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it's playback time

Office-based music lessons are providing stress-busting inspiration to City execs.
Emma Crichton-Miller **talks to the new midlife musicians. Portraits by Steve Double.**

About five or six years ago, a change came over a friend of ours. Christopher Edwards, a shipping consultant working in London during the week, with weekends in the country, used to complain bitterly of his enslavement to the City. He was away from his family four nights a week and, with a stressful workload, couldn't even enjoy the theatre or the concerts that had once been the consolation of his London life. Now, however, there was new excitement in his voice. Some weeks he even seemed eager to get back to town. Was he having an affair, we wondered? It all became clear over supper in London. He was indeed in the throes of a new romance – but the object of his affections was not some glamorous City banker, but a Blüthner grand piano and the cupid responsible for igniting his amour was the teacher Richard Meyrick.

Edwards has always loved music. His mother had been very musical and he had sat under the piano while she played. He had had piano lessons from the age of five or six until he smashed his hand playing rugby as a teenager. He had then given up: tempted whenever he saw a piano to play again, but too daunted by the fear of playing badly to risk it. At one point, he had even hired a piano but had been too distressed – realising how much he had forgotten and how little he really knew – to persevere. He would play Christmas carols for friends and help his children practise, but had put anything more ambitious to one side. Then, “I saw this feature

in a regional newspaper. Richard Meyrick sounded a wacky guy, with his motorbike covered in musical notes parked outside the Lloyd's building handing out leaflets.”

Meyrick had set up The Piano Studio in the heart of the City, two minutes from Barbican tube station, in 1998. A much-acclaimed concert pianist with a full recording and recital career, he had contracted throat cancer in 1990. As he was recovering, it occurred to him that there was probably a business to be made from offering lessons to stressed City workers, whether beginners, lapsed child players or even advanced amateurs. It turned out that there was. Within a short space of time he had 50 or 60 clients – two high-court judges, lots of solicitors, QCs, merchant bankers, insurance company directors, derivatives traders, even financial journalists. Now he has a purpose-built studio containing the aforementioned, much-to-be-lusted-after brand-new Blüthner grand. The Blüthner Piano Centre, which sponsors The Piano Studio, also offers its own Berkeley Square showroom for regular concerts – Edwards is currently wrestling with a Scarlatti sonata for the 10th anniversary concert on June 5.

Edwards says that what Meyrick gives him is “the most incredible intellectual and musical stimulation, which I thought I had left behind at university. I have rediscovered the willingness and capacity to learn.” He had taken along a Chopin nocturne for his first lesson, in great trepidation: “We spent the most stimulating 60 minutes taking apart everything. Richard doesn't give any quarter, but he is not destructive. After that my head

was reeling with ideas and exhaustion.”

Just as exhilarating as his musical advice is Meyrick's historical and interpretative wisdom: “He explains why things should be played this or that way.” Edwards practises every day: “Even if I am travelling, I practise the fingering on the table.” Meyrick is deliberately flexible with lessons: “I suggest people book five lessons at a time, each about two or three weeks apart. We don't want lessons to become another cause of stress.” What he is hoping to achieve for his pupils is their independence from him – he gives them practice techniques that mean they can maximise even the most limited time available. That doesn't mean, however, that the process of relearning is entirely stress-free. As Edmund Noon, a derivatives trader with ABN Amro, put it to me: “I certainly don't worry about positions and markets when I'm practising, but it is sometimes quite frustrating.” He has been so motivated, however, by Meyrick's teaching that he sometimes finds himself practising for up to 15 hours a week: “I can tell I'm getting better.”

Unusually for a concert pianist of his distinction, Meyrick teaches absolute beginners. For Richard Hardie, vice-chair of UBS, “My first lesson was literally, ‘This is Middle C.’” He was 55, had found himself with a bit of time and decided to realise a lifelong ambition. His mother had been a student at the Royal College of Music and his youngest daughter is very musical. “The first time I heard a piece of Brahms coming from under my fingers, I was bitten.” Playing the piano even a little bit (“I still find it difficult co-ordinating left and right hands...”) has

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given him an appreciation he did not have before into what it takes to be a concert pianist: "It's not just the technical skill, it's the intense emotional effort..." Although often pressed for time, "even after a hard day's work, to sit at the piano for 20 minutes and make some progress is the most wonderful thing. You just cannot think about anything else for that time." Hardie has been an enthusiastic supporter of UBS's partnership with the London Symphony Orchestra (both won the BP Arts & Business Sustainability Award 2007 for this 10-year relationship) which, besides the flagship UBS and LSO Music Education Centre, has engendered a whole range of activities and events. He has also engineered the arrival of a new Blüthner grand piano into the UBS foyer, as well as helping to organise a music club for UBS employees, which fields both an 80-strong choir and an orchestra. A recent innovation is an in-house music teacher, Carolyn Kotok, who offers lessons in office hours on a silent Yamaha. Hardie is convinced that music "is an extraordinarily powerful way of bringing people together".

UBS is not the only City institution to foster the latent musical talent of its employees. When international law firm Allen & Overy moved its principal London offices to Spitalfields last year it put in three purpose-built music rooms. In its previous offices three empty basement rooms had been gradually taken over, first of all by individuals practising and then by two teachers, Howard Charles and Mark Luther, who had started coming in to teach singing and had ended up running a complete music school. Now called City Music Services, Charles and Luther employ teachers in various instruments and offer Allen & Overy employees lessons in everything from guitar, percussion and tuba to piano, violin and flute. They also offer singing, dance, and speech and presentation classes, and organise the company's choir and regular in-house concert programme.

The rooms have proved a good investment. Partner Don McGown, for instance, had come back from Hong Kong eager to

take up the violin again. What could be more convenient than on-site lessons? "Music is really important to help people get a balance in their lives. If you moved the music room even five minutes further away, you'd lose people." Colleen Keck, another partner, concurs. She learned piano as a child and then gave up: "Your mother says you will regret it, and you do." She has taken lessons now for five years as well as singing in the choir:

"It gives you a big boost. If you have been for a brisk walk you feel energised. It's the same after a music lesson. It's so different, so utterly distracting." McGown adds, "We have found no drop-off in work – people fit their working day around their lesson."

So therapeutic have their lessons proved for pupils that Charles and Luther have begun to provide similar services for other organisations including the prominent law firms Simmons & Simmons and Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer. The key difficulty is finding rooms to play in within the prevailing City architecture of open-plan offices. While silent pianos are one solution, one company based in Piccadilly recently fitted a soundproofed acoustic pod in the middle of the building. Being able to offer music has become a significant carrot for attracting the most able staff. As Charles puts it, "It's only a matter of time before companies see that the benefit is as valuable to employees as health-club membership."

Charles and Luther are insistently inclusive: "People think that unless they've had lessons since the age of five, they can't begin. You can do it at any age." Last year they opened a new centre, Oasis Culture, with purpose-built music rooms in Billingsgate Market. A dance studio will be added later. Here they offer creative respite to anyone from the business community or local residents. The pair have been bowled over by the response: "It was a real eye-opener to realise how important a part of their week it is for our students."

Undoubtedly, there is something in the air. Will Hodgkinson's 2006 book *Guitar Man*

(Bloomsbury, £7.99), about learning the guitar after two decades of dithering, has been followed this year by

Jasper Rees's charming memoir *I Found My Horn* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £14.99). Here he recounts a year spent grappling with what he describes as "the orchestra's most difficult instrument", which he'd begun to master at school but then abandoned. He set himself the daunting goal of performing a Mozart concerto in front of a paying audience – and, as he puts it, "breathed the sweet, rarefied air of utter, inner contentment". The fact that this achievement occurred as he neared 40 is no accident. Pioneering psychologist Carl Gustav Jung spoke often of middle age as the second moment in life where greater emphasis should be put on what he called "individuation" or the process of realising one's Self. In midlife we often turn to skills we developed as children but abandoned as young adults. Sometimes we're moved to tap potential we perhaps never knew existed.

Clive Coen, a professor of neuroscience at King's College, London, is a classic case. A gifted young violinist educated simultaneously at Westminster and the Royal Academy of Music, he'd just won a scholarship to read music at Oxford when a gap break studying with composer John Cage in New York convinced him to move away from music towards science. He put away his violin for 25 years. It was only after his parents died that he took up music again: "As with many people, I realised it was what my parents had given me of most value. It was a legacy I wanted to pass on to my children." Coen says that it has taken him 10 years to recover his technique, but it is possible to make up for lost youthful exuberance with analysis: "Even if I haven't time to practise, I practise in my head by reading through the fingering."

Besides the musical pleasure of being able to play the repertoire he loves again, Coen has also established a network of new friendships through the various trios, quartets and orchestras he plays in. Even Hardie (the beginner) acknowledges, "Playing the piano has given me an insight into what binds together people who love music. It is almost like a brotherhood."

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Alongside anecdotal evidence that children taught to play musical instruments from an early age do better at maths and analytic reasoning, neuroscientific investigations mapping the brain's responsiveness to music confirm the central place music has in all our intellectual, emotional and creative life. Whether or not you agree with Nietzsche's view that "without music, life would be a mistake", there is every reason to take up that old cussed instrument once more – or embark on a new one. ♦

PLAY IT AGAIN

Carolyn Kotok, www.carolynkotok.co.uk. **City Music Services**, www.citymusicservices.co.uk; 07930-983 171; 07932-630 581; about £41 per 40-minute lesson.
The Piano Studio, Richard Meyrick, 0800-731 5453; richard@thepianostudio.co.uk; £80 for 60 minutes.



Above: **Richard Meyrick (left)** brings music into the life of **Richard Hardie**, vice-chair of **UBS**.