

EARLY CHILDHOOD MUSIC CLASSES:

What is their value & what is appropriate?

When I started teaching early-childhood music classes in 1986, not many people knew what “early-childhood music” really was. Things have certainly changed. It is rare to find a child these days who has not had an early-childhood music experience, either in a pre-school or in a private studio setting. This is wonderful news! The earlier we reach children the more opportunity we have to help them reach their full music potential. Thanks to recent issues of Newsweek Magazine and several TV news stories, many who previously thought music to be a nice little “extra” are now clamoring to sign their children up for class to give them an edge on their SAT’s. On the one hand it is very gratifying to have the work of early-childhood music and movement teachers validated by scientific research. Seeing the value of music education highlighted in a national news magazine is truly exciting! On the other hand, I find it rather sad that for many people in our society, music is only valued for its ability to improve a person’s math and science skills.

Music teachers have long known about the relationship between music and spatial awareness. We know that students involved in school music programs have better attendance records. We know that being involved in a music ensemble promotes social skills. While these are all good reasons for enrolling a child in a music program, they all point to the extrinsic value of music. What about the intrinsic value of music? What about music for music’s sake?

Imagine for a moment the Inauguration Day Ceremonies without the Marine Band playing “Hail to the Chief”...imagine your child’s first birthday without the sounds of “Happy Birthday” being sung by your family...imagine a Christmas Eve church service without any Christmas carols. Music is a part of our lives. It is an important part of the ceremonies that mark the milestones in our lives. It’s hard to imagine a wedding, a funeral, a graduation, a party, or a parade without music. Music is an essential aspect of our humanity. We all have the right to fulfill that potential. Music is a source of joy and wonder. It stimulates the imagination and nurtures the soul.

All children are musical beings. They are born with an aptitude for music. But that aptitude diminishes if it is not nurtured in the first nine years of life. By helping our children reach their full music potential we are helping them come into their own as well-rounded human beings. Following is a discussion of simple early-childhood music and movement activities that will help nurture a child’s musical development.

The most valuable thing you can do for a young child is to keep him singing and moving. Dr. Edwin E. Gordon, the leading researcher in early-childhood music and author of the most widely used music aptitude tests, states that a child’s music aptitude is in a developmental stage from birth to age 9. While a child can certainly learn musical skills such as fingerings, breathing, note reading, etc. after age 9, how musical a person he or she is - how well attuned his or her sense of pitch and rhythm is – is set for life by age 9.

Gordon divides music aptitude into tonal and rhythm aptitude and says the most effective means of nurturing a child's tonal and rhythm aptitude is to provide them with a rich environment of singing and moving. What does this mean in terms appropriate early-childhood music and movement activities? I believe there are 4 simple activities that should be kept in mind, whether you're choosing a music program for your own child or integrating music activities into your daily plans: singing simple songs, tonal and rhythm patterns, continuous and flowing movement activities, and steady beat activities.

SINGING SIMPLE SONGS

If we want children to be tuneful singers we need to follow a few simple steps. First we must sing to our children. Just as we talk to our children long before we expect them to join us in conversation, we should sing to our children if we ever expect them to join in our songs! As we sing to the children we will be laying the very important aural foundation required for future musical growth. As children mature to the point where they can sing with us, it is imperative that the songs be pitched properly. Children have a very limited range in which they can match pitch (from about D to A above middle C) and if teachers insist on singing in a lower register, the children will be unable to sing tunefully.

Indeed, the result will actually be a drone-like chant rather than singing. If you are still questioning the importance of singing in a register that is higher than you're used to, think of the following: no one questions that a violin plays much higher than a cello and that the reason for the different registers is the size of the instruments and the length of the strings. Now think of your size compared to the size of the children. It makes perfect sense that just as a violin is unable to match the pitch of the cello, the child is unable to match the pitch of an adult singing in a low register. Singing up high may feel a bit unnatural at first, but it is absolutely necessary if you want the children to be able to sing tunefully.

TONAL AND RHYTHM PATTERNS

A few minutes of every class should be spent with the teacher chanting short rhythm patterns and singing short tonal patterns. As the children mature, they may begin to echo the patterns. As the children mature even more, they will "answer" with a different pattern, something that is slightly different than the original pattern but one that is in the same key or meter as the original pattern.

Patterns can be thought of as the "building blocks" of music, just as words are to language. Just as we spend time saying and repeating single words to children as they are learning language, we should spend time singing and chanting tonal and rhythm patterns to children as they are learning music. Once again we are laying the aural foundation for their musical growth. Chanting and singing patterns facilitates an understanding of meter and tonality and lays the groundwork for understanding musical notation.

CONTINUOUS FLOWING MOVEMENT ACTIVITIES

Music is organized in such a way that it usually evokes a movement response from its listeners. Whether it comes in the form of tapping your toe inside your shoe or swaying from side to side, music generally makes you want to move! In fact, to be able to fully understand the rhythmic component of music, the listener must be able to determine where the beat is and how to move appropriately and consistently to that beat. Only then can a listener understand the meter of the piece and how the rhythm fits within the context of the meter. In order to develop this ability, children should be engaged in activities which encourage continuous flowing movement.

With very young children we can pick them up and dance with them to music in variety of styles. As they grow a bit we can stand facing them and holding their hands, as we sway

back and forth and twirl them around. As they approach 4 or 5 and experience some inhibitions about moving gracefully, we might invite them to take a scarf or crepe paper streamer and make it “float through the air to music”.

STEADY BEAT ACTIVITIES

“Steady beat” is the constant, unwavering pulse present in most music. “Melodic rhythm” refers to the combination of long and short notes that make up the melody. In a song with words, the melodic rhythm is usually determined by the text. For example, the phrase “bah bah black sheep have you any wool” is organized as follows: long, long, long, long, short, short, short, long.

When we attend to the rhythm of a piece rather than the beat, we tend to rush or slow down instead of singing in a consistent tempo. In fact, since young children are so very interested in language, they are often drawn to rhythm of the text rather than the steady beat.

Therefore, we need to engage the children in steady beat activities – those which allow the children to bounce, rock, or tap to the steady beat while listening to or singing a song.

With very young children we can bounce them on our outstretched legs. Children a year or older can bounce themselves by kneeling up and bouncing as if they were riding a horse. Similarly, we can rock with them leaning on our backs, and we can pair older children and ask them to hold hands and rock back and forth as if they were rowing a boat.

Three and four year olds will enjoy tapping various parts of their bodies to the steady beat. Tapping is a much simpler movement than clapping or marching and gives a much clearer indication of whether or not the child can actually match the beat. Introducing rhythm sticks for tapping the beat offers variety and a new challenge to the children. Exploring the many different ways to play the beat will hold the attention of even 4 ½ and 5 year old students.

SIMPLE BUT ESSENTIAL

While the activities described above may seem simple, they are exactly what children need to help them fulfill their music potential. It may be tempting to bypass these developmental activities and enroll a child in violin or piano lessons. There is no doubt that even a young child can learn certain skills on these instruments. But if this type of instruction comes before a strong aural and movement foundation is laid, the experience will be much more technical than musical. If a child can’t sing in tune and move in time, he won’t be able to play an instrument with good intonation or rhythm. With a strong foundation of singing, patterns and movement, he will have the aural skills necessary to figure out how to play his favorite song without relying on the sheet music. He will be able to create songs of his own and new arrangements of old favorites. He will become an independent musician and derive great pleasure from music. If music is a source of joy and success for children, they will have a life-long appreciation for music. And their sensitivity to that which is beautiful is nurtured from the time they are very young, they will grow to value it and not accept that which is not beautiful, whether it be sounds, sights, or feelings deep within their souls. That is the value of music. That is what I want for my children – both my own children and the children I teach. Early-childhood music experiences, as described here, can help children realize their full music potential. If the experience enhances their aptitude for math and science, that’s okay too. But it’s just the icing on the cake!