

Where has the British classical music talent gone?

There are no homegrown soloists at this year's Yehudi Menuhin Violin Competition. Jessica Duchon on a worrying trend.

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The Yehudi Menuhin Violin Competition in Austin, Texas, is about to reach its grand finale. It was founded in 1983 by Menuhin himself, is held every two years in a different city, and for three decades has helped to launch exciting soloists onto the international scene. One of the greatest violinists of his day, Menuhin lived for years in Britain. But this time not a single UK contestant treads his competition's boards.

Where has the British talent gone? The issue is complex and emotive, according to the competition's artistic director, the Welsh pianist Gordon Back, who was formerly Menuhin's accompanist. "In the UK we specialise less at a young age," he says. "Perhaps there's a lack of dedication and parental support - you have to start very young on the violin. By 18 it's too late to change; it's the early teaching that is vital. The kids from Asia are incredibly well set up technically in their early years."

The reason is not hard to trace: "Musicians who studied in America with some of the world's best professors go back to Asia to teach because the fees are good and they're respected," says Back.

But other cultural matters come into play, too: "Is it in the British character to stand out and be a soloist?" Back asks. "We have the same issues in sport. I'm not sure there's the desire to be the best, to go out and win."

Even if the desire does exist, our systems often crush the joy out of music-making. Graded exams, for instance, can actually lower youngsters' aspirations. "Everything has to fit into a box, so it narrows you completely and squashes creativity," Back suggests.

Meanwhile, many parents in the UK fail to grasp how much work it takes to become a fine musician; pushing children to practise an instrument for several hours every day has become unfashionable here. Elsewhere, "tiger moms" take the opposite view.

The competition's pre-selection jury, listening "blind" to recordings of 275 applicants from 27 countries, selected 42 participants without knowing their identities. The six applicants from the UK did not match the standard of some from America and the Far East. One contestant is at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey, but hails from the Far East, one of

only two overseas applicants studying in Britain. In 2004, 10 British youngsters applied and two were accepted; 19 non-British applicants were studying in the UK and two got in.

Today's dwindling statistics are sobering, and the lack of support for young UK musicians goes right to the top. The government has stripped state funding from higher education in the arts and humanities; at school level, many cash-strapped local authorities have cut back on music services, and in some areas instrumental lessons are now only accessible to those who can afford them, though talent is no respecter of bank accounts. The Menuhin Competition caters for very young applicants, so the dearth of UK contestants could signal the deepening malaise in recent years.

In 2016, to mark Menuhin's centenary, the competition comes to London. Will there be any British entrants? It's worth remembering that the UK's superb results in the 2012 Olympics reflected a substantial investment of time, money and effort in the training of British athletes. Music, like sport, is a global market, but the UK is leaving its young performers woefully ill-equipped to compete. As Back says: "It's as if the rest of the world has moved on and we haven't."

The final of the Yehudi Menuhin Competition takes place in Austin, Texas, on 2 March.
menuhincompetition.org