

# To be or not to be the Top

by Fenia I-Fen Chang

**I**t was a cold Sunday in January when the Dallas Music Teachers Association held its Symphonic Festival piano competition. Icy conditions on most of the roads made it very difficult to drive from home to the competition site. Many parents chose to stay home and skip the competition. However, almost all of the Asian parents made it there. As usual, all of the winners had Asian last names!

When people asked me about the differences between Chinese parents and Western parents, I always like to tell this story: In my neighborhood there is an activity center and a math school sitting on opposite sides of the same street. On any given Sunday, you will see a lot of traffic as parents take their kids to different classes or activities. Most of the cars turning into the parking lot of the activity center are driven by American parents dropping off their kids for basketball, swim lessons, or simply to play. The cars turning to the math school contain Asian families, most of them Chinese.

Dr. Amy Chua's article in The Wall Street journal about the superiority of the Chinese parenting style has drawn a lot of critics on the internet, but as a Chinese mother and a music teacher myself, the article touched some of my daily debate-what is the best for my kids?

I agree with Chua about the parenting philosophy of most Chinese parents. (As Chua, I am also using the term "Chinese mother" loosely. These parents could be Korean, Indian, or from any other ethnic group that subscribes to the strict parenting rule.) Most Chinese parents do have a goal in mind to produce children who display academic excellence, musical achievement, and professional success. And, as Chua pointed out, most Western parents worry that pushing kids too hard academically will hurt their children's self esteem.

This difference is evident in music study. Although parents of all ethnic groups would like to have their

children learn to play instruments, most Westerners would rather enroll their children in group 10 CLAVIER COMPANION lessons to simply have fun, rather than find a really good teacher to train their children to display musical mastery. On the contrary, most Chinese parents would think that having fun at a group music class is a waste of time and money.

If you ask a typical Chinese parent to take a Myers-Briggs personality test, most of them will probably have these characteristics (taken from the ESTJ personality type as described at [www.personalitypage.com](http://www.personalitypage.com)):

*"... they take parenting responsibilities seriously, ... They like to be in charge, and may be very controlling of their children. They do not have much tolerance for inefficiency or messiness. They dislike to see their mistakes repeated .... They will have little patience with the unstructured, go with the flow" attitude of their perceiving children."*

This is not, as Dr. Chua stated, because Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything. This might be the thinking of my grandparents' generation. The strict and academic-success driven Chinese parenting philosophy, in my view, has more to do with the Chinese culture. The imperial examination system solidifies the thinking that only academic excellence will give you success in life. Chinese parents don't believe in great carpenters or successful salesmen—they want their children to be professors, doctors, or lawyers. Academic achievement is at the core of a child's upbringing in most Chinese families. It is no coincidence that Chinese parents produce so many whiz kids and musical prodigies.

As a music teacher, I am in agreement with Dr. Chua that kids need to be pushed. Given the choice, children will always choose play over practice. As parents, we need to make sure that they spend enough time working on perfecting their knowledge and skills, be it in

an academic field or in music. I also believe we need to challenge kids to get over the difficult parts of their study. As Chua pointed out in the article, "This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents] ULY/AUGU~• 2011 tend to give up ... Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence ... Once a child starts to excel at something, he or she gets praise, admiration and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun."

Nobody wants to hurt a child's feelings. However, if parents are too anxious about their children's self-esteem, praising children's mediocre performances instead of challenging them, they will likely miss opportunities to unveil the children's potential.

Having said that, I don't think it is necessary to exhaust all tools to motivate your children, including calling them names and using negative words to describe them. One thing I notice in my teaching career, be it private teaching or at the college level, is that there are different degrees of intelligence among different people. For students who are not that smart or naturally talented, a harsh challenge might ruin their confidence. As a music educator, you will need to adapt to the talents you have, to know there are limits to how far you can go, that you cannot just keep pushing everybody. Dr. Chua is lucky to have two very smart girls who can meet a demanding mother's endless challenges. Applied to other children, these techniques might produce rebellious teenagers or cause nervous breakdowns.

It is generally believed that Western parents will try to respect their children's individuality, support their choices, encourage them to be what they want to be, and provide positive reinforcement. There is nothing wrong with positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. However, don't mistake that for accepting mediocrity and being a pushover parent. There may be some super geniuses or extremely talented children who will inspire themselves to greater things without any outside influence. But a lot of these achievers were pushed to be successful by their parents as well. Most of us are just ordinary people who will choose to take it easy if given the choice between working hard and having fun. This is especially true in regard to learning piano or other musical instruments. It is a very complicated process of the brain processing the score and telling

both hands to do different things simultaneously. Even the smartest brain will need a lot of practice to master the skill. You will only have fun if you can get past the hard parts. For most kids, you need strict parents to push you past those hard parts.

I believe all decent parents want what is best for their children, and they want their children to be at the top, if possible. Most Chinese parents believe that to get to the top, the best way to prepare your children is to let them have a higher goal for themselves, to let them realize their potential, and to arm them with skills, work ethics, and confidence. It may not always get them to the top. But it will certainly give them a good chance to be successful in this highly competitive society.

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*Born in Taiwan, Fenia I-Fen Chang made her solo debut at age eleven after winning the first Japan Kawai piano competition. She has performed at major venues in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, France, and the US., including Alice Tully Hall & Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall in New York, Strathmore Hall & Kennedy Center in Washington D. C. , and the National Concert Hall in Taiwan. She holds B.M. and M.M. degrees from Juilliard, and a D.M.A. from the University of Maryland, and her teachers include Abbey Simon, Russell Sherman, Jerome Lowenthal, Thomas Schumacher and Santiago Rodriguez. Devoted to music education she has served on the faculties of among others, Washington Bible College, National Taiwan University of the Arts, and Texas A&M-Commerce. She is the Founder and Artistic Director for the Asian-American Performing Arts Association of Texas, and she currently maintains a private teaching studio in Plano, TX.*