

A

Tinkling the ivories, jangling the nerves

EXCEPT perhaps for learning a foreign language and getting your teeth properly sorted out once and for all, there is nothing more rewarding than learning a musical instrument. It provides a sense of accomplishment, a creative outlet and an absorbing pastime to while away the tedious hours between being born and dying. Musical "At Homes" can be a fine way of entertaining friends, especially if you have a bitter grudge against them. Instrumental tuition is widely available publicly, privately and by post.

Before choosing an instrument to learn you should ask yourself five questions. How much does it cost? How easy is it to play? How much does it weigh? Will playing it make me a more attractive human being? How much does it hurt? All musical instruments, if played properly, hurt.

The least you can expect is low back pain and shoulder strain, in some cases there may also be bleeding and unsightly swelling. Various relaxation methods such as meditation can help.

The most popular instrument for beginners is the piano though I don't know why this should be so. The piano is expensive, it's fiendishly difficult to play, it weighs a ton and it hasn't been sexy since Liszt died. If you sit at the keyboard in the approved position for more than a few minutes, the pain is such that you are liable to break down and betray the secrets of your closest friends. The only good thing you can say about the piano is that it provides you with a bit of extra shelf space around the house.

Being difficult to play means that learning the piano could make you vulnerable to a syndrome known as Lipchitz's Dilemma. Lipchitz was an Austrian behavioural psychologist who observed that setting out to acquire a difficult skill leads to one of just two alternative results.

Either, because of lack of talent or lack of application, you reach only a low to average level of attainment, which leads to general dissatisfaction and maudlin sessions of wandering aimlessly about the house, gently kicking the furniture and muttering, "I'm hopeless at everything."

Or you reach a very high attainment level but, because you spend anything up to 18 hours a day reaching and maintaining this level, other aspects of your personality do not develop properly, which leads to general dissatisfaction and maudlin sessions of wandering aimlessly about the house, gently kicking the furniture and muttering, "Up the Villa."

Having thus established that no good at all can come of any sort of endeavour, Lipchitz himself gave up behavioural psychology and took a job in a Post Office as the person who runs out of things.

The violin is definitely a Lipchitz's Dilemma instrument, but it does have certain advantages over the piano. It is portable and need not be all that expensive to buy. You might not be able to get as good a sound out of a cheap instrument as an expensive one but since it is notoriously difficult to get

much of a sound out of any sort of violin your best advice is to forget the whole idea and take up something easier.

The maraca is a hollowed out gourd half filled with beads or dried lentils or some such. Shaken, it makes a rattling sound. Small babies find this mildly entertaining but nobody else is interested.

The harmonica is similar. You buy it. You blow it. You suck it. You put it in a drawer. You lie on the sofa and you turn the telly on.

Some people think that the drums are easy to play and assume it must be fun, thrashing about like that. Do not be misled. Even basic rock'n'roll drumming requires a high level of musical understanding and physical co-ordination. Years of practice are needed to acquire a fluent technique, sufficient stamina and command of rhythmic and dynamic nuance and yet, after all that trouble, people still come up and say, "Must be fun thrashing about like that." This is why drummers often contract some of the more amusing personality disorders from the Encyclopaedia Psychopathica.

An evening out with a drummer can be diverting but be prepared for it to end with lines such as, "Leave it, Terry!" "For God's sake, he was only joking!" and "OH, CHRIST, WHAT A MESS!" Otherwise take my mother's advice and don't have anything to do with drums or drummers.

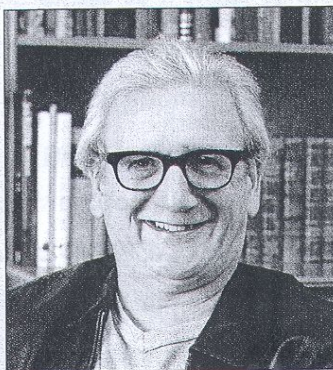
Brass instruments are much more fun. Professional brass players always wear an expression of bewildered good cheer. This is because they have discovered one of life's most wonderful secrets: you can earn a living making rude noises down a metal pipe. It is a secret that enables them to steer through all life's uncertainties and absurdities with unruffled equanimity.

I have played the guitar for more than 30 years, but I would not advise others to do the same. Far too many other people play the guitar and you will probably find, as I have, that they do it better than you.

A friend once invited me for tea. He had also invited a chap from the pub. The chap from the pub brought his accordion with him. It was an electric accordion which plugged into an amplifier. The living room was small: the amplifier large. He played Lady Of Spain and The Sabre Dance. The International Court of Human Rights has my report on the incident and is considering my recommendations.

For sheer sex appeal you can't do better than a saxophone. Just holding a saxophone gives you a late night charisma, enables you to drink whisky and smoke with authority. But if you wish to maintain credibility, it's as well to have a good stock of excuses ready for when you're asked actually to put the thing to your lips and blow, especially if your best shot is "Oh, The Camptown Ladies Sing This Song, Doo Dah Doo Dah." Otherwise be prepared for maudlin sessions of aimless wandering, gentle furniture kicking, and muttering, "I'm hopeless at everything."

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B 1 Read the article _____ and note down your answers to these questions. Highlight the relevant information in the text.

- 1 Nine instruments are mentioned: what are they?
- 2 Three rewards of learning an instrument are mentioned: what are they?
- 3 Four kinds of pain are mentioned: what are they?
- 4 What is the difference between the two symptoms of 'Lipchitz's Dilemma'?
- 5 What reasons does the writer give for advising the reader NOT to take up eight of the nine instruments he mentions?
- 6 Which of the instruments seems to have the fewest drawbacks?
- 7 What happened at the end of the imaginary evening out with a drummer?

C 1 Highlight these words in the text – the paragraph number is shown with ¶.

- ¶1 grudge ¶5 syndrome ¶6 maudlin ¶8 endeavour
 ¶12 be misled physical co-ordination nuance
 ¶14 unruffled equanimity ¶17 charisma

2 Match their meanings to these words and phrases, using a dictionary if necessary:

- charm and magnetism condition control of one's movements dislike effort*
get the wrong idea perfect calmness self-pitying subtle variation



B

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- 1 piano violin maraca harmonica drums brass (e.g. French horn) guitar electric accordion saxophone
- 2 a sense of accomplishment a creative outlet an absorbing pastime
- 3 low back pain shoulder strain bleeding unsightly swelling
- 4 You get depressed because you can't play it well enough – or you get depressed because you spend so long practising that there's no time for anything else
- 5 a piano: expensive, difficult to play, not sexy
 b violin: notoriously difficult
 c maraca: mildly entertaining but only to babies
 d harmonica: you quickly get bored with it
 e drums: very difficult to learn, but people think it's easy and fun
 f guitar: too popular, most people will play it better than you
 g electric accordion: anti-social
 h saxophone: playing it in public may destroy your credibility
- 6 Brass instruments (e.g. French horn) – if you like making rude noises. And the saxophone – if you really do learn to play well.
- 7 The drummer attacked someone who came up to him, and there was a fight.

C

This exercise draws attention to some of the vocabulary in the passage. Make sure everyone has time to **highlight** the words, as only this can focus on the use of the words in context. Just matching the words and phrases is not enough.

ANSWERS

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| grudge | = <i>dislike</i> |
| syndrome | = <i>condition</i> |
| maudlin | = <i>self-pitying</i> |
| endeavour | = <i>effort</i> |
| be misled | = <i>get the wrong idea</i> |
| physical co-ordination | = <i>control of one's movements</i> |
| nuance | = <i>subtle variation</i> |
| unruffled equanimity | = <i>perfect calmness</i> |
| charisma | = <i>charm and magnetism</i> |