

OPINION

Students of all ages need the simple pleasures and confidence which come from making music together

The pandemic has made me even more aware of what social beings we humans are and the benefits we gain from playing and performing live

LONG before Covid-19 was even heard of, my goal as a teacher was to instil confidence. It has always been important to me that through learning music to the highest standard, students will also develop confidence in their ability to sit exams and perform on stage. Following the first two years of the pandemic, confidence has never been more lacking, nor the need to instil it more important.

Like many teachers, I have witnessed a massive loss of confidence in pupils during and since the pandemic. It has affected every age group, but none more so than teenagers.

I have been teaching for almost 30 years and, while teaching teenagers has always been more challenging than other age groups (and, for that reason, in many ways the most rewarding), I have never experienced the number of struggling teens as I have in the past year.

During the course of the pandemic my school continued to teach on Zoom and all but two of our pupils carried on having music lessons in one form or another. Some members of our adult choir also left, which I quite understood, since they were on screens all day and didn't want to go back online in the evenings.

The feedback we got from pupils once we were 'back in the room', however, was that those Zoom lessons were the highlight of their week. Even though it wasn't the same, it was something: a social connection.

From our youngest musical-theatre pupils to the older students (including teenagers), seeing their friends online every week and doing what they loved was variously described as 'a lifesaver', 'the best part of my week' and 'the only thing I looked forward to'.

The choir even preferred Zoom in some ways, as there was no hassle to find a parking space or leave home in the dark and the rain, plus it gave members the chance to enjoy a catch-up.

We used break-out rooms so that the sopranos could have 20 minutes with me while the altos had 20 minutes in another 'room' with my fellow choir leader, Emily.



Leila Begg

■ Above: Leila pictured with a student
Picture: JAMES SOLOMON

Meanwhile, the tenors toddled off for 20 minutes for a glass of wine or a cup of tea and then we all swapped. Emily and I recorded all of the harmonies so that, even at home, it felt to all the members like they were singing with the choir, which helped us achieve a huge amount.

But, of course, we couldn't sing together and although it was definitely better than nothing, the relief and joy once we were able to sing and hear one another live was indescribable! We sang outside at first and then inside in small, socially-distanced groups.

That first inside rehearsal was strange. We were all quieter. More reserved. And the volume of our singing had dropped dramatically. Not just from lack of training, but the sheer fear of contracting or, worse still, infecting others with Covid. Imagine the guilt. Interestingly, the repertoire that we learned during lockdown still feels different when we sing it live. All the emotions we were feeling at the time come back sharply into focus; such is the connection between music and memory.

Many of our teenage pupils had changed beyond recognition when they returned. They, too, were quieter and had forgotten how to interact. At the beginning of a lesson before the pandemic, I would hear chatter and a buzz when I walked into the music room and would have to quieten everyone down before we began.

But when we came back in person after lockdown it was eerie. Shocking, in fact. I would walk into the music room as usual, only to find... silence. The students were sitting, looking uncomfortable and not chatting with one another at all. Some were on their phones, some just staring at nothing.

To get them to interact in class took time, patience and understanding, and there were moments when I thought we would never get back to normal.

Our contemporary singers usually do a little performance at the end of each

lesson. For a long time, we got a flat 'no, thank you' when we asked who wanted to sing the following week, whereas pre-pandemic, getting time on the microphone was regarded as a highlight. They had lost so much confidence and I can't describe how helpless I felt.

It will be years before we see how much damage that long period of social isolation and uncertainty caused.

I'd like to say that we're now back to some semblance of normality, but I can't. Yes, things are better and the insecurity and loss which resulted from so much being cancelled has lessened, if not gone totally.

I don't think we have yet appreciated what a toll that aspect of the pandemic took on us all, but particularly on our teens and university-age students, who lost so much during such developmentally important years. It was hard on us all but,

other than the elderly who were separated from friends and family, I think it was hardest on our teens and young adults.

I don't think we will ever again take for granted the simple pleasures which come from making music together, live, and in the same room. The confidence which comes from mastering an instrument or vocal passage and then being examined on it or performing it and having one's hard work heard and appreciated is so important. This is just one of the countless effects that the pandemic has had on society.

I do appreciate that, in the grand scheme of things, it's not the most serious. However, it has made me even more aware of how important music is and of what social beings we humans are; and of the terrifyingly detrimental effects on us all when, in the blink of an eye, it is taken away.



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