human experience. And about having fun together."

Although there are moments when the organisers ask for quiet, babies and toddlers are given the freedom to react to the music in whichever way they want. And more often than not, they are full of surprises, proving the wonder and joy of the experience.

MUSIC MAY BE COMPLEX, BUT IF YOU PUT IT IN FRONT OF BABIES THE SYNAPSES IN THE BRAIN FIRE UP

"Sometimes people think children can't sit still and listen to music. What's the point? [they think]" says Miaomiao. "But you can hear the hush at the beginning of the concert. It's not about them concentrating like an adult for a whole hour. If you can give them that one moment, that one special moment that they can remember, that they can catch on to, that's going to open the door for them."



If classical music isn't your thing, though, Monkey Music offers an entirely different experience, but one that is equally fun and educational. The classes cater for babies from three months to four years old, and follow a progressive curriculum that takes into account a child's development. "What we do for the tinies at 'rock 'n' roll' [up to age one] is quite different from what we do for the two year olds in 'jiggety-jigs'," explains Jeni Eastlake, who runs Monkey Music in Putney, Barnes and Fulham. "There's a real progression through the classes: socially, musically, and creatively. If you envelop them in this wonderful musical environment, it paves the way for all sorts of development."

With younger babies, the main focus is on the beat of the music and the relationship between the parent or carer and child. "When they start at three months, they begin to turn towards a sound and start to vocalise and become interested in the world around them,"

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develop their language." Jeni continues, "We open up their sound vocabulary and try and get them to make lots of sounds. The noise of a train, for example."

Repetition and structure help children learn and the weekly classes have regular songs, as well as a regular 'time to move' and 'time to play,' when age-appropriate instruments come out. "The children know what sort of activity is coming next and that way they feel comfortable with what is happening and they start hearing oral cues, which helps them when they start school," says Jeni.

But it's not just the children that benefit. As well as being a great bonding experience with your little one, it's also a great way to meet new friends. "When your world's been turned upside down, to go along every week and have this nurturing environment with the same people at the same stage and have some time out to be with your baby and not worry about all the other stuff, is so important."

And in addition to going out to classes and concerts, including music in your everyday routine with your baby is easy to do. Whether it is playing baby-friendly music at home or in the car, or singing nursery rhymes together at bedtime or in the bath, music can help to strengthen the bond between a parent and child, with the added benefit of developing those little brains. **🎵**

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says Jeni. "It's all about enjoying the music and sharing the music with lots of cuddling and swaying to the music to feel the steady pulse."

The pulse is the foundation to all Monkey Music classes. "We've all got rhythm as we've all got that steady pulse inside us," says Jeni. "When babies are in tummies they're surrounded by the womb sounds and heartbeat. I like to think we're reinforcing that, and instead of having to relearn it as a child, it's just something they'll always know. It gives them a rhythm to life and it helps with language, dancing, playing instruments... If you can feel that pulse you've got a headstart."

By six months, they are imitating sounds. "We play music and join in with it to help