

Rock me, Amadeus

It's boom time for serious classical music concerts for tots, but if you think it will turn them into budding Mozarts, think again, reports

Catherine Nixey

If only this were allowed in the Wigmore Hall. As the Ravel reaches its climax, the heat in the hall is becoming almost unbearable. There is a little discreet wafing of programmes. Some unobtrusive shifting in seats.

Then one audience member, in a blue floral dress, has a better idea. She stands from her seat, wanders in front of the viola player, lifts her dress high over her head and gives it a flap. Most refreshing. Another lies down on the floor and rolls about at bit. While a third, perhaps a little too hot, hits his neighbour. French impressionist music can be so affecting.

This is Bach to Baby, a series of concerts that does much what it says on the tin: it brings classical music to tiny children. The audience may be unorthodox, the players are not: they include principals from the LSO, BBC commentators, Grammy Award nominees.

In today's concert in the Foundling Museum, central London, as well as a viola player from the London Philharmonic there is David Jones, a baritone whose last gig was singing Gershwin on Radio 3. Today, he is singing *The Wheels on the Bus* (after



the classical pieces there is always a less classical finale). His audience have so far expressed a preference to sing about wipers and wheels. He crouches down beside them: "... and any other mechanised parts?"

The concerts were founded by Miaomiao Yu, Guildhall professor of music, concert pianist and mother. Or rather, concert pianist then mother. The two, she says, don't go well together. "A lot of musicians I know, a lot of mums, almost hid it from everyone because that doesn't go with your professional image." Things are not much easier now. "It was difficult. I was breastfeeding,

“Bach to Baby is expanding across Britain and there is global interest

trying to time when I'm feeding with the orchestral rehearsals; trying to be all professional. I timed it so it never interrupted anything. On the surface everything was all professional, but in the background, so much more stress."

Even when she wasn't playing, she couldn't take her son into concerts because of the rarefied atmosphere of a concert hall. It wasn't always like this: Haydn famously composed extra-loud bits as "audience silencers", to stop the audience chatter. But no longer. Now, as Yu puts it, "even a cough is frowned on" — let alone rolling round on the floor. So when her son was about a year old, she decided to something about it. She decided to set up her own classical concerts; proper ones, which you could go to with a baby.

If she had been expecting a welcome, she didn't get it. She wasn't laughed at, precisely; it was worse: she

was ignored. "It took another year before I could convince a venue that this would work. They just didn't take it seriously. Or they didn't take me seriously. They didn't want to answer the calls." The general attitude was, she says, that "this would never work". Does she think they took her less seriously because she was a woman with a baby? "Yes."

Doubters be damned. Since the first concert in 2011, there have been almost 400 of them. There is now a concert happening almost every day in



Top left: young music fans at the Foundling Museum in central London. Above and right: Catherine Nixey with her son, Felix



Classic pushy parents

■ **Leopold Mozart**

The original proponent of tough love. By the time Wolfgang was six, Leopold was touring him round the royal courts of Europe. Not that Leopold was content: he described his son as "irresponsible, negligent, wasteful, mendacious, unproductive, morally delinquent". "Unproductive" seems particularly tough; Wolfgang wrote his first symphony aged eight.

■ **Johann van Beethoven**

Having decided his son would become a second Mozart, the alcoholic Johann became a second Leopold, beating his son to make him practise; beating him when he made a mistake, and keeping him awake to practise. Beethoven, like his father, became an alcoholic.

■ **Antonio and Teresa Paganini**

The couple locked their son Niccolò in his room for hours to make him practise. Sure enough, they developed one of the finest violinists the world had ever seen. Paganini Jr also developed a drink habit.

■ **Emma Gould**

Glenn Gould's mother less discovered her son was a genius than decided he would be, and to that end exposed him to a "constant stream of music" when pregnant. It worked — or something did: Gould became famous as one of the greatest interpreters of Bach. He also became famous for being a trifle odd: as an adult, he hummed as he played and still sat on his boyhood piano chair.

■ **Pamela Tan Nicholson**

Pamela tried to stop her daughter, the young Vanessa-Mae, below, from skiing for fun lest she harm her fingers — though at a show in St Moritz she did allow the violinist to swoosh up to the stage on skis as part of the act. Vanessa-Mae questioned this. "I said, 'Why is that OK?' She said if I was to die like that, at least your obituary will be huge. If you die skiing, it'll be this small."



“Pregnant mothers try to get their children to listen in the womb

reasoning about mathematics." Understand 3/4 time and you are understanding ¾.

However, perhaps because learning an instrument involves boring old effort, and perhaps also because you can't mass-manufacture music teachers and sell them on Amazon, this discovery never received the same publicity. CDs appeal, Rauscher thinks, because it "sounds like a quick fix — 'OK, I'll have a smart child. I'll just have them listen to Mozart.'"

While many of the results of her research may be benign but pointless, she is worried that some habits may actually be damaging. "One of the things that worries me the most is that pregnant mothers are going to go and put headphones on their tummies and try to get their children to listen in the womb. That can certainly interfere with their sleep cycles."

A much milder downside of the fandango surrounding Rauscher's research is that any association of classical music and children is now tainted with the whiff of overparenting. Classical music and parental ambition go together like toccata and fugue.

When in 2011 Amy Chua published *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, it was the section on piano practice that grabbed much of the attention. In it, Chua famously described having threatened her daughter "with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years" if she didn't perfect a piece.

professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, found that American college students performed better on some spatial reasoning tests after listening to Mozart. A bit. And just for ten minutes. She and two colleagues published a paper in *Nature*. And that, she thought, was that.

A couple of months after she published, Rauscher walked into a record shop and "there was this big kiosk featuring CDs about music for babies and quoting our research on the back of the CD". The Mozart effect had been born. "It was rather bizarre."

It was also, she says, bunk. "Our original study was done with college students and had nothing to do with babies at all. I think it's wonderful that children can listen to classical music but I certainly don't think it's going to make them any smarter." However, the world, perhaps in need of a little memory-training itself, seems to have forgotten this bit of her research.

A much more interesting study would follow several years later. This showed, beyond doubt, that classical music can have quite astonishing effects on children, though when you practise it, rather than apply it as a poultice. Give a disadvantaged child lessons in a rhythm instrument before the age of six and their arithmetic scores will go up as much as 30 per cent. "Because what you're doing when you're playing is partitioning time," says Rauscher. "And that's what you do when you're



London, about 25 concerts a month. The brand is currently in the process of expanding across Britain (Surrey, somewhat unsurprisingly, is first) and she has had interest from around the world: it seems that Asia, Australia, Europe and North and South America are all keen for their babies to get a bit of Bach too.

In one sense, it feels slightly surprising that Yu encountered any doubters at all. There is an entire industry devoted to bringing classical music to babies. There are *Baby Bach* and *Baby Mozart* CDs under the Baby Einstein label. There are no direct claims made but $E = mc^2$, you get the impression, could be just an étude away for your malleable child. Another CD calls itself *Beethoven for Babies: Brain Training for Little Ones*. A fascinating prospect — will it help train a toddler to compose music while deaf, alcoholic and possibly syphilitic? I do hope so.

What is in many cases being sold is less the music than a myth — a slightly insidious myth — that from Bach comes brilliance. That is emphatically not the case at Bach to Baby. "I've specifically never said 'come to a concert and your child will be smart,'" says Yu. "That's not the reason for the concerts. I put on these concerts so that everyone can enjoy music, with the babies. It's not about getting smarter. It's about experiencing different things."

Elsewhere, though, the myth proliferates. And, like all good children's myths, this one begins with a once upon a time. Or, to be more precise, it begins in 1993, when Frances Rauscher, an American psychology researcher who is now a

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