

Learning with infants

The development of musicality in children from 0 to 36 months

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“Educating children does not mean taking them out of the musical vacuum in which they are assumed to be in order to bring them to a certain level of competence. On the contrary, it means developing play activities already present in them ... rediscovering a sense of true “non-directionality” every child has such a tendency and we respect it, we respect and encourage it.”*

These words written by Francois Delalande in 1984 identify the crux of this new pedagogy of music for very young children, which has its roots in the Music Learning Theory* of Edwin E. Gordon, US researcher. Having finally abandoned the tabula rasa theory that saw the child as an empty container to be filled, in which the expectations of the adults in charge of their education were all too much in evidence, the new learning theory recognizes the newborn child as a rich and “extraordinarily sophisticated”* individual, in possession from birth of, among other things, a pronounced musical aptitude: if appropriately encouraged and stimulated it can guide the child – every child – in learning the language of music; if ignored, or stimulated in the wrong way, it quickly fades. It is now an established fact that the most important learning period is from birth to three years, a window of opportunity that has long been neglected in traditional music education.

Research in the field of music learning converges in Gordon’s Music Learning Theory and new music teaching trends for the very young, the principal exponent of which is Beth M. Bolton. It has highlighted the importance of beginning the process of music learning in the first months, using methods based on the process of language acquisition which can be developed into a structured teaching method.

Language acquisition is one of the most natural and spontaneous processes among children: they are exposed from the moment they are born to verbal stimuli. Immersed in contexts dense with verbal language, the child begins to build her own personal vocabulary.

The size of the child’s vocabulary is directly proportional to the amount, variation and correctness of the stimulation she has received, while the learning process is facilitated if such stimuli are followed by long silences to give the child the time to process all the information received. The

major sources of such stimuli in the early stages of a child's life are, in the first place, the parents and those close to the child: children can pick out the sound of their own language, or their mother's voice in the midst of other sounds.

As with any learning process a long preliminary stage of listening is fundamental: the child absorbs the information, processes it with a view to "joining in" when she feels ready. When adults use complex syntax or vocabulary when speaking to, or in the presence of, children, they do not expect the children to "understand conceptually" or respond immediately to the stimulus, but rather are always fascinated and surprised as they follow each child's progress through the various stages of language acquisition: from a long period of absorbing information to spontaneous lallation or babbling; from the choice to interact with simple words or contracted forms (which often only their mothers can understand) to the construction of formal sentences and the capacity to express concepts, ideas, needs and emotions verbally with a breadth of vocabulary that every child has mapped in her own head.

It is appropriate to point out here that in traditional teaching methods for children, where children "do music" in groups, there has always been a tendency to ask the whole group to do something at the same time. This approach ignores two fundamental aspects: each child's markedly different response to a single proposal or stimulus and the personal aptitudes of each child. If I ask you to do something, I expect you to do it – I have created an expectation. If I want to guide the child, which means leading her by the hand to discover and express her personal musical tendencies, there is no room for "my" expectation – the child should simply be presented with suggestions. Each child's response "will teach me how to teach them", to understand what is the best path to take to facilitate their acquisition of a language.

It is no accident that this methodology talks about "informal guidance", at least in the early stages of accompanying the child in the learning process: in the class the teachers propose models and wait for each child to relate to the proposal in her own individual way. In the same way in which every child is exposed to different linguistic stimuli, the variety, repetition and complexity of the music proposed will give the child the opportunity to build up a musical vocabulary that will help her to learn the language and use it as a wonderful means of expression and communication.

Unfortunately the range of musical stimuli for children in the Italian cultural tradition is rather meagre. The repertory dedicated to them (nursery rhymes, lullabies) is made up almost exclusively

of melodies in the major mode (rarely in the minor) and binary meter. The great advances in psychology and pedagogy do not appear to have been followed by the appropriate updating of the musical repertory for early childhood. Everything is still based on the idea that music for children has to be simple. I wonder why, since our intention, as in verbal language, is not to make them repeat things, but to give them a broad range of competences that can contribute to parallel development in other areas of learning.

Moreover the almost non-existent rhythmic and tonal differentiation means that children are unable to experience one of the fundamental stages of learning – learning by contrast and comparison. The more different stimuli they have the opportunity of hearing and experimenting with, the more they will develop their discriminatory skills. Given the opportunity of comparing different parameters they will learn to distinguish between them accurately.

As mentioned above, these new theories are applied by using “models” to present children with a wide range of modes and meters. The teachers are not so much music teachers as “music parents” in class, singing, chanting and moving fluidly in a highly communicative atmosphere. The children are not asked to do anything but simply “be” and “hear”. Melodies in various modes (major, minor, Dorian, myxolydian, Lydian, Phrygian, Locrian, multitonal) and various regular and irregular meters are used during the sessions. During the early stages of inculturation the tones used are melodies without words, just as the rhythms are recited sequences with neutral syllables. Initially words distract the child from the melody and rhythm, as he concentrates on the language that is most familiar to him – verbal language (how many of our children come back from nursery or kindergarten singing songs learned off by heart but musically dull and flat?). For this reason the words are added when the child has already become aware of and familiar with the tune and rhythm. The variety of styles (a jazz style is just as good as a melodious one) and vocal timbres is equally important. And the pieces should all be performed with feeling: very young children who are not yet able to understand the actual words being spoken to them, will however pick up on the intonation of the person talking to them, and therefore whether the message is positive or negative.

Movement figures prominently as a supporting activity to the variety and complexity of music offered. The child’s first response to music is through movement: it is common among very young children that their musical interaction with adults almost exclusively takes the form of physical movement. Newborn babies tend to stop all physical activity while they are being played or sung to

and then start moving again during the silent periods following the activity. They also tend to respond to the rhythm by moving their body rather than through lallation or babbling.

Gordon has reinterpreted and integrated into his Music Learning Theory, the theory of movement developed in the seventies by the choreographer and dancer Rudolf Laban. He posits four fundamental elements of movement linked to the child's own stages of development: flow (characteristic of new-born infants), weight (when the child starts to sit up or roll, acquiring sufficient body control to change position on his own), space (capacity to move in the space around him), time (having reached a stage where he can move on his own, he can now decide his "progression"). The final stage in the acquisition of these four elements brings about an awareness of flow with beat: this means an understanding of what separates one beat from another, the space between beats, which is the flow of time.

I have already mentioned the importance of silence as a key moment in processing information and therefore of learning. Gordon maintains (and I fully agree with him) that the process of becoming musically conscious, or audiation, takes place during this silent period. Audiation can be defined as a "musical thought" or the child's ability to hear the sound within him even if it is not physically present. To continue the comparison with verbal language "audiation is to music as thinking is to language" and we guide the children to think musically and express themselves with their own vocabulary, just as they are guided from birth to think and then express themselves using words. In other words, every child is given the opportunity to go on to formal music instruction (from learning to play an instrument to any other experience that involves training) having already grasped the basic tenets of melody and rhythm. When children start elementary school (and therefore formal education) they already have an understanding of words, phrases and sentences.

During the stage known as preparatory audiation, each child goes through various phases from absorption to random and purposeful interaction. The teacher establishes a rapport with the child, imitating his responses, using the same mode and meter the child has (rather like helping a child who mispronounces a word to say it correctly). This also greatly helps the child's confidence as he feels comfortable having individual attention in the class, and is happy to be there in a class where the other children receive similar attention.

Gradually the children start to give musically correct responses or to improvise small phrases until they can coordinate breathing, movement, intonation and rhythm, to a point where they are able to

“converse” with their teacher through the medium of music. This brings us to the final stage of preparatory audiation, assimilation. The child expresses himself consciously; he is not imitating the teacher but is correctly expressing competences he has acquired.

The achievement of a conscious stage has no bearing on the child’s actual age but on his musical age. The earlier a newborn baby is exposed to music, the sooner he will attain a good level of musical awareness.

Throughout this process the presence of adults in the classes (parents or nursery teachers) boosts and reinforces the teachers’ models and help the children to trust them.

The aim is simply to give the children another means of expression and communication; to guide them as they add another tiny piece to the extraordinary mosaic that every child represents.

*Francois Delalalande, *La musica è un gioco da bambini*, 1984 Paris, FrancoAngeli editore.

*Edwin E. Gordon, *A Music Learning Theory for Newborn and Young Children*, 1997 Chicago, GIA Publications.

*Asha Phillips, *I no che aiutano a crescere*, 1999 Milano, Feltrinelli.