

## Working with dyslexic/neurodiverse<sup>1</sup> music students remotely.

### Comments and suggestions for good practice

#### Introduction

- Note that the term 'student' is used in order to describe individuals between the ages of 1 to 100!
- All of these points can apply both to neurodiverse<sup>1</sup> students and neuro-typical students. Remember that good neurodiverse-aware teaching is generally good teaching for all.
- Various online/remote platforms can be used. Details are given at the end of this document.

#### For students under the age of 18, or vulnerable adults

1. 1:1 online activity **MUST** be agreed with parents or carers prior to any sessions taking place.
2. The 1:1 must then take place only at the days / times agreed. Parents and carers or another responsible named adult should be present in the house at the time.
3. Session protocols must be agreed with parents / carers and learners.
4. Keep a written a record of any such sessions to safeguard yourself and the learner.
5. Being filmed or recorded without giving consent is a legal breach of General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and both students and teachers need to ask for consent to film or record any session.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term 'neurodiverse' emphasises the positive aspects of different ways of thinking such as those shown by individuals with dyslexia, DCD/dyspraxia, ADHD, autism and so on.

## Some general positives

- Many teachers report positive contact with students using remote delivery for lessons.
- Some shyer pupils (or/and those on the autistic spectrum) may gain in confidence through online work. The fact that they are having lessons in their home and don't feel worried about being in a room 1:1 with an adult may help some individuals.
- Students can show a greater level of independence.
- There can be increased (and useful) contact with parents.
- Parents generally seem very grateful for the extra effort being made.
- It can be useful to be able to observe students working on their own instruments, in the case of piano/keyboard lessons; seeing the sort of stool or chair they are using and the room that they normally work in. This can bring a number of issues to the fore about which the teacher might not previously have been aware: there may not be a music stand, for example, for instrumental players or a keyboard may be kept in a cupboard and difficult to get out. Obviously, such issues need to be raised with parents carefully and only if a solution can be suggested.
- For piano/keyboard lessons, it may be easier for the teacher to demonstrate on his/her own instrument, rather than having to do musical chairs with the student on the one piano.
- Gradually the student (even the youngest) will become more confident – and so will you!

## General points

### **Be prepared!**

And encourage the student to be prepared. Have every part of the lesson ready to go for the student: this will stop any distractions

during the lesson. Of course, this doesn't mean that you might not do something unplanned.

### **Talking**

Because you and your student will be relying much more than usual on verbal clues, speak clearly and perhaps more slowly than usual. You will have to listen more carefully than normal, too. Don't talk too much. Give visual confirmation of the things you're talking about, where possible.

### **Young students and parents.**

For younger students, it may be useful for parents to sit in on all lessons just in case the student needs assistance with issues such as writing in the names of notes, fingerings and so on. Ask the student how s/he feels about this if it is not the normal procedure in face-to-face lessons.

- Keeping **concentration** on a screen can be tricky. Some students may be having school lessons via computer screens. There may be more to distract students at home. Encourage the student and/or parents to have the lesson in a room/area where nothing else is going on; there aren't people (or animals!) moving around in the background, for example (or even the TV on).
- To aid concentration, your visual **background** should be reasonably un-cluttered. This can be particularly important for neurodiverse individuals. Make sure that there is nothing on show that shouldn't be!

### **Practice.**

- Be patient in terms of the amount of practice that can be done. Parents may be working from home and access to the piano or a space to practice that doesn't interfere with others' work may be difficult. A keyboard with headphones may be an alternative at times for pianists.

### **Anxiety**

- Remember that neurodiverse students and particularly students with mental health difficulties, may find the pandemic situation, lockdown and new ways of working particularly stressful and difficult. Students may be particularly prone to anxiety, fatigue and concentration difficulties, so be prepared to be extra supportive and patient. For **some** students, remote support can increase anxiety levels.
- Your familiar face may provide a 'constant' during a period when life is far from normal. So, be (extra?) positive. Consider wearing bright colours to help present a 'cheery' atmosphere, but not heavy stripes or patterns as these can cause pixilation on the screen.

### **Encouragement**

- This may need to be even more than normal. Keep up (or start) a reward scheme of stars, with the student drawing in their own and colouring it in, perhaps using an agreed 'code'.
- So – tons of praise! It's hard to do things online.
- Encourage students to evaluate their own performances with the teacher.

### **Lesson content**

- As always with neurodiverse students in particular, don't overload sessions with too much information, new things etc.

### **Copies of the music**

You will need to have a second copy of the music.

- This can be done by photographing the Zoom screen or
- Photograph the music (if you have a copy) and send the image to the student with fingering and other things for them to focus on directly on the part of the music that's applicable.

### Making notes in the lesson

- Some pupils will have their parents involved during the lesson.
- For younger pupils, perhaps take notes yourself, scan them and send them to parents to print out, or copy out, and stick into the pupil's notebook.
- For older pupils, encourage them to take their own notes. Allow time for this and help them to know what to write. Have a look at what they've done (they hold the note book up to the screen).
- Consider using a **WhatsApp group** to communicate instructions following 1:1 lessons with pupils and family members.
- It's not always easy to point to things on the music. Turn this into a positive by encouraging the student to take responsibility for writing information on to scores and for writing points in their notebook, something which can continue in face-to-face lessons.

### Use of videos and recordings

- Note point 5 in the Introduction to this document re videos. Used with permission, these can be very helpful.
- Pupils can record their pieces and send them to the teacher to listen to offer feedback, if the parent consents. Videos need to be stored sensitively and securely in a password-protected area. The teacher can send written bullet-pointed feedback.
- Perhaps encourage pupils to make videos of their performances to send to grandparents to cheer them up through the lockdown. This will be very much appreciated!
- It can be useful, particularly with neurodiverse students, to send them videos or recordings of any new pieces to be learned. These could start with just a few bars (and one hand only for pianists) so as not to overwhelm. Other students may prefer to get a good overview first before breaking work down.

The use of such videos, if they prove successful with an individual student, can continue when face-to-face lessons resume.

- Video any tricky sections of pieces that are being learned so they can be used in practice sessions through the week. (Again, also a useful tool for face-to-face teaching.)

### Timings of sessions

- **Be flexible** in terms of timings of sessions. Moving a normal week-day lesson to a Saturday may be best in a period when a student is working quite a lot on screen with school lessons as well on the computer.
- For dyslexic/neurodiverse children, splitting a 30 mins instrumental lesson into two smaller 15 mins lessons and doing back-up 5min tutorials to a student if something is very poorly understood can be really useful.
- The same applies to all very young pupils.
- The delivery of 1:1 lessons for school pupils has, of course, benefited from an easier timetable and no problem of having to miss school lessons!
- There is no waiting generally for pupils who are normally taught in school and they can have their full lesson length as they may not be rushing off to the other side of a school or building.

### Props and equipment: for teachers and students

- Have a whiteboard and pen handy for explanations.
- Flashcards and laminated jumbo manuscript are useful props for musical games.
- Use tambours for call-and-response rhythm work. The student can also have a drum, or a pan lid/tray... to work with too.
- Rhythm flash cards.
- For younger pupils, enlist the help of parents at home to assist with issues such as providing pencils, re-positioning the camera, recording

and so on. Encourage all students always to have notebook, pencil, eraser and possibly a metronome handy.

### Imaginative teaching

This situation can be a real opportunity for being imaginative and thinking outside the box.

- The lack of standard music exams, could mean that teachers can create their own 'progression routes' that might be valuable in the future and encourage work which is less exam-orientated.
- Use music apps (unless the student has had enough of learning from a screen).
- The ABRSM apps work ok when shared in Zoom, for example. This allows an opportunity to apply some aural skills.

### A possible example of imaginative working

- Encourage your students to create a song or an instrumental 'tone poem' about lockdown. This may be an opportunity for young people to express how they are feeling through their music: sadness, frustration and hope for the future. This may well advance an individual musically **and** be good for his/her mental health.

A possible structure for such activity

- Mind map to encourage thoughts about the content of the song/piece. Perhaps use a different colour pen for each idea **if** the student finds this approach useful.
- Perhaps start with 3 chords: I, IV and V in a simple key (C?). Later add more chords.
- If the student improvises a melody on an instrument or voice, the teacher could notate this. The student could copy this, if s/he finds it useful, perhaps using wide-lined MS.

- If work on the composition continues outside of the lesson, this can be recorded on a mobile phone (the student's or parent's). This can be emailed to the teacher who can notate it (and send it back) before the next lesson.
- It may be easier to work using chord symbols above a single stave (for the melody) rather than working on 2 staves/clefs.
- The composition can be put into Sibelius (or similar software) so that the student has a neat version s/he can be proud of.

### **Multisensory work**

Such approaches are particularly useful with neurodiverse students but should benefit all. This approach should be continued in remote work.

- Continue to clap rhythms.
- Find things (pan lids etc.) to tap out a rhythm.
- Speak out rhythms.
- Play and say note/letter names.
- Step out the rhythms.
- Play games: I-spy with my little eye a bar that looks like this...  
I-spy with my little eye a bar that sounds like this... etc.
- Try the 'Bar/Beat' game: number the bars of the pieces that is being learned, if they aren't already numbered, and then play games like "Can you tell me the letter name of the RH note on the 3rd beat (or 4th quaver beat or whatever) of bar 14?" This can be very revealing! Can the pupil count the bars? Can they identify exactly where in the bar a note is? Demonstrate a piece and stop midway. Ask, "Where am I now?" "Can you give me the bar number?" "Can you give me the beat number?" and so on. This leads to analysis at different levels and really lends itself to making up lots of fun musical quizzes.

### **Technology**

- Use online working as positively as possible. For example, the screen-sharing facility on Zoom or Microsoft Teams can be used to share a



piece of sight-reading, a recording, a game, a theory game, a YouTube performance, an aural app. and GCSE anthology listening exercises.

- Use the record facility on your phone or computer or an app such as Simple Recorder (Mac) to send piano accompaniments or the other half of a duet for pupils to play along to or recordings of pieces (see points above). The student could sometimes play along to the recording at home.
- Hold your phone over your hands to demonstrate technique or to illustrate pattern on the piano/keyboard.
- If you experience technical problems, keep calm! If necessary, ring your student's home to reinstate the session.
- Avoid having multiple tabs open as this can affect how well your connection works.
- Check your internet connections are as good as possible. The site Netspot: 'Top ways to boost your wi-fi' may be useful. See <https://www.netspotapp.com/top-10-ways-to-boost-wifi.html>
- Avoid working via wi-fi if possible. The bandwidth (internet power to devices) will be improved a lot if you (and your student) link direct to your router using an ethernet cable. The cable colour doesn't matter (some are different), it's the connector that counts and it's possible to buy really long cables that can go from one end of the house to another.
- If you have to use wi-fi, consider changing your phone contract so that you can have unlimited data and then use your phone as a hotspot to boost the wi-fi.

There are many suggestions above which can continue to be used in face-to-face lessons. The advent of a new way of working (remotely, via computers) can be a real stimulus to more creative teaching generally.

### A few negatives

- This kind of remote work can be **very tiring**. Do ensure that you have adequate breaks between students and build in time during the day for yourself.
- There can be poor **sound quality** using Zoom or other platforms. This is particularly difficult at higher grades because Zoom evens out dynamics and has an aversion to bass notes and sustaining pedals.
  - It can be useful to purchase a good USB microphone. This will enable you (the teacher) to hear things clearly and stops dropouts as the microphone is directional.
- It's not easy to accompany students due to time lag issues. Similarly, because of lack of synchronisation, it can be very difficult for the teacher to help with a section of tricky timing by clapping the rhythm as the student plays, or even counting aloud. Instead, try playing the passage for the student who can then copy the rhythm, even if it is just a bar at a time.
- Pulse maintenance can be a problem. Encourage your students to download an app metronome and sometimes to play with it while you are teaching them.

### Platforms that can be used for remote delivery

- **Skype**. One of the first online video platforms. You can share and send documents. There is a subtitles feature. See <https://www.skype.com/en/get-skype/>
- **FaceTime**. The Apple equivalent of Skype. Many Mac users will prefer to use this, but you need a Mac computer as well. See <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/facetime/id1110145091>
- **Zoom**. A popular video app. See <https://zoom.us/download>  
You can run webinars and group sessions by sharing the meeting link with whoever needs to be included. There is a Tips and Tricks document for teachers. See

<https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Tips%20and%20Tricks%20for%20Teachers%20Educating%20on%20Zoom.pdf>

You can share your screen and annotate it. Calls can be recorded.

- **Microsoft Teams.** Part of the Microsoft Office 365 package. See <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/microsoft-teams/download-app>

With thanks Karen Cousins, Liz Childs, Deborah Harris, from Colour Strings, Anne Margaret Smith, Joy Smith and members of the BDA Music Committee (Karen Marshall, Andrew Millinchip and Nick Sermon), who have all contributed valuable suggestions. Information has also been used from the Association for Dyslexia Support in Higher Education (ADSHE), Diversity and Ability (D&A) and Disabled Students UK.

For further information about working with neurodiverse music students, please contact the British Dyslexia Association Music Committee at [info@musicdyslexia-spld.co.uk](mailto:info@musicdyslexia-spld.co.uk)

The British Dyslexia Association cannot take responsibility for this material; it is offered as advice and represents the experience and knowledge of the BDA Music Committee. Full research verification has not been undertaken.