

'How to give it' – Financial Times

Victoria Sharp interview

Victoria Sharp, 49, a former banker and art historian, is co-founder of the charity London Music Masters (LMM). LMM provides awards to talented young violinists, and sponsors music education in inner-city boroughs through its Bridge Project (www.londonmusicmasters.org)

What is the first charity you can remember supporting?

I grew up in America, where charity is endemic. When I was 17 or 18, I was involved in creating a \$200m endowment to provide education at my school - Philips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts – for students who couldn't have otherwise afforded it.

Which cause do you feel most passionately about?

LMM. I set it up and I am completely devoted to it. I always wanted to give back in the area of music education; specifically to support people who wouldn't otherwise have the chance, and, at the other end, to create an awards scheme for those who are on the cusp of an international career and could use extra financial support, mentoring and performance opportunity.

What percentage of income should we give to charity?

As much as you are able and willing. Increase it as you move along. It should grow with your ability and your passion.

What do you get out of your giving?

Joy. There is nothing like going into our schools: these kids come running to you and they throw their arms around you and tell you what they've achieved.

*Interview by Angus Watson
howtogiveit@ft.com*

Do businesses need to appear charitable?

That's a loaded question because of the word "appear". They should be charitable because they feel it from within, not just because they want to tick a box.

Has the recession affected LMM?

Sadly, yes. People are much more circumspect about their giving. As a charity you have to work hard, get in the queue and not lose heart. When things pick up, funds will come trickling back.

Are you a planned or spontaneous giver?

I'm both a spontaneous and planned giver in my areas of particular passion, and I do react spontaneously outside that box to a situation or an appeal that tugs at my heart. There's a question, however, whether knee-jerk responses to disasters always go to the right place.

Why teach classical music to underprivileged children?

Music education programmes in London are in a woeful state. I think that music as a tool for communication, for personal and intellectual growth, for self-confidence, for discipline, should be a right for all children, not just the privileged minority.

Is LMM elitist?

The Parents don't complain. They get it. It's patronising to suggest they won't. Children get something so deep out of a music education, no matter what level they take it to. Whether they join a band, a choir, or never touch it again, the years we've given them will live with them forever.