

What A Star!

by Anna Dunwoodie

Astar Young has been learning the harp for a year and a half and is making great progress.



I had to give Astar a lesson at her house last week and realised that her progress is helped along by following all the tips I try to give my students to try to “remove the barriers” to learning. Many would say that learning a new skill or instrument is more challenging as we get older – I agree – but Astar has taken this challenge on fully and is making huge progress.

When I arrived, her harp (which is pretty new) needed a bit of a tune up – all her harp related ‘gear’ is in a box at close hand (books, tuners, metronome, pencils, strings, etc) ... there is no wasting of time going off and finding all the related bits. Her harp and her music stand are permanently set up so she can just slip behind it and play when ever she has time, (and Astar is one of the busiest people I know!) The lighting is perfect, the music is clear and easy to see so getting into her practice is not stressful.

The music – its all enlarged to make it as clear and easy to read as possible. There is only one tune per page and it looks like a rainbow with all the relevant notes coloured, counting or fingering written on it.

This all means that the time Astar gets at the harp is all productive – she has a clear picture of what she needs to practise and gets in and does it successfully!

What does it take to help your child succeed at their practice?

It doesn't matter if it was your child, or you, who wanted them to learn an instrument. If you have *given in* to their whim to learn, or pushing your belief that *they should* learn an instrument, you are the financier of lessons and instruments and the taxi driver, but your support doesn't have to end there. In fact, if it's your wallet that is being pillaged by term account, you probably have a very strong feeling that you would like to see some results for the outlaid time and money ... and so you should.

Let's take for now that the music lessons themselves are going really well.

- 1) That there is a good rapport between the teacher and your child,
- 2) That the teacher is setting suitable tasks for your child to practise and home,
- 3) That the teacher has reasonable expectations of what can be achieved between lessons,
- 4) That the child enjoys going to weekly lessons, ready to learn.

The first step is to make sure the expectations of *how much*, and *what to practice* are perfectly clear between the teacher, parents and student.

.... And that home practice consists of playing a phrase or a piece several times, or until improvement is heard.

Many children (and some parents) have a different understanding of ‘practice’ so it is best to make these terms clear for everyone so the child is meeting the teacher’s expectation. In some cases, the teacher needs to understand that the child is not expected to practise, only to attend lessons. In this case the parent and child need to understand that progress will not be as fast as a peer who does smart practice 4-5 times a week, or even a peer who does one good practice a week!

We’re going to continue from here on the understanding that teacher and parent agree that the child should do a smart practice 4-5 times a week.

If it’s you, the parent, who wants the child to learn an instrument (as opposed to the child) you probably have a constant battle, or quiet revolt raging away when it comes to practice at home. If it’s the child who wants to learn the instrument, it’s still possible that they don’t know what’s best for themselves in terms of practice and naively believe that one (or no) practice between lessons will get them through. Regardless of how much they really want to be able to play that instrument, practice is not always that appealing.

We all know that “practice makes perfect” but the reality is GOOD practice makes perfect, and PERFECT practice makes perfect. To be blunt – we get out what we put in to our instrument.

(Another issue which we won’t go into here is “a good instrument to get a good sound” – it’s fine to start on beginner instruments, but there comes a time when this can inhibit the progress of a good student musician)

But the more times the student can place their hands on the instrument and do a good, smart practice, the better the progress will be.

One 2-hour practice a week will not achieve the same results as four thirty minute practices. We gain a little better understanding of our pieces each time we smart practise them and then when we revisit them the next day we improve on yesterday’s improvements and continue building on this.

We all know how busy today’s kids are, and music may not be your child’s main point of focus, but even so if you are paying for the lessons and the instrument you should be getting progress too, otherwise you may as well pay for a babysitter rather than a music teacher.

Remove the Barriers to Learning

Remove any obvious barriers to learning – things that get in the way of a successful practice.

Consider if the problem is:

- a) To do with the operator/body/environment.
- b) To do with the instrument.
- c) To do with the musical notation.

Barrier to Learning	Possible Solutions
Tired (a)	What is the best time for this musician to practice? Before school, straight after school
Hungry (a)	Feed them; get the musician in a good space before they start.
Distracted (a)	Do they have their own practice space away from other siblings.... TV..... distractions?
Can't read the music ... At all... (c)	This may be part of the learning process. Discuss with the teacher how the child will know what to practice. Harp Tips – coloured notes for C and F, notes or counts written in, CD to play along with.
The print is too small to read (c)	Enlarge it – the teacher will probably be delighted with your use of commonsense. For beginners, having only one piece of music on the page, enlarged to twice the size of the normal print, with Cs and Fs coloured makes the task of reading so much easier. These things aren't missed when the teacher removes them later as they are progressing. Better lighting on the music.
Where is my music? (a)	Make the music books/bag distinctive so its easily accessible and always easy for the young musician to see and find quickly. Ideally have a music stand and practice space always set up for easy use.
Finds body/arm/hand position of the instrument difficult or heavy (a/b)	YouTube – how does everyone else manage? Have you discussed this with the teacher? If it's in the first 3-6 months, it may be that the body is still getting adjusted or gaining the strength needed to comfortably play this instrument.
It's easier to play on my teacher's harp.... (b)	The student might be right – not every instrument suits every body. It also might be time to move up from the beginner harp to something that they can produce a good tone easily on.
The touchy issues	
Over-committed with extra-curricular activities	
Doesn't want to learn ... at all ... or anymore.	

We'll follow this up in the next journal with some tips for success for your learner.