

RICHARD MORRISON

The music teachers who made me who I am (and still haunt me)

With music being downgraded in many state schools, teachers are working in the most unappreciated circumstances — yet they still manage to be inspiring



Richard Morrison's teacher guided him kindly through the demoralising early phases of learning the organ
CHRIS MCANDREW FOR THE TIMES; GETTY IMAGES

[Richard Morrison](#) | Thursday October 05 2023, 6.45pm, The Times

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Championed by that sparky young composer and broadcaster Jack Pepper, the excellent Music for Youth organisation has a special focus this year on music teachers. They will be celebrated by 3,000 young musicians at [two Proms in the Royal Albert Hall](#) (November 14 and 15) and in a medley of songs written by Pepper himself about his own piano teacher. And celebrated too, it's hoped, by thousands of adult musicians, professional and amateur, sharing online their memories of the teachers who nurtured their nascent talents and encouraged them to embark on lifelong journeys of musical discovery. You can tell us about your great teachers at the bottom of this article.

It's a good time to raise the profile of music teachers — by which I really mean that it's a terrible time. Music has been disastrously downgraded in many state schools, something I won't bang on about again for fear of sounding like a stuck LP (“what's a stuck LP, Grandad?”). It's enough to say that many music teachers are working in the most demoralising, underresourced and unappreciated circumstances, yet still managing to inspire their students. That makes a campaign of recognition for them even more timely.



Jack Pepper champions Music for Youth, a charity for young musicians and audiences across the UK
ALICK COTTERILL

So let me start the ball rolling by dredging up 50-year-old memories of the three teachers who turned me on to music, to such an extent that I have spent my entire adult life doing it or writing about it. The first, Colin, was my teacher at school. It was, and is, a fine boys' school in north London but in my day it had one big flaw — sadly still prevalent in many schools today. The head teacher saw no value in studying music as a serious A-level subject. He allowed us to perform in the school choir and orchestra but felt that music was, at best, a pleasant hobby that had no place in the academic curriculum.

Against this background of disapproval from on high, Colin — still in his twenties — operated like a guerrilla fighter. Boys who loved music would be invited to his home, his wife would cook us lasagne, and Colin would put on record after record and contextualise them so vividly that I still find his phrases popping into my head when I write my reviews. And so, surreptitiously, he got me through A-level music without the school knowing (I sat the exam privately).

The head teacher was annoyed when, instead of applying to do English at Oxford, I chose to study music at the other place. I recall the words “gambling with your future” being used. Soon after that, however, Colin was allowed to teach A-level music officially, and with great success for decades.

And my third great music teacher? I've already mentioned him. My dad taught music in tough London comprehensives for 30 years. He never lost heart. He would organise massive school productions of musicals involving hundreds of students, even the stroppiest troublemakers. Fagin's gang in *Oliver!* can rarely have been portrayed so realistically.

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He also conducted a very good brass band — probably the best in London at that time, although in national brass band contests (the most ferocious musical competitions I've ever witnessed) we could never match the brilliance of the northern colliery and mills bands.

Being in London, though, had its advantages. Teenage brass virtuosos came down from the north to study trumpet at the Royal Academy of Music, but they liked to keep up their brass band playing while in the capital so they played with us. For me, a far-from-virtuosic second trombonist, it was an incredible education just sitting near them. For years afterwards I used to see them, perhaps a little plumper and balder, popping up in the brass sections of top British orchestras. In fact not long ago I interviewed Martyn Brabbins, the music director of English National Opera. "Are you Don Morrison's son?" he said. "I played trombone in his band when I was a student."

My dad retired to Eastbourne, the way one does, but the desire to bring music to people never left him. He became the afternoon tea pianist at the Grand Hotel, entertaining dozens of dotting admirers each day, none younger than 75. He was still doing it on the day he died. What a great way to go: useful and adored to the end; making music almost until his last breath.

Do you remember an inspirational music teacher? Share your memories below and enter the Music for Youth competition to celebrate music teachers [here](#)



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Do you remember an inspirational music teacher? Share your memories with us.

Your name

Age