

Insight

RNIB

supporting blind and
partially sighted young people

Curriculum

Creating a new curriculum for
learners with complex needs

Dyslexia and low vision

Plus

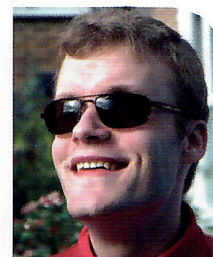
Curriculum Bitesize:

Are you ready? Preparing for
new starters at secondary school



In the Key of Genius (Part 3)

The third of our excerpts from Adam Ockelford's new book "In the Key of Genius: The Extraordinary Life of Derek Paravicini" in which Derek's musical ability becomes clear.



Derek today



Adam and Derek perform

It was Derek's sister Libbet who first noticed the change. The Easter holidays were drawing to a close, and she had spent most of the previous two weeks with Derek – now 20 months old – in the nursery, playing rough and tumble games, digging through his toy box to find things he hadn't come across recently, reading him stories, and rocking him to and fro on the family's child-sized wooden rhino. It was Friday afternoon and, worn out by his boundless energy, she lay on the floor and left him to play alone with the little electric organ for a while. She was so accustomed to the complex blur of sounds that her brother somehow produced, that she didn't notice anything different to begin with.

But she gradually became aware that the sounds that were emanating from the organ were actually quite melodious. She sat up to

get a better view of what he was doing. Initially, he seemed to be deploying his usual jumble of fists and palms and knuckles, but it gradually dawned on her that his hands were in reality moving together, systematically up and down the keys, black and white.

"Quick!" cried Libbet excitedly to Nanny who was in the utility room finishing off some ironing. "Come and listen. Derek's playing some music."

Dubiously but dutifully, Nanny put down the iron and came in to the nursery to find out what was happening.

Peering over Libbet's shoulder, she too could see the pattern of the notes that Derek was pressing down, though it didn't sound like a recognisable piece to her. Still, it was a vast improvement on the thumping of three months earlier and, come to think of it, by far the cleverest thing that he had ever managed to do. She suddenly felt very proud.

"That's lovely, Derek", she said. Little did Nanny and Libbet realise, though, that this was just the first outward sign of the extraordinary developments that we now know must have been going on in Derek's brain. His fascination with abstract patterns of sound, those thousands of hours spent simply listening during the first 20 months of his life, had caused millions of special neuronal connections to form, and it was those connections that now lay behind the emergence of a precocious musicality.

As far as Derek was concerned, each musical note was coming to have a distinct personality: familiar friends in a confusing world. Being given the organ to play had opened up a whole new realm of possibilities. One day, by chance, he must have allowed his fingers to unfurl enough to play individual notes, one at a time or in the patterns needed to make recognisable chords. Something must have 'clicked' in his brain: Derek's own 'eureka moment'. What Derek had stumbled on was the fact that the music that he had heard "out there" – or at least parts of it – he could now reproduce for himself, rather like the babbling that usually precedes a baby's first recognisable words.

The chords that Libbet and Nanny observed were the first discernible evidence of that process in action. Derek was able to recreate some of the building blocks of music, but he hadn't yet acquired the skills to put them together to form whole melodies. That stage wasn't long in coming.

Several weeks later Nanny was sitting in the nursery, keeping an eye on Derek while she sorted out a photograph album. "There!" she said to herself, completing the page on their recent holiday in Southport. She sat back to admire her efforts, and the memories came flooding back. A glorious summer's day. Derek losing the unequal battle with his first ice-cream. Libbet building sandcastles for him to knock over with his blue plastic spade. A huge expanse of sandy beach, with the Irish Sea in the distance. Nanny's eyes were closed now. She could feel the warm sun on her back, smell the fronds of drying seaweed and hear the children's voices, laughing and shouting. The strains of Molly Malone were coming from somewhere. It was one of her favourites. She had often sung it for Derek, and before she knew it she found herself joining in: 'She was a fishmonger, and sure 'twas no wonder, for so were ...'

She awoke with a jolt, with the music still ringing in her ears. She blinked and looked around. Derek was still there, bashing about on his keyboard as ever. It must have been his playing that had made her think of Molly Malone. She focused on him fondly for a moment, and became aware that he wasn't playing his usual chords. And then, as she watched, she realised what it was: before her very eyes, he distinctly picked out the chorus of the old Irish folksong using the side of the little finger on his right hand in a series of deliberate chopping movements. His left hand seemed to be producing some sort of accompaniment. She must still be dreaming, she decided, shaking her head, though any thought of trying to wake herself up was overcome by the irresistible urge to join in.

"Alive, alive oh! Alive, alive oh!" she sang, and Derek carried on, following her now, his head weaving vigorously from side to side, his body rocking to and fro, his whole being transported by the music they were making. "Crying cockles, and mussels, alive, alive oh!" Voice and keyboard ended together, triumphantly.

For the first time in her life, Nanny was completely at a loss for words. There was even a tear in her eye. She gave Derek the most enormous hug. He was pleased though perplexed by the strength of her sudden attention, and, freeing himself, started to play again.

"Mary Ann. Mary Ann! Come and listen to this. You won't believe your ears." Derek's mother Mary Ann was used to the hyperbole that invariably greeted each of Derek's new achievements: finally managing to sit up in the bath, being able to say 'dada' (repeatedly) and at last taking a step on his own by holding on to the furniture. What was it this time? She could hear from Nanny's tone that non-attendance was not an option, though,

and with curiosity banishing any of the reluctance that she might have felt, she made her way up the steps from the kitchen and put her head round the nursery door.

Nanny started singing again and Derek joined in on the keyboard, with a more elaborate accompaniment this time, using both hands as before. All three verses. There was no doubting it: he really could play. And with such feeling!

Mary Ann could only smile at Nanny in disbelief. Her son truly was amazing. How could it be that this little boy, just over two years old, totally blind, virtually unable to speak and apparently able to understand very little of what was going on in the world, had taught himself to play the keyboard – something that she couldn't even do herself? It just didn't seem possible, yet she had seen and heard it happen.

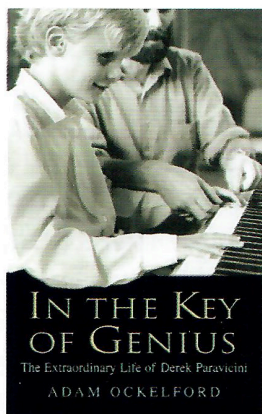


Adam and Derek

- **Adam Ockelford is Professor of Music at Roehampton University.**
a.ockelford@roehampton.ac.uk

- RNIB runs a Music Advisory Service for blind and partially sighted adults and children, their families and those who work with them. For further information contact Sally Zimmermann on 020 7288 1266 or email sally.zimmermann@rnib.org.uk

“In the Key of Genius: The Extraordinary Life of Derek Paravicini” is published by Hutchinson £17.99 in hardback. Braille and audio versions from RNIB. Call 0845 702 3153



The West of England School and College
for young people with little or no sight

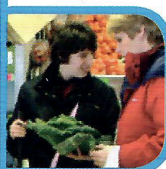
Supporting independence



We are the region's leading centre for the education and care of young people with visual impairment and complex needs. The School takes pupils aged 3-16 and the College takes students aged 16-23.



Our aim is to challenge each young person to be as active and independent as possible, whatever their ability.



For more information or to arrange a visit/assessment call: 01392 454334 email: lfowler@westengland.ac.uk or visit: www.westengland.ac.uk