WHY ARE WE NOT A MUSICAL NATION?

Building a Musical Nation: From Birth to Age Nine

Marilyn Lowe and Eric Rasmussen: MTNA 2017

In 1926, Archibald T. Davison, Harvard University music professor, asked some thought-provoking questions in his book MUSIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA. "Why are we not a musical nation? What is wrong with it?" and "What can we do about it?" His conclusion was, "We are musically uneducated or mis-educated."

The good news is that, since 1926, there has been extensive music and education research about how the brain processes music and how we learn. Music educators continue to research and update the approach to teaching and learning, just as we expect updated research in technology and medicine.

During this time I will briefly introduce eight areas of research to set the background for Dr. Rasmussen's fascinating work with the Baltimore OrchKids from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. A PDF file of this session will be made available by MTNA and will include a list of resources for those interested in exploration.

1. We are wired for music from birth. In fact, the ear functions at about 5 months before birth. Therefore, parent education is important. Overall, the best stimulus for music development is when parents are involved in babies and young children's developmental processes. Parents can make a difference by selecting special music to sing or play during the 4 months before a baby is born.

2. There are critical time periods for music development to occur. The largest growth periods of the brain occur during the first years of life. In fact, children have 'windows of opportunity' to develop their innate music aptitude before adolescence. What does this mean for parents and music teachers?

Carefully planned unstructured guidance in early childhood music programs, with a large variety of selected music, acculturates children to the language of music and prepares for formal instruction. We know that music can have a dramatic affect on the brain's structure; it can enhance memory, spatial reasoning and language skills.

3. Brain and sound researchers find that music is the most complicated sound the brain can process. Have you ever wondered what goes on in the brain when performing music or listening to a performance? I saw a demonstration of this presented by Dr. Don Hodges, UNC/Greensboro, in an MRI image showing that all parts of the brain are activated when listening to or performing music. The brain lights up like a Christmas tree. This has implications for learning music.

4. How is music best learned/taught? One music educator who devoted his life to researching how we learn when we learn music, Edwin E. Gordon, defined two principles for teaching/learning: 1. Teach sound before sight 2. Teach practice before theory.

Perhaps Gordon's greatest contribution to music learning is contextual music thought. Music only makes sense when it is learned in the context of a meter or a tonality, not time and key signatures which are theoretical. After meter or tonality is established, we can apply the concept of "whole-parts-whole," pioneered in 1912 as the "German Psychology of Gestalt." In 1935 the German Psychology of Gestalt was translated into English. Briefly, the Gestalt Theory states that there are wholes that are better understood when the parts are examined.

Research confirms that the human mind is not meant to multitask. Multitasking is less productive than doing a single thing at a time. In fact, we can only learn one new thing at a time. What does this mean for music instruction? Think about introducing the parts of music separately. Teaching rhythm and pitch separately, within the context of a meter or a tonality, then returning these parts to a whole piece of music is the foundation for Dr. Edwin E. Gordon's Theory of Audiation. Learn one new thing at a time. Listen to a whole piece of music (even a 30 second song) then analyze its parts in context: meter/rhythm patterns, tonality and tonal patterns. After an analysis of the parts, listening again to the whole will have more meaning.

5. How do children's songs **with** words affect music learning? If children sing a song **with** words, the focus is on the words. We have all heard "Mary had a little lamb" or the "Alphabet Song" sung out of tune with words. However, if children sing a song **without** words, the focus can be placed on the melody and its rhythm.

Tom Moon, long time NPR music critic expressed a dislike for "message songs" for children - about brushing teeth or riding in a car. He felt that music does not have to be a story and that all good music is children's music. In fact, he cites a movement from the Goldberg Variations as a good listening example for children.

Children respond to the human voice. By singing a large variety of short songs **without** words, children learn that music is a listening and performing art with a melody. Words can be added later. A wonderful collection of short songs and chants in a variety of tonalities and meters is available through GIA Publications. It is listed on the resources page of this PDF. (If time, demonstrate.)

Short songs without words. Tonal patterns. Rhythm patterns.

Short chants without words. Rhythm patterns

6. Research shows that infants are born ready to process meters and tonalities.

What children process in music is cultural. Children from different countries are exposed to different kinds of music and have different music environments. In the U.S. we have become a major-duple culture, with little contrasts or variety in tonality or meter.

How can we encourage music understanding and learning? Introduce a larger variety of listening experiences that include many different tonalities and meters. Think about contrast/variety and same/different for building understanding. Some listening examples include the following:

1000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die, Tom Moon, NPR, Downloadable PDF listing a large variety of music.

3 CDs published by GIA Music: 100 very short songs on each CD, performed by instrumental musicians from professional orchestras.

7. To learn music, follow the language learning process. This process is: listen, speak/perform, think/improvise, read, and write. Erika Christakis, in her book *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups,* states that conversation is gold. The focus should be on talking and listening, not just reading. In Finland, formal reading instruction begins about age seven. Preschoolers have been prepared for reading by speaking and listening, which are the basis for the beginnings of literacy. Children use what they learn in conversation, which is the best early-learning system we have. The same is true with music. Build a listening and performing music vocabulary and use it for improvisation.

Edwin E. Gordon, in a reply to teachers said: *"My best recommendation to music teachers of the next century is to improvise, improvise, improvise! Get rid of notation. Learn from Music Learning Theory to teach children to make music without the aid of notation or music theory. Follow religiously the process the way we learn language."* ***Edwin Elias Gordon 1927 – 2015***

8. Engage children in 'music play.' Why and how do we do this? By engaging in a playful, appropriately designed music curriculum of informal music instruction from pre-birth. Studies have shown that a play-based curriculum is superior to an instructional-based curriculum. Playful activity leads to the growth of the part of the brain that is responsible for higher mental functions. For further insight about children and play, read the 2009 book, *The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience* by Sergio Pellis and Vivien Pellis.

Brief Suggested Resources
Marilyn Lowe, MTNA 2017

Some references and names to Google for more information

John W. Flohr (TWU)
Edwin E. Gordon (Publications from www.giamusic.com)
Don A. Hodges (UNC, Greensboro NC)
Tom Moon (NPR Music)
Diane Cummings Persellin
Lois Svard
Lev Vygotsky

Gestalt Theory
Multi-tasking

Some Readings

Experimental Songs and Chants Without Words, Gordon, Bolton, Hicks, and Taggert, GIA Publications, Inc.

Learning from Young Children (Research in Early Childhood Music), Edited by Suzanne L. Burton and Cynthia Crump Taggert, Rowman and Littlefield Publications, 2011. (Especially note chapter by Flohr and Persellin).

Learning Sequences in Music, Edwin E. Gordon, GIA Publications, Inc., 2012.

Music Education in America, Archibald T. Davison, 1926 (out of print but is available through inter-library loan or used book companies).

The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups, Erika Christakis, 2016.

The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience, by Sergio Pellis and Vivien Pellis, 2009.

The Ways Children Learn Music, Eric Bluestine, GIA Publications, Inc**.,** 2000.

Listening Examples

100 very short folk tunes are performed by professional instrumental musicians on each of the following three CDs

Don Gato
Simple Gifts
You Are My Sunshine

GIA Publications, Inc. https://www.giamusic.com, 7404 South Mason Avenue, Chicago, IL 60638. (800) (442-1358)

Tom Moon - 1000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die Free PDF http://www.1000recordings.com/

Tom Moon, longtime music critic for NPR and formerly for the Philadelphia Inquirer, believes that “all music is kids music.”