

Rosie Cross describes what she learned from teaching the piano to Tom, who has Down's syndrome

Tom was born in 1985 and diagnosed with Down's syndrome, an extra chromosome in his genetic makeup which results in characteristics such as weak muscle tone, low IQ, and poor speech (partly due to an over-large tongue). There is also a tendency towards heart and respiratory problems but Tom has not been affected by any of these. He is the eldest of four; his father plays the violin in the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and his mother, who used to be a teacher, is now a breast feeding counsellor.

From the beginning Tom's parents assumed that, as far as possible, he would have all the opportunities open to his brothers and sister. He began life in a mainstream school but at the age of seven he moved to a special school as he was seen to be marginalising himself and drawing back from the other children who were faster and more able than himself.

Piano lessons

When Tom was eight his father approached me about piano lessons for the two older boys but he did not mention that Tom has Down's syndrome until all the arrangements had been made. When he eventually told me, my immediate reaction was to refuse to teach Tom on the grounds that I knew nothing at all about Down's syndrome and had no experience of teaching children with special educational needs. However I decided not to say this until I had found a piano teacher willing

to teach both boys but despite making a considerable number of phone calls, I couldn't find anyone. I therefore agreed to tackle the problem and began a process of learning that continues to this day.

The first thing I had to do was to get to know Tom. I needed to find out from his mother what he could and could not do, learn about his childhood and his development from birth, and discover what her expectations were as regards his piano playing. She obviously was not expecting him to be a concert pianist but she hoped that his music would contribute to his personal development, and that he would perceive himself to be taking part in the same activities as his siblings.

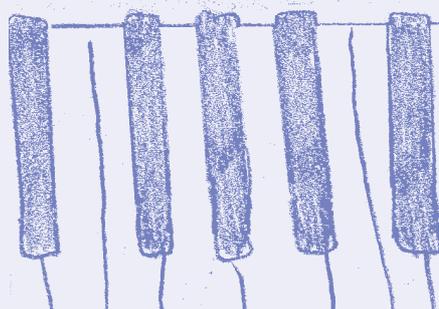
Initial difficulties - and how they were solved

The first obstacle seemed to me to be his fingers! They certainly lacked muscle tone and were rather like floppy sausages. Tom found it difficult, if not impossible, to move his fingers individually, and to start with he would play the piano with the flat of his hands. At this stage I encouraged him to do this as he was obviously enjoying himself and showing interest in the piano. I tried to get him to describe moods such as "happy" and "sad" in this way. I devised games and simple activities that gradually encouraged him to use his fingers, starting with the middle three fingers of each hand because he found this easier than thumb and little finger. It took a long time and a lot of work to get to the point where he could play *Merrily we roll along* with the middle three fingers of each hand on the set of three black notes, and eventually with both hands together, starting with contrary motion and then going on to similar motion.

The second obstacle was that of written notation. Tom was never going to be able to read notation and so another way had to be found of enabling him to access music and internalise it. I looked at many



published teaching methods for young beginners but none seemed to suit our purpose. Tom wanted a book because his brother had a book so I chose the Alfred Series A - E for very young beginners. It progresses very slowly and fitted in with what I was doing with Tom in that it starts with two fingers on the set of two black notes, progresses to three and does not introduce the stave until half way through the first book. When the fingers eventually move on to the white notes, the letter name of the note is printed inside the note head. Tom learned all the pieces in the book by rote, and the pictures on the page reminded him what tune to play. The pictures worried me at first because they are really designed for



children of four or five, and I was afraid that he would feel patronised by them. However, this was never a problem as far as Tom was concerned although it was an issue for his mother and me as we did not like the rather sentimental approach to some of the lyrics. The books served to give us some sort of structure but they were only a small part of our overall work and I supplemented them with a lot of improvisatory work. In ten years Tom completed lesson books A - C. He learned mainly by rote and was able to access music slowly by letter name. He was, however, able to play all the white major and minor scales.

The benefits

After Tom had been playing for some time and was able to move all five fingers around the piano easily and play many tunes that lie within a five finger span, it began to be obvious that there were benefits to his everyday life which were a direct result of his piano playing. His motor co-ordination improved and his mother commented on the fact that suddenly he could handle a knife and fork and do up his shoe laces. His speech improved because he was learning to listen in a concentrated way. The work we were doing on the piano helped to address numeracy and literacy, and his self confidence grew as he discovered that there was something he could do well.

A major difference between teaching Tom and a less disabled beginner was his lack of expectation, and in some ways it was refreshing to be liberated from the lack of pressure to achieve the goal posts that parents often expect, such as graded examinations. Tom did not look ahead or see his work in terms of progress towards a goal. He enjoyed his weekly half hour on the piano, and he enjoyed being able to go home and do the same activities on his own piano. Tom's mother supported him by being involved with every practice and finding alternative ways of helping him. For example, she discovered that putting her fingers over his and "playing" his fingers helped him towards eventual independence. Tom's success was to a considerable extent attributable to his mother, and his progress was overseen by a partnership between the two of us. She knew more than anyone about what Tom could and couldn't do and together we moved forward, trying new ideas and not being afraid to ditch ones that were not working. All my pupils have a practice notebook which sets out how their practice should be structured and what it should include. Tom had one too, but

since he wasn't able to read it, his parents' involvement was absolutely essential.

Tom comes from a musical family and he responds well to music. He can be reasonably articulate about what he likes and does not like, and when he lived at home he spent a lot of time in his room at home with his CD player. Because of the nature of his father's work, Tom had been to many concerts and observed what went on. As he grew older and more able on the piano his performances would include

to sit at the piano and doodle around with his fingers without any inhibition. I tried to find ways of channelling this interest and give structure and direction to it. This was not hard - he was extremely enthusiastic. One of his first improvisations was called *Looking Forward to Christmas*. He had different types of playing for different aspects of this; for example he played at the top of the piano to describe fairy lights, and getting excited was a fairly boisterous section in the middle. I decided to include this improvisation in one of my



the sweeping back of imaginary coat tails, and he often won the prize at my pupils' concerts for the person who would manage to acknowledge their applause the best! A conductor friend donated a baton and Tom would put on a CD, stand on a block and conduct, looking every inch the part.

Performing

I wanted to find performance opportunities for Tom comparable to those I provide for my other pupils. These include public concerts, visits to an old people's home and small gatherings in my home, and children find these occasions fun, exciting and sociable. They benefit from getting to know each other and hearing each other play. I found that the way ahead for Tom was improvisation. I noticed that he liked

pupils' concerts. This concert was held in a local hall and involved more than 20 young players, ranging from very young beginners to post-grade 8 pianists. They and the audience were enthusiastic about Tom's inclusion, and interested and impressed when they heard what he could achieve. A toddler had been making his presence felt by running around and throwing toys on the floor during the other performances, but when Tom started playing, he stopped in his tracks, slowly walked towards the piano stool, and climbed up next to Tom. They looked at each other with expressions of sheer enjoyment.

Tom went on to create many more improvisations which grew out of day to day activities and happenings. He performed these in a number of venues



- one of these was the SENCo exhibition in the National Exhibition Centre in 2003 where we had been invited to do a 10 minute slot during the lunch break.

Helping Tom to improvise

My role as teacher in helping Tom to devise and practise his improvisations was important, and working on a single improvisation, alongside other activities, might take a whole term. Sometimes the starting point would be a melody: in *All in a Day's Work* it was Grieg's *Morning* which Tom had heard and liked, and wanted to play. He learned it partly by ear and partly by using the letter names in the version I wrote out for him, and this alone took several weeks. Next we worked on adding some simple chords, and to help him to learn to play triads we played chopsticks together, with Tom playing the bass part. Then we talked about what comes before morning - the quiet of night. We experimented with playing softly, to suggest the stillness that comes before dawn. Then we remembered the dawn chorus, the singing and twittering of the birds, and we created this on the high notes of the piano. When Tom heard an ice cream van playing *Whistle while you work* he wanted to include it, so I wrote it down for him, again using letter names to help him learn and remember it, and then other sounds were added such as police car and fire engine sirens, bulldozer and typewriter. By this stage I had given Tom a crib sheet to help him remember the structure and content. It consisted of isolated words such as peaceful music, morning, whistles and sirens - written in

big letters that he could read. The piece was rounded off with *Twinkle twinkle little star* which he could already play and to which we added chords, and the ending was a section that Tom improvised on the piano to evoke the peacefulness of night-time. This was played on the low notes, in contrast to the morning sounds which used the top end of the keyboard. The Melody website gives further details of how this and other improvisations were constructed and how they evolved.

Tom particularly enjoyed improvising, and improvisation is a powerful and valid means of communicating emotion and feeling with the outside world for people with learning disabilities, especially if they have limited speech. Another of my pupils, who has very little speech, uses improvising as a means of communication; for instance if it's raining and he's got wet on the way to my house for his lesson, he'll tell me about it by playing the piano.

Teaching Tom

I said earlier that teaching Tom was, for me, the beginning of a learning process that continues to this day. Initially I saw teaching him as a 'problem' to be solved and I was apprehensive about my lack of experience. But this feeling soon passed. I have always tried to tailor my teaching appropriately to the needs of each individual pupil and this was just as important for Tom as it was for other pupils. The starting point was "This is Tom; how can I best help him, being the person that he is and learning as he does, to get the most out of learning and playing the piano?" not "This is how you learn the piano".

Tom, like everyone else, is a unique individual and although teaching him has helped me to understand how children with Down's syndrome learn, children with Down's syndrome are not all the same and it has been important for me to see Tom as an individual with his own interests and enthusiasms as a musician. For instance, he has a particularly good sense of rhythm which he demonstrates through conducting as well as through playing. It was also evident, as with some other pupils, that music was an important part of his background and family life.

After leaving school Tom attended a residential college for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, and he is now living independently, with support. During his time at college he learned the cornet and he still plays the piano when he comes home.

Music and learning disabilities

Children and young people with Down's syndrome and other learning disabilities benefit in a number of ways from learning an instrument. It helps with their language development, motor co-ordination, memory, concentration - and of course their confidence and self esteem. But more importantly than this, they are taking part in music. As the Music Manifesto states:

Music can be magic. It calls for and calls forth all human virtues: imagination, discipline, teamwork, determination. It enriches and inspires.

.....We believe that music is important in itself and for its ability to change how we think, feel and act. For this reason, music plays a prominent part in young people's lives, both in and out of school, and from the very earliest age

We believe music has a unique contribution to make to education - and by that we mean the education of all children, not just those with the potential to become great professional musicians and composers. We know that the creativity at the heart of music-making can help raise attainment and motivate young people.

All this is just as true for young people with learning disabilities as it is for other young people.

There are many organisations working with pupils with special needs, but there seem to be few instrumental teachers who feel able to accept pupils with learning disabilities such as Down's syndrome, almost certainly because of a lack of training and experience. This was the reason for setting up Melody, a charity established to promote awareness of the potential benefits of playing a musical instrument for those with a learning disability such as Down's syndrome. Tom was one of its founder members.

References

Melody www.melody.me.uk

Music Manifesto www.musicmanifesto.org.uk

Rosie Cross taught music in secondary schools for a number of years. She is now a piano teacher with around 60 pupils and is on the staff of the Birmingham Conservatoire Junior Department. She is the Director of Melody, a charity founded to promote the benefits of playing a musical instrument by those with a learning disability. She can be contacted at rosie@melody.me.uk.