The Real Mozart Effect? Part 3

In the last installment of this article we explored the learning of basic musical elements as young students may learn them. Rhythm was discussed using the syllables in the words “bean” and “taco.” A visual representation of the rhythmic value of these words was used by placing sticks either vertically (bean) or horizontally (taco). Another rhythmic example was the opening of the Response to Grace, “O Living Breath of God” (bean-ta-co-ta-co bean-ta-co-ta-co). Also discussed were the basics of recognizing intervals either looking at the piano keyboard (one key to the next is a step), or looking at a piece of music (line note to space note is a step).

Now remember, Mr.Kodaly taught songs to pre-school children using folk melodies, both old and new. He borrowed the system of hand gestures to denote the sounds of a musical scale developed by Englishman Curwen. Combining the use of solfège syllables (do-re-mi…), the Curwen hand signals, and a rudimentary method of rhythmic dictation, the curriculum designed by Kodaly introduces to the children many hundreds of songs by the time they reach the fifth grade.

Now granted, all these students are not going to become professional musicians. This is not the expectation. Neither will the students become mathematicians based on their ability to add, subtract, multiply or divide. But music will develop the young brains in a different way than any other subject they will study in their lifetimes.

According to Kodaly, music is as fundamental to human nature as is speech. If it weren’t, why then are we surrounded by music? Not only are we bombarded with music in practically every building we enter, when we go outside we can hear the music of nature. We hear the sounds of the birds, the rustling of wind blowing through the trees, the pattering or hammering of rain. There is even a rhythm and sometimes musicality in the unnatural sounds that we hear as well. Put together in an organized rhythmic pattern, the sounds of cars driving by, the sound of the garbage truck, even the pounding of a jackhammer can be organized into an interesting ensemble of music.

Mozart however probably wouldn’t have appreciated such a cacophony, and if the musical influences of our industrial living were beneficial, we would all be geniuses. But I digress. Back to the children.

It took Kodaly many years to institutionalize his music courses in the Hungarian school system. There were no arguments against music in the schools at the time. But Kodaly did overcome some hurdles in his persistence of the need to have music as a daily activity. There was to be, much to the astonishment of the education movement, including surprise by Kodaly himself, a surprising and unexpected resulting from the new music curriculum. It seemed that test scores of the children that were being taught music on a regular basis were improving. Not just the test scores in music, not just the test scores in mathematics, but across the board. All the students were performing markedly better in ALL subjects due to their involvement in the music curriculum.

It didn’t take long for people to take notice. Musicians of course were ecstatic over the process in itself. Music was being given its just due in the education in Hungary. Over time, the Kodaly Method as it had become known, spread throughout Europe, and on to North America. There were seminars supporting the methods, classes teaching the methods, and discussions and papers written about the successes of the method, not only in teaching music, but the improvement of student test scores.

So already in the 1940’s it was known that instilling students with musical knowledge and education would result in the student’s overall improvement in all subjects. Why is it then, that it wasn’t until the 1990’s that someone came up with the notion that by listening to Mozart, you could improve your train of thought? Why is it that during the past three decades at least, that the California board of education has systematically eliminated music from the curriculum of our younger generation?

There are surely benefits of music education which we don’t yet know the source. For children however, it has been long known that spatial cognition is greatly influenced in a positive way by studying music. This discussion of The Real Mozart Effect? will continue in the August Key News.

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