Tiger Teaching

Lynn Helding

Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications

Part of the Music Pedagogy Commons

Recommended Citation

This is a story about a mother, two daughters, and two dogs. It’s also about Mozart and Mendelssohn, the piano and the violin, and how we made it to Carnegie Hall.¹

So begins Amy Chua’s now infamous 2011 memoir, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, whose debut was preceded by an excerpt released in the Wall Street Journal under the provocative headline, “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.”² The book immediately rocketed to berths on bestseller lists around the world, and is currently being translated into thirty languages. In case you are among the seeming handful of people on the planet who have not yet read the article, the book, or the barrage of Tiger Mother response blogs (over 10,000 on the Wall Street Journal website alone), this was her opening salvo:

A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it’s like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I’ve done it. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin.³

In the hailstorm of opinion pieces, letters, blogposts, and roundtable chats that Chua’s book engendered, most were public rebukes of Chua’s harsh child rearing practices (including bleak testimony from products of other Tiger Moms), which law professor Chua herself weirdly admitted “would seem unimaginable—even legally actionable—to Westerners.”⁴ Chua has also taken heat for resuscitating the cliché of the overachieving Asian-American automaton, stoking the fires of parental anxiety over the college admissions process, and feeding Americans’ unease over China’s emerging economy.

Despite marketing her book as a “parenting memoir,” numerous pages in Chua’s small volume are taken up with detailed descriptions of her daughters’ music lessons (piano for Sophia, violin for Lulu), and their daily practice sessions. In fact, three entire pages are devoted to unedited examples
of the daily practice directives that Chua wrote up by the dozens. These are measure-by-measure practice instructions, not sticky love notes of encouragement ("I know you can do it!), so popular by today’s parenting norms. So the ubiquitous presence of music in Chua’s book—music lessons, music practicing, music competitions—should make it required reading for those of us who teach music, and doubly so for those whose clientele is under eighteen.

Thus I find it quite strange that, as I write this column on the eve of Chua’s one-year publication anniversary, I have yet to come across a published reflection on *Tiger Mother* by any musician or music teacher with a national profile. The only response that came close was “Musicians Debate the Merit of Tiger Mother’s Parenting Methods.” Despite this headline, and the author’s assertion that the book “is about as controversial in the classical music world as it is in parenting circles,” only two musicians were actually interviewed for the article, and at that, separately; thus, there was no “debate.” It was padded out by sad details from the already published biographies of two Asian musical prodigies, Chinese pianist Lang Lang (raised by a Tiger Father), and Japanese violinist Midori, who suffered from anorexia nervosa. As for controversy “in the classical music world,” I have seen none. Besides, no controversy could equal the rage expressed in “parenting circles” over Chua’s extreme child-rearing methods, which has since overwhelmed the national response valve, and shut it down altogether due to Tiger Mother burnout. So at the risk of adding yet another reflection on *Tiger Mother*, channeling Chua’s book introduction, here is mine.

This column is written by a singer, teacher, and mother of two (three, if you count the dog). While it is about Mozart (but the child, not the music), it is not about Mendelssohn, nor the piano, nor the violin per se. But it is about children, teens, and the instruments they study. And lest it seem that this column is going to cover only the precollege population, please read on. The transition from early to middle adulthood has now been delayed by almost a decade, so that thirty really is the new twenty. By default, that makes the twenties, at least for many young people in America, a period of extended adolescence in which parents and families play a significant role.

This column is also about who pays for music lessons (in more ways than one), and what role desire plays in the care and feeding of both the student and the instrument. It is also about such cultural myths as self-esteem and inborn talent, and what those myths have now engendered: hothouse children and the helicopter parents who tend them. For along with the public consternation, Chua also generated a collective soul-searching.

When an entire nation reacts so strongly to something, you know you have hit a nerve. And Amy did. She hit us where it hurts, questioning our parenting, our kids’ educational achievement and our nation’s ability to compete globally in today’s world.

*Tiger Mother* contains all the ingredients for a bracing dip into a cultural storm, for what it might tell us about our own teaching styles, and how we negotiate between our teen students and their parents. While both teachers and parents may have a young person’s best interests at heart, how teachers address those interests in light of a host of considerations—cultural norms, individual family differences, child-rearing beliefs, and the wishes of the teen students themselves—demands, at the very least, a diplomatic response. But current research allows us to frame an enlightened one as well.

And about how the Chuas “made it to Carnegie Hall”? Yes (surprise, surprise), the answer is the punch line to the old joke. The price paid for Carnegie Hall was indeed “practice,” but Chua wasn’t kidding when she used the “we” word. Despite the fact that it was thirteen year old Sophia Chua-Rubinfeld who took the stage, alone, in her charcoal satin floor-length gown, it was Tiger Mother Chua who supervised every minute of the practice hours required to get there. Why? Chua’s blunt explanation: “Children on their own never want to work.”

**PARENTING STYLES**

In my current occupation as a college professor, most of my students are eighteen years old or over, so I rarely communicate with parents, and in fact, I am forbidden to do so by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), unless my student gives his written permission. But students under eighteen are not afforded this privacy under the law. So when a voice teacher takes on an under-age client, she takes on his parents by...
extension; thus, it is enormously important to assess by which one of three basic parenting styles (as designated by social psychologists) the teen singer is being raised.

Dealing with the authoritarian style (high levels of control and low levels of warmth), and its polar opposite, the permissive style (low levels of control and high levels of warmth), each holds particular challenges to both student and teacher. Amy Chua’s parenting style is firmly ensconced in the former, while permissive “liberal Western parents, who [are] weak-willed and indulgent” are the object of her disdain.¹¹

Most experts agree that the third path, the authoritative style, which features high levels of control (such as strict boundaries, duties to family chores, and high expectations for achievement), leavened by equally high levels of warmth, will produce the most favorable outcomes. But most people who have raised kids know that it is precisely the daily judgment calls between strictness and leniency that make the job so demanding. And in this era of the so-called “Narcissism Epidemic,” many fear that they haven’t been strict enough.

“Western parents,” Ms. Chua writes, “have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement and try and persuade themselves that they’re not disappointed in how their kids turned out.” With that, she really has our number. At the present moment in Western parenting, we believe that our children are special and entitled, but we do not have the guts or the tools to make that reality true for them. This explains, I think, a large part of the fascination with Ms. Chua’s book.¹²

**THE BATTLE OF THE DONKEY AND THE TIGER**

Despite the fact that Chua is a professor at Yale Law School and, we may presume, a pretty busy woman on any given day, she describes regularly dashing from her office at midafternoon (vaguely citing “meetings”), in order to retrieve her daughters early from their private school for megapractice sessions at home. Regarding her insistence that Sophia and Lulu practice more than the measly thirty minutes wanly accepted by soft “Western” parents, Chua bragged, “For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It’s hours two and three that get tough.”¹³ This partially explains why Chua recounts so much yelling, screaming, and shaming during practice sessions, particularly at the recalcitrant Lulu, who did not share her older sister’s talent for quiet obedience. Indeed, much of Amy Chua’s public condemnation has to do with her liberal use of such epithets as “garbage” slung at her kids, though a few of Chua’s defenders cite her “brutal honesty” and her “willingness to share her struggles.”¹⁴ But it is her brutal honesty that has made some accuse her of outright child abuse. Exhibit “A” is the now infamous tale of “The Little White Donkey,” in which seven year old Lulu explodes in frustration over the piano piece of the same name. Tiger Mom orders a return to the bench and a threat to cease being “lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic,” or she will haul the child’s dollhouse to the Salvation Army if the piece is anything less than “perfect” by the next day. Tiger Mom is briefly rebuked by Dad, who is immediately batted away for his spinelessness. Tiger Mom forces the seven year old to practice “right through dinner into the night, and I wouldn’t let Lulu get up, not for water, not even to go to the bathroom.”¹⁵ As one critic archly noted,

I know a lot of social workers who would be very interested to learn of a 7-year-old forced, as Lulu once was, to sit at the piano, apparently for hours, without water or even a bathroom break.¹⁶

Whether or not this story shocks you, one thing about it is certain: this is one high-stakes, high-stress family. Extracurricular music lessons are purchased by parents who can afford them, and in our present economy, the money usually comes from the combined income of two parents, or from families funded by one super-wage earner in a high-powered occupation. In either scenario, the parents are often stressed by their own pressures plus the after-school schedule of their offspring (sports, music and dance lessons, volunteer work, tutoring sessions, paid employment, and religious activities), all abetted by the chauffeuring talents of an adult driver—usually, a parent. How many of us have received into our studios our underage students as they flit between multiple after-school activities?

Even though parents as high-octane as the Chua-Rubenfelds may be fulfilled by their careers and the monetary rewards that come with them, the price paid for such a lifestyle is almost certainly family-wide stress. Stress is as ubiquitous in Chua’s book as music and yelling, but what is missing is any account of the musical desires and motivations of her daughters, except when
Lulu turns thirteen and begins a concerted campaign of defiance.

Readers wonder what will happen to these hothouse children when they eventually grow up. How will they feel about the hours of enforced practice, and the laundry list of banned pleasures that many American parents view as normal rites of childhood? Opinion writer David Brooks branded Chua a “wimp” for not allowing her daughters to test their mettle in one of the most fearsomely competitive and cognitively demanding teen arenas of all: the sleepover.17

So far, only Chua’s eldest has crossed the Rubicon into adulthood. Sophia had generated months of media speculation last summer after it became known on the blogosphere that she was weighing twin Ivy offers: Dad’s alma mater (Yale), or Mom’s (Harvard). When she chose the latter, the media had a field day with cute headlines about the “Tiger Cub,” but Asian-American writers glumly noted that public reaction to the news (See? Harsh parenting works!) would embolden yet another generation of Tiger Parents to push their kids past the breaking point, citing higher suicide rates among young Asian-American females as one caution.18 And what of Amy Chua’s minimum two-hour practice requirements for her daughters? Let’s take a look at the numbers.

**AMOUNT OF PRACTICE: THE RULES OF TEN**

K. Anders Ericsson, the “expert” in expertise studies, discovered that if you want to become at expert at anything, ten thousand hours of practice is required (Figure 1).19

By the age of 20, the best musicians had spent over 10,000 hours practicing, which averages 2,500 and 5,000 hours more than two less-accomplished groups of musicians at the same academy, respectively.20

He also corroborated what researchers before him had noticed: that it takes about a decade of committed practice to accomplish this milestone. Both the “10,000 hour Practice Rule” and “The Ten Year Rule” have been conflated, and have received a lot of media attention lately. But one factor got lost in the hype. Ericsson discovered that while ten years’ worth of practicing the activity creates expertise, it is the **quality** of that practice that really matters. Ericsson dubbed this

---

**FIGURE 1. The Math for the Ten Year Rule.**

- 10,000 hours of practice over a period of 10 years, which equals:
  - 1,000 hours per year, which equals:
  - approximately 20 hrs per week, which equals:
  - approximately 2 hours and 45 minutes per day × 7 days a week.

*based upon the assumption of practice every day for ten years, or 365 days x 10 years.

---

variable “deliberate practice,” which he defined as “an effortful activity designed to improve individual target performance.”21 Also lost in the transmission from the academic to the popular press was the opinion that different activities require different levels of commitment; according to Ericsson,

... the number ten is not magical. In fact, the number of years of intense training required to become an internationally acclaimed performer differs across domains. For example, elite musicians (disregarding the biased standards for child prodigies) need closer to 20 to 30 years of training and often peak when they are around 30 to 40 years old.22

No one would argue with the observation that the practice requirements for an Olympic snowboarder are quite different than those necessary for a concert pianist. But while both mandate hours of deep practice (and nerve, to boot), the former requires quick responses to changing physical conditions, while piano performance requires a rock-solid technique that can be trusted to deliver the same result every time. In one way, this is the difference between improvisation and the re-creation of an extant piece of music that is at the core of classical music performance. This partially explains why it can be so hard to convince a teenaged garage band crooner to take voice lessons; such activity requires no technique, nor hours of practice, just a fearless willingness to “improv.” The notion that technique may expand creative horizons can be a hard sell, but the additional requirement for hours of dedicated practice can render the sales pitch dead on arrival to a teenager. But Tiger Mom gave her kids no choice about music lessons, not even about which instruments they would play. If that seems draconian, just consider how different your own studio dynamics might be if all your teen clients adhered to this philosophy, as stated in Sophia’s open letter of thanks to her mother: “Everybody seems to think art is
FIGURE 2. Mozart and the Ten Year Rule

- regular practice begun age 3
- practice 3 hours a day × 7 days a week equals 21 hours per week, which equals
- app. 1,100 hours per year, which equals
- 3,300 practice hours by age 6
- 6,600 practice hours by age 9
- 9,900 practice hours by age 12

spontaneous. But Tiger Mom, you taught me that even creativity takes effort. 23

As Ericsson found, to excel in top-tier music performance demands 10,000 hours of practice just for starters, as a down payment to a second and third decade of the same; granted, those 20,000 or 30,000 hours are gained “on the job,” which is no surprise to musicians who have dedicated their lives to the rigorous level of practice that elite performance demands. But such people inhabit the uppermost echelons of the music field. Thanks to the spread of the Ten Year Rule throughout the popular press, readers are picking up on the idea that they could log half, or two thirds of those 10,000 hours. If you do the math, that means about two hours a day are de rigueur to be very, very good at something, and about one hour a day if you’re willing to settle for the status achieved by all the children of Garrison Keillor’s mythic Lake Wobegone: “above average.”

The few performers who hit the 10,000 practice hour mark before a decade has passed are often dubbed “geniuses” or “prodigies,” though in almost all such cases, deliberate practice commenced in childhood. As Ericsson found, a regular practice routine of 3 hours a day × 7 days a week equals 21 hours per week, which equals 210 hours per month, which equals 2,520 hours per year, which equals 6,300 practice hours by age 9, which equals 9,450 practice hours by age 12. This was almost certainly the case with iconic musical genius/prodigy Mozart, as estimated by the late Michael Howe (Figure 2). Based on these estimates, by the time Leopold Mozart packed off his children on the first of many performance tours in July 1763, the seven year old Wolfgang would have already completed around 4,400 practice hours. By the time the tours ended in 1768, the twelve year old Wolfgang would have come close to 10,000 hours of practice—that is, if he had stuck to three hours per day; but there is every reason to believe that Tiger Father Leopold would have required more than three hours per day in order to ready the children for performances at court.

Research confirms, over and over again, that practice is the most important variable in motor learning, and thanks to the work of Ericsson and others, we now know much about both the quantity and quality of that practice. It goes without saying, to this readership at least, that practice requirements differ among instruments, and must also be calibrated according to age and ability. While Chua’s two to four hour practice sessions for a teen singer could spell fatigue, if not harm, there are myriad and creative ways to practice short of simply “doing it.” The value of watching and listening to expert performers is, I think, undervalued as a practice technique, and in this digital era, new resources abound that were unavailable even a decade ago.

And yet questions remain regarding the roots of expertise. What is it beside practice that accounts for expert, and even “above average” performance? If the “Talent Account” continues to be demystified as largely a “Talent Myth,” then what other factors go into the making of a dedicated performer? Let us consider one last tantalizing bit of evidence from expertise studies.

HELICOPTER PARENTS

With all due respect to the accomplishments of Sophia Chua-Rubenfeld, who has been tagged as a prodigy by—Guess who!—the top two groups of experts (prodigies and the A minus list), all have one critical childhood component in common: “early parent-initiated activity,” which is just a fancy euphemism for Soccer Moms, Hockey Dads, and Helicopter Parents. 24 Study after study of elite performers in the domains of sports, chess, dance, and music have uncovered “remarkable support by their parents.”

The parents of the future elite performers were even found to spend large sums of money for teachers and equipment, and to devote considerable time to escorting their child to training and weekend competitions. In some cases, the performers and their families even relocate to be closer to the chosen teacher and the training facilities. 25

And despite Mother Chua’s demure protestations that she “can’t take any credit,” for Sophia’s acceptance to both Harvard and Yale, her claim, “I don’t think my parenting had anything to do with it—I think Sophia did it 100% herself,” rings completely false when compared...
with the evidence for “early parent-initiated activity.”\textsuperscript{26}

Behind every prodigy, it seems, is a Helicopter Parent. And elite performers themselves know this; one study found that they rated at least one of their parents as “the most influential person in their career.”\textsuperscript{27}

Whether that influence was overwhelmingly positive or negative is an individual story in every case. The mother of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps believed in her son’s abilities even after frustrated grade school teachers pronounced him incapable of focusing. In consultation with her young son, they mutually agreed to replace his ADHD medication with hours of stringent swimming practice. However, Debbie Phelps was no stage mother.

I’ve been there not to dictate or guide. I’m there to listen to what he wants to do and try to help him problem solve and make a wise decision . . . Every time Michael gets on the blocks, he has a goal for himself, and he knows what he wants to do . . . I don’t set those goals, and I’m a very strong advocate of [the idea that] I’m the parent, not the coach or the agent or whatever there is to be.\textsuperscript{28}

Ms. Phelps’s hands-off creed is in stark contrast with the famously pushy parents of such sports stars as Tiger Woods, Jennifer Capriati, and Andre Agassi, or the emotionally abusive father of pianist Lang Lang. Amy Chua’s estimation of her daughter’s eventual piano master, Wei-Yi Yang, gives the reader the impression that the Tiger Mother was at last tamed to the back seat.

... all I could think was, This man is a genius. I am a barbarian. Prokofiev is a genius. I am a cretin. Wei-Yi and Prokofiev are great. I am a cannibal.\textsuperscript{29}

However, such humility dissolved on the eve of fourteen year old Sophia’s Carnegie Hall debut. Like so many stage parents before her, Chua’s own need to “make sure Sophia’s performance was flawless” trumped Master Wei-Yi’s advice to allow the kid to remain calm and focused, and not to tire her fingers. “Contrary to everyone’s advice, we practiced until almost 1 a.m.”\textsuperscript{30} Who was in charge in this scenario? Given the power structure as described in Chua’s book, it was not the child.

The negative consequences of overbearing parents are easy to predict; anxiety disorders and repetitive strain injuries top the list. But permissive parents who refuse to enforce practice rules along with music study create problems of a different kind for their children. For those who fear that deliberate practice takes all the “fun” out of music making, consider this maxim from expertise expert Ericsson:

The requirement for concentration sets deliberate practice apart from both mindless, routine performance and playful engagement, as the latter two types of activities would merely strengthen the current mediating cognitive mechanisms, rather than modify them to allow increases in the level of performance.\textsuperscript{31}

In other words, fun is fun, but it isn’t deep practice. And worse, if your child diddles on the fiddle, or mindlessly “runs over” an aria, he actually fortifies his poor habits by stewing in his own abilities. And when those abilities are weak to begin with, as they are for children and teens at the beginning of training, a downward spiral of failure is created. It is not for lack of “fun” that so many eager elementary school musicians are barely playing their rental instruments by their first year’s end; it is most likely for lack of “deliberate practice.” For those who still insist that music should be about “fun,” Chua has a rejoinder.

\textbf{“NOTHING IS FUN UNTIL YOU’RE GOOD AT IT.”}

One of Chua’s central theses is this:

What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you’re good at it. To get good at anything, you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences.\textsuperscript{32}

I would emend this as follows: Things in which you are interested become more fun relative to the ability you acquire. And since I hold a personal aversion to the word “fun” when applied to anything besides unadulterated recreation, I would further substitute an adjective such as “intriguing” or “exciting.” In any case, Chua has a point—up to a point. But her “until” and its intimation of arrival, and of finality, is troubling to me as a teacher. Honestly, practicing is rarely “fun,” but given that the vast majority of musicians’ time is spent practicing, rather than performing, it makes little sense to engage in it if it does not repay in joy, or pleasure, or engagement during its actual pursuit. For the same reason, it is unsus-
tainable to find no reward in any musical pursuit not entrained to praise, applause, or career advancement.

And really, even this Tiger maxim is somewhat disingenuous, given that "fun" as a goal is nowhere apparent in her account; there is only winning, earning A grades, and being the best. Amid the perpetual quest for perfection, the lack of joy is just one of the troubling deficiencies in Chua's musical goals for her kids (the others being expression, communal music-making, and sharing your talents for the good of the whole, like those school plays in which her kids aren't allowed to participate). The circular thinking that Chua's Tiger maxim engenders goes something like this:
• The things I am bad at are not fun, so I should quit.
• The things I admire (like language facility), or enjoy (like singing), but at which I am only merely competent, I should quit, because I was taught that "Nothing is fun until you're good at it."

But isn't Tiger Mom's maxim supposed to engender a stricter work ethic, so that "I am only competent at singing and I should quit" becomes "I am only competent at singing and therefore I can work harder so that someday it will be fun"? Yes, it is supposed to.

In a previous column, I described the work of social psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck, whose research has illuminated the dark sides of such stubborn fixtures in the parental tool kit as the "talent account," and the dogma of praise. Dweck found that emphasizing a child's "talent" fosters a "fixed mindset," rather than a preferred "growth mindset," which emphasizes the child's ability to work hard at a task and improve. Children who have been reared on beliefs in their "talent" along with big dollops of praise, tend to regard effort as unnecessary, due to the magic of their natural gifts. They resist stepping out of their comfort zone to actually try, fail, and learn. Thus, unexposed to failure, they develop no strategies to respond to it in the future. This offers a powerful caution for those children labeled "prodigy," "genius," or Wunderkind. Adult life is filled with trial and failure, except for those who are pathologically averse to it. All too often, the precociously gifted, like the once twelve year old Charlotte ("Voice of an Angel") Church, do not successfully transition to adulthood.

So in this arena at least, it appears that the Tiger Mom may have conferred a "growth mindset" on her cubs—as long as it isn't poisoned by the impossible pursuit of perfection. Jennifer Crocker, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, has questioned the "growth mindset" as a panacea, and has theorized that in one subgroup of students, the "growth mindset" could actually cause dysfunctional behavior. Crocker has discovered there are variations within the "growth mindset," with one such variant group being students who, while believing that they can work harder and improve, harbor a deep connection between self-worth and perfect performance. In experiments, these students tended to behave in disturbingly similar ways as "fixed mindset" students. For example, when given the opportunity, they avoided practicing, or allowed distractions to interrupt them (both of which could later be blamed for poor performance). Thus, just like "fixed mindset" students, they "self-handicapped." The researchers concluded that a "growth mindset" may be fairly worthless unless students divest themselves of the linkages between effort, perfection, and worth.

Critics have branded Chua the ultimate narcissist, one who exults in her childrens' victories only as an extension of herself, and whose concern for others ends at her family's front door. They openly worry about her daughters' mental health in the face of her overweening demand for perfection. Crocker has some advice for perfectionists:

A glib way of putting it is to say, "Get over yourself" . . . If you want to stop acting in self-defeating ways, then think about how your schoolwork will help people outside of yourself.

**"DESIRABLE DIFFICULTIES" AND "GROWTH MINDSETS"**

In the end, Chua's tale of tough love leaves one vast question unanswered, and that is one of motivation. We may well wonder what would cause a three year old to want to sit still long enough to practice the piano. Is there such a thing as inherent motivation, something one is simply born with? Or is it egged on by an external force, like sibling rivalry? Is it the product of incessant browbeating by an overbearing parent, in which case, the motivator is simply a desire to avoid punishment? And in the latter case, do some children possess an inner strength to absorb that negative energy (like Sophia who stated, "Early on, I decided to be an easy child to raise"), while other children crumple, like her sister Lulu?
Lynn Heiding

There are many theories about motivation, including the “arousal levels” that favor learning. It appears that an intermediate arousal level is best, a sort of Goldilocks approach that falls midway between “Sing or die” and “I think I might want to, maybe.” Teachers and parents can stoke arousal levels by demanding exactly what students are capable of producing at any time along their learning path. Too little arousal, and nothing is accomplished; but too much arousal can make learners so anxious that the “fight-or-flight” defense response is stoked. This teaching/learning philosophy was beautifully summed up by psychologist Robert Bjork as the doctrine of “Desirable Difficulties,” which he defined as “conditions that introduce difficulties for the learner.”

Bjork says that these difficulties are obstacles that slow down the rate at which the learner absorbs information. This process has been shown to enhance long-term retention—in other words, learning itself. But Bjork also stresses the importance of the “desirability” factor, noting that difficulties can quickly become undesirable if thrown in the path of the learner too soon, or too late. Of course, making these judgment calls, and instilling motivation itself, constitute the “art” part of teaching.

But we cannot concern ourselves with only the instillation of motivation in children; motivation must be sustained by the child himself as he progresses through adolescence to adulthood. There is no standard formula for this, but Dweck’s research on the “growth mindset” offers some intriguing considerations. Dweck posits that when teachers and parents instill the belief that ability and intelligence are flexible, rather than fixed, this inculcates a sense of control in the youngster, which in turn can seed a love of learning for its own sake. The catch, as Jennifer Crocker has noted, is that the “growth mindset” should not, in itself, be wedded to ego.

For all the hyperbole surrounding Chua’s child-rearing techniques, what she has to say about the sustainability of motivation is spot on.

As a parent, one of the worst things you can do for your child’s self-esteem is to let them give up. On the flip side, there’s nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn’t.

Building self-esteem on praise without effort (the “Talent Account”), or praise about effort only, with no reward for actual results, creates a house of cards; it is simply unsustainable. Constructing an obstacle course of “Desirable Difficulties” for our students and our children in order to engender a “growth mindset” is harder work, for sure. But a “growth mindset” is what young musicians need when their parents aren’t present, either during their practice sessions, performances, or first encounters as young adults with college music teachers. And the gift doesn’t stop there. A wise teacher can take up the hand that is dealt her, so to speak, and further the process so that musicians can become the kind of lifelong, self-sustaining learners our art demands. When parents and teachers work in tandem, a “growth mindset” bequeathed to their student is a lasting legacy.

NOTES


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Chua, Battle Hymn, 162.


15. Chua, Battle Hymn, 62.
19. Figures 1 and 2 are based on the work of Michael Howe, Genius Explained (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.
22. Ericsson, 691.
25. Ericsson, 693.
27. Ericsson, 695.
30. Ibid., 138.

32. Chua, Battle Hymn, 29.
35. Ibid.
38. Chua, Battle Hymn, 62.

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
And let the young Lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound!  
We in thought will join your throng.  
Ye that pipe and ye that play.  
Ye that through your hearts to-day  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death.  
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

From "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood;"  
William Wordsworth