Model students

From egg cartons and sweet boxes to plastic sticks filled with glitter, string teachers around the world have found ingenious ways to teach violin without a violin. JONATHAN GOVIAS looks at how effective such tools can be for developing young children's skills and enthusiasm

IN 1998, EARLY IN MY TENURE AS MUSIC DIRECTOR of the Calcutta Orchestra in India, I joined the orchestra manager on a trip to our local luthier, an outfit by the name of Mondal Brothers. On the way to their workshop, I asked the manager why the orchestra used this particular establishment. 'They are the best,' he said, simply. When I asked what made them the best, he responded, 'No matter how badly a violin is broken or smashed, if you have all the pieces, they can put it back together.'

'What happens if you don't have all the pieces?'

'They have some pretty good violins made of mango wood.'

On a later hearing, those same mango violins would make me reconsider the adage that something is always better than nothing. But in a country where the average monthly wage is £43, even the cost of a Chinese-made student violin can be a significant barrier, equivalent in terms of Western purchasing power to the price of a turn-of-the-century instrument by an anonymous French or Italian maker. Under these circumstances it is not always prudent, let alone possible, to place an instrument in the hands of a beginner. But while the idea of teaching violin without a violin may in some instances have its roots in good sense and financial realities, there are pedagogical considerations as well. A classical stringed instrument is an extraordinarily intimidating piece of equipment. Not only does it lack the instant sonic gratification and comforting intonation of the piano, but to the novice it can be an extremely uncomfortable and awkward object to hold, sometimes disastrously so. It's not just the risk of mishandling or dropping it: getting students to adopt the necessary contortions of hand and limb to hold instrument and bow properly is a challenge in itself, so sometimes the best way to teach a beginner is to start without either. Accordingly, teachers have been quite ingenious in devising equipment and techniques to ease transitions to the instrument.

'EQUIPMENT' IN THIS CASE might be an exaggeration, considering that one of the most common – and primitive – examples is the egg-carton violin. This is exactly what it sounds like: an egg carton or similar box with a ruler taped to it to approximate a fingerboard. Lacking strings, bridge, head and other refinements, it was pioneered by Shinichi Suzuki as part of his efforts to engage the extremely young without frustrating or overwhelming them. Susan Jarvis, violin instructor at Boston's New England Conservatory and leader of the Suzuki programme at the institution's preparatory school, explains: 'Dr Suzuki was the first to teach tiny, tiny students. You have to

▲ Children in a Heart of Los Angeles music programme show off their cardboard violins

PHOTO: MATHEW IMAGING

remember he was dealing with two- to three-year-olds.' For such an age group, the egg carton offers a rough facsimile of the size and outline of the instrument, without the weight or fragility. Most of Jarvis's students are between four and five years old, by which time they have the motor skills to be able to depress strings, but she has still found egg cartons useful. 'I've used them twice. Once was with my best-ever student, who was 27 months old when she started, and the other was with a child who had just turned 3 and didn't have much muscle tone. Many roads lead to Rome, and using a box is just one of the roads. People take that path to ensure the posture is good, to master those steps and ensure the instrument isn't broken.'

Posture, position and safety are recurrent themes, but the idea of incremental learning – starting simply and gradually adding sophistication – is equally important for the right hand too. 'I don't use a box violin, but I use a pretend bow,' adds Jarvis. 'I start by teaching bow hold with a pencil. The student then graduates to holding a clear Plexiglas wand filled with oil and sparkles, which is about the same weight and thickness as a bow. When the hold is good, I give them the real bow.'

It's a sentiment that's echoed on the other side of the continent. Rachel Fabulich is on the faculty at the Pasadena Conservatory, and although she starts her violin and viola students on a box variant, she offers almost exactly the same perspective on the bow, with some additional reasoning. 'If I hand them the bow right away they develop tension in their hand, and it's hard to get that tension to release. I can teach them the hand frame on simple objects that they don't fear. Then when I teach them the bow they know the shape and they can easily make the bow hold without that tension coming in.' As for using boxes, she says: 'I would take six months on the box teaching them rhythms, postures. For a younger child, repetition is so essential. It's nice to have that prior step, and after that introduction the violin itself is a motivating tool.'

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROTO-VIOLINS as a teaching tool was not confined to Suzuki's innovative work in Japan. Some 30 years ago, on the opposite side of the Pacific, instructors working in Venezuela's El Sistema were desperately trying to figure out how to provide instruments for classes that were vastly oversubscribed. Their quick-fix solution: to have the students make their own out of papier-mâché. The logic was simple and nearly identical to Suzuki's. The students would learn basic instrumental care and positioning, and the very process of constructing their own teaching aids would involve them further. Since those early days the practice has evolved, and now instructors incorporate songs ▷

A student in Goa uses a plywood mock-violin to practise posture

Basic fittings and 'strings' make this cardboard violin very sophisticated

'The kids were so excited when they got their real instruments – there was a sense of "Wow, we really earnt it"'

NIKKI SHORTS

and routines, finishing with concerts using these materials, to reinforce the basic concepts. Although necessity was the original mother of this invention, the so-called 'paper orchestra' continues to this day for pedagogical and not financial reasons, and has been adopted by a number of other groups of similar social purpose.

Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA), a community sports and cultural centre, made the strategic decision to start with the 'paper orchestra' concept for the music programme it launched in autumn 2010. At HOLA a mix of first- and fourth-graders were given a very sophisticated proto-violin (complete with fingerboard, tailpiece, bridge and yarn 'strings'), designed by the art faculty, printed on heavy-gauge cardboard and pre-assembled by the facility staff. The students decorated the instruments and were then drilled on instrument care, posture, synchronised bowings, and rest, ready and playing positions over four weeks. The process was integrated with song, the children singing music such as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* in solfège as they moved their bows up and down.

The paper orchestra was undertaken at the behest of HOLA's programme management and represented lead instructor Nikki Shorts's first exposure to the idea in practice. Aside from emphasising the traditional practical components, Shorts also added a significant teamwork element in keeping with the social mandate of the programme. 'If they were doing rest position or play position, I wouldn't let them continue until they worked together as a team,' she says. 'If one person wasn't following along, or not paying attention, or if they weren't behaving well, I'd constantly reiterate that their behaviour would affect their team.'

As for the effectiveness of the paper instruments, Shorts adds: 'The impact wasn't so much about the instrument itself. I guess we were trying to focus on the community and team-building impact. It built this camaraderie among the children.' Could the same then have been accomplished with real instruments from the start? 'The kids were so excited when they got their real instruments later – there was a sense of "Wow, we really earnt it,"' she responds. The concert at the end, in which children sang while miming playing, prompted a final reflection: 'With the real instrument, it's highly possible that there could have been some intimidation on the part of the kids, because they could be using the wrong strings, the wrong notes. They probably wouldn't have been so brave right off the bat with real instruments.'

IS THE SOPHISTICATION of the proto-violin an important consideration? At Child's Play India, an El Sistema-inspired initiative in Goa, American-trained instructor Winston Colaco

Students at Child's Play India start off on a sweet box with a ruler attached

Paper and papier-mâché instruments created by El Sistema students in Venezuela

starts his students on Indian sweet boxes (perhaps as a subtle form of motivation?) with attached rulers. But before giving them real violins, he introduces another step: a solid plywood mock-violin modelled on a type used extensively by Suzuki teachers in Turin, Italy. According to Colaco, 'The wooden model is good for getting a feel of the balancing act involved in playing the real instrument. It comes closest to the real thing in terms of holding [a violin] and acting out the whole posture.' He continues: 'It is important to get the prototypes to weigh as close to a real violin as possible. The ultimate goal of these transitions is to help the child move towards effortlessness as a violinist later.'

Colaco generally prescribes a period of eight weeks on the proto-instruments, but adds, 'I would advocate even longer, but if you sense that the pupil, especially if they are one of the younger ones, starts losing interest, then switch over.' For Colaco, as with Jarvis, it's a question of age. He will start students aged seven and above directly on the wooden mock-violin, reserving the sweet boxes for those younger. And like Shorts, he sees some advantages to the instruments without strings. 'Since the instrument is stringless and devoid of any sound it makes it much easier to focus just on the important, basic technical aspects. A soundless violin is a relief for a beginner student and teacher, for the time being at least.'

Starting to learn violin without a violin is a fairly recent idea, and there are still many accomplished musicians who started on some kind of sounding instrument, even if it wasn't a standard violin. Joel Smirnoff, formerly of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and now president of the Cleveland Institute of Music, recalls that his very first instrument had a plastic body. Still, he might have been better off than his wife. 'She started in the public [non-fee-paying] schools on a public school violin, but they had no bow for her, so for the first six months she played everything pizzicato.' That said, he still identifies some value in the proto-instrument approach. 'There's a coordination problem inherent to all string playing. The left hand has a vertical technique, the right hand has a lateral technique. What a proto-violin will do at a very primitive level is to begin to accustom the brain to the peculiar sensation of playing a string instrument.' Still, that thought comes with some words of caution concerning the soundless versions. 'Well, how long would you want to keep that up? The child wants to be rewarded with sound, even if what they get is just some sense of pitch.' It's a very logical position, but it's not absolute. 'If a child has a passion for music – not just the child but the adult – you'll probably do anything to make it happen.' Whatever your opinion on paper or proto-violins, you can probably agree with that. ■

PHOTOS JONATHAN GOVIAS