

Music For Babies?

I recently had lunch with my 80 year old mother and two of her friends. In the attempt to find something interesting to chat about, I told them about the large "gathering drum" I had ordered to use in my "Music for Babies" class. One of the women asked what age I teach, but before I could answer, my mother said, "Babies! She teaches babies! Can you imagine? People actually bring their babies to her for music! What in the world do you teach babies?"

This was an especially interesting question coming from my mother since she has spent her entire life teaching music. Even at 80, she directs a gospel choir at her local senior center! But it is perfectly reasonable question, and one that deserves some discussion.

This is a very exciting time to be involved in music education. Recent research has revealed so much about how we learn in general, and more specifically, how we learn music. We no longer proceed on the premise that a few chosen people are talented and the rest of us would be better off to confine our singing to the shower. We now know that all of us are born with an aptitude for music. Music aptitude like intelligence, is normally distributed. This music aptitude diminishes if it is not nurtured by early, repeated, appropriate experiences. This means that a person's ability to fulfill his music potential is determined by both his innate music aptitude and the quality of his early experiences.

It has been discovered that we learn music the same way we learn language. Therefore, if we examine the way a child learns language, we will have a guide as to what is an appropriate early-childhood music experience.

Using fiber-optic cameras, Dr. Alfred Tomatis discovered that a five-month old fetus is capable of hearing and responding to the sounds of language. This means that babies are absorbing the sounds and rhythms of language from as early as 5 months in utero! Since most children do not begin to speak until sometime near the end of their first year, it is safe to say that they were 'bathed' in the sounds and rhythms of their language for well over a year before actually being expected to speak. They will then spend many months experimenting with isolated words, eventually combining them to make phrases and later complete sentences. During this time we continue to 'bathe' them in language - never considering the idea of "holding out on them" until they are ready to answer us in complete sentences. It is the very fact that we continue to talk to them regardless of their ability to respond that allows children to become fluent in language. In this sense, children are not *taught* language - they *acquire* language when:

- a. they have a strong aural foundation comprised of their sensory experiences while in utero and during the first few years of life
- b. they are given ample time to organize and assimilate those experiences
- c. the sensory experiences have an emotional component

In a 1997 special edition of Newsweek devoted to brain development, Janellen Hullocker of the University of Chicago suggests that "Information embedded in an emotional context seems to stimulate neural circuitry more powerfully than information alone." This idea is substantiated by Neuropsychologist and check educator, Carla Hannaford, PhD, who states in her book, Smart Moves: Why Learning is Not All in Your Head, "In order to learn something, there must be sensory input, a personal connection, and movement...Emotions interpret each experience and help us to organize it in terms of our view of the world."

From this information we can conclude that live music-making provides the child with a much richer sensory and emotional experience than recorded music could ever provide. In fact, it's hard to imagine a more sensorially and emotionally charged experience than that of a mother singing to and dancing with her child. The baby is not only hearing her voice, he is feeling the vibration of her voice as his head rests on her chest, he smells the familiar scent of her body, while his vestibular system is being stimulated by the rocking, bouncing, and spinning of their dance. This is a far cry from a baby lying in his crib listening to a cassette!

So, in answer to my mother's question, "What in the world do you teach babies?" I would have to say: the goal of all my parent/child music classes is not to teach anything! Rather, it is to guide parents and children as they engage in musical activities that will help the child fulfill his music potential; it is to 'bathe' them in the sounds and rhythms of the music of our culture; it is to provide an environment which encourages musical interaction between parents and children, and gives parents the chance to get ideas from other parents as to what movements are most beneficial for development; it is to pass on the songs and rhymes that are part of our cultural heritage; and to add to the collection of emotional, sensory experiences that will make up the aural foundation on which all future music learning will be based.

Having said all that, my primary goal for both parents and children in my classes is that they experience the joy of making music with others. The feeling created by engaging in active music-making with other people is quite special and becomes even more special when experienced by parents and children together. Who knows...perhaps I can talk my mother into joining our class this year!

Written by Jill Hannagan: Owner /Teacher of the Hockessin Music School in Newark, Delaware