

Introduction to Music Development



Numerous neurologists, pediatricians, biologists, and psychologists associated with universities and research institutes have come to believe that there are critical periods

associated with surges of neurological connections and synapses that take place prenatally and during early childhood. They believe that cognition takes place in the outer shell of the brain, the cortex. The cortex consists of neurons that are interconnected by axons and dendrites, which are stimulated by syntactic activity. Nature provides the child with an overabundance of cells to make these connections, both before birth and at critical times after birth. Unless the cells are used for that purpose during these critical periods, they are lost and can never be recaptured. As a result, possible peak times for a child's learning are diminished. For example, Torsten Wiesel and David Hubel discovered in 1960 that if a blindfold is placed over the eye of a kitten at birth and the cover is not removed until several weeks later, the animal will be blind in that eye for life. What the researchers seem to be saying is that unless cells are used to make neurological connections and synapses related to each of the senses at appropriate times, the cells will direct themselves to enhancing other senses, and the sense that is neglected will be limited throughout life. Thus, if a very young child has no opportunity to develop a music-listening vocabulary, the cells that would have been used to establish that hearing sense will at best be directed to another sense, perhaps the visual, and the visual sense will be strengthened at the expense of the aural sense. No amount of compensatory education at a later time will be able to completely offset the handicap.

The home is the most important school that young children will ever know, and children's parents are the most important teachers they will ever have. Most parents are more capable of guiding and instructing their

children in the development of language and arithmetic skills, however, than in the development of music skills and understanding. That is not necessarily because parents do not have high levels of music aptitude, but because most parents were not guided and instructed in acquiring and understanding music when they were children. Thus, they become unwitting, if not unwilling, participants in an unavoidable and unfortunate cycle. That is perhaps the most important reason why well-informed professional teachers need to informally guide newborn and young children in becoming comfortable with and audiating music.

Music is unique to humans and, like the other arts, is as basic as language to human development and existence. Through music children gain insight into themselves, into others, and into life itself. Most important, through music children are better able to develop and sustain their imaginations and unabashed creativity. Because a day does not pass without children hearing or participating in music one way or another, it is to their advantage to understand music. Only then will they learn to appreciate, to listen to, and to partake of music that they believe to be good, and it is through such awareness that life becomes more meaningful.

The purpose of *Jump Right In: The Early Childhood Curriculum* is to help preschool teachers and music teachers to recognize the importance of early childhood music, to discover how very young children learn to understand music, to provide opportunities for guiding very young children to learn about music, and to learn how very young children might best be taught music. The intent is not prepare children to be professional musicians or for parents and teachers to identify or foster musical geniuses. Rather, it is to explain to them how they might informally guide young children to an understanding of music the way they have already guided them to an understanding of their spoken language.

Specific musical responses should not be demanded or expected of young children. Like speech develop-

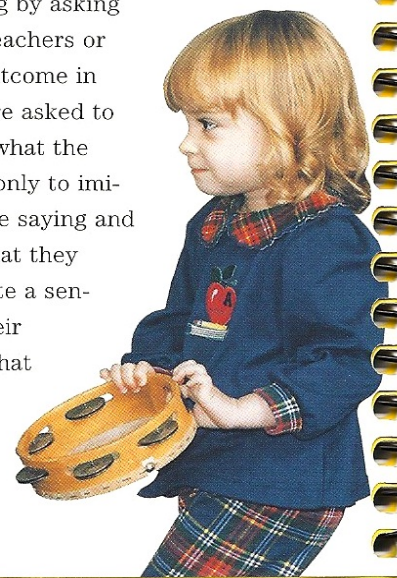
ment, a child's musical development is not immediate. Moreover, in our society it is common, even with exceptional musical guidance, for evidence of some children's musical development to present itself later than that of their speech development. It is important to gain as much insight into this process as possible, because just as we must not neglect a child's informal guidance in music, so we must not delay a child's transition from informal guidance to formal instruction. The result would be as detrimental to the child as to neglect informal guidance in music altogether.

Preschool children must not be taught as if they are young adults or even kindergarten children, nor should the determination of the of their musical capabilities be based on comparisons with what adults can or cannot do. Young children learn as much, and possibly more, from themselves and one another as they learn from adults. Nonetheless, if adults devote the necessary time to the musical development of young children, and if they do not underestimate the children's comprehension, these young children will become comfortable with all types of music at an early age and will develop positive attitudes toward music that will persist throughout their lives. When they become adults, they will constitute more appreciative audiences, and they may even read a music score as easily as they read a newspaper, magazine, or book. If music should become a profession rather than an avocation for a child, it should be considered only as an unexpected benefit, however.

Consider how young children learn a language. As newborns, they hear language being spoken all around them. Ideally, they are read to even before they can fully understand what is being read. They absorb what they hear. Soon they are vocalizing sounds in imitation of speech, and typically this includes sounds in language babble that may be found in a number of languages. By the age of nine months, the typical child has acquired the readiness to articulate the necessary sounds with his or her tongue to speak the language of the culture. When adults and siblings speak to children on a one-to-one basis, they offer them informal guidance in forming words. Soon young children naturally "break the code" of the language of their culture and begin to imitate real words. By using those words to communicate with others, they soon learn to create

their own phrases and sentences. Later they learn to read and write words and sentences that they have heard and spoken. The whole process of the sequential development of the four vocabularies-- listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in that order--begins at birth and continues until after children enter kindergarten or first grade. Unless such a process, which develops through both structured and unstructured informal guidance, occurs early in life, children will not have the necessary readiness to profit from formal language instruction. To be successful in school, children must enter kindergarten or first grade with at least a substantial listening and speaking vocabulary. In addition to acquiring rich listening and speaking vocabularies, it is to their advantage to be informally guided in developing rudimentary reading and writing vocabularies at home before they begin formal language instruction in school.

Unfortunately, the typical child is not given parallel experiences in music. If children who have not received structured and unstructured informal guidance in music before they enter school are given formal music instruction in kindergarten or first grade, further difficulties are often created as a result of the way music is taught in many schools. For example, in order for teachers to teach language skills in school successfully, children need to have acquired the ability and skill to engage in individual creative speaking before they enter school, yet most children have never had a chance to perform or create music individually before they begin formal music instruction, and once they do begin formal instruction, they are seldom offered or allowed the opportunity to perform or create music individually in class. Most formal instruction involves teaching children to sing by asking them to repeat the sounds the teachers or others make. Yet imagine the outcome in language learning if children were asked to speak only in groups, repeating what the teacher said. They would learn only to imitate what others around them are saying and so would not give meaning to what they said. They might not every create a sentence of their own to express their thoughts. It is no wonder then that when music is taught the way it is usually taught in school,



many school children are deprived of the chance to develop an understanding of music and are simply dismissed as being “untalented” by their teachers and parents.

When children enter kindergarten or first grade, they receive instruction in language for a substantial portion of the school day. Thus, a teacher may be held accountable for each child’s language development in accordance with an established curriculum. Following standard practice, records are kept and measurement procedures precede evaluation. In contrast, children typically receive instruction in music once, and in rare cases twice, a week for a period of twenty to forty-five minutes. Because there is inadequate time devoted to formal music instruction or, more correctly, to neces-

sary compensatory informal music guidance even though the children are no longer of preschool age, and because there is no generally accepted sequential curriculum in music, the music skills that children might be expected to have acquired by the second grade are never realized due to their impoverished instruction. Entertaining children and at best offering them a perfunctory explanation of music notation seem to be the mainstays of most formal music programs in school. If the children are having fun, it is assumed by many administrators and parents that the music program is successful. It must be remembered, however, that children can experience even more pleasure and ultimate satisfaction when they are engaging in activities that promote musical understanding. Fun is temporary, but an understanding of music sustains one throughout life.