

OUR TIMES

'Sometimes I think I'd rather be dead than go to piano class': The children traumatized by the conservatoire

In a demanding discipline, where enjoyment can be secondary, many children drop out of their musical studies, leaving them with a sense of failure. But teaching styles and the schools' attitude to their futures, whether as amateurs or professionals, can make all the difference.

By Ophélie Neiman

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CLAIRE LE MOING

Natan and Anna (children's names have been changed) were eight years old. Both were enrolled at their local music conservatoires, one in Seine-Saint-Denis, just outside Paris, the other in Vitrolles, near Marseille. Natan played the piano and Anna the saxophone. At the back to school meeting for their second year, teachers set clear expectations for the parents: "The child must practise for at least half an hour a day, otherwise there's no point in them coming to class," the piano teacher said. The saxophone teacher warned: "The child must play every day, but for no more than 10 minutes, otherwise you risk putting them off."

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A term later, Anna said that she "really enjoyed playing" and was "always happy" to go to lessons. Natan, after many tears, pulling his hair out through stress and dropping a bombshell – "sometimes I think I'd rather be dead than go to piano lessons" – threw in the towel.

However, he didn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. In fact, he wanted to continue learning, "but without the pressure of the conservatoire". He likes his new teacher, who is actually a student at the Paris Conservatoire. Natan appreciates his encouragement, his explanations and the opportunity to discuss sheet music with him. While his mother was glad she could afford private lessons for him, she felt saddened by how quickly things had fallen apart: "The year before, he liked going, he worked hard and got good feedback. How

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