



The Real Mozart Effect?

It was during the mid-1990's that we began reading tales of the improvement of brain power based on the listening of classical music. There were even suggestions that listening specifically to Mozart would somehow improve one's thinking, leading to speculation that the earlier a child listened to the music of Mozart, the smarter they would become. Let's take it a step further, which some did, and subject that baby in-utero Mozart CDs. Thus the birth of another genius!

Well, it isn't quite that easy, but it has long been known that the study of music improves skills in all other subjects, including the reading and mathematics that are so much of the curriculum of today's schools.

Back around 1930 or so, a Hungarian by the name of Zoltan Kodaly (pronounced Koh-dye) began making himself known as a music pedagogue. Having spent decades compiling literally more than 100,000 folk songs with his colleague Bela Bartok, Kodaly began expressing his views on the importance of music in early childhood education and development. His basic premise stemmed from his belief that music was part of the core human need, as is speech. This should come as no surprise to anyone since all cultures foster some form of music.

According to Kodaly, every person, every child has the ability to sing a tune, and to carry a tune. Of course this comes naturally to most, but can be learned by all, so he thought. By introducing specific music curriculum into the Hungarian school system, Kodaly almost single handedly changed the course of the Hungarian schools, and improved the student performance in all subjects.

The music course designed by Kodaly assumes that the music must first come from within, i.e. he didn't begin by teaching the students how to play the recorder or the piano. In the preschool years, the children were taught to sing simple melodies and songs. Most were folksongs from around the world, but much of the material was composed by Kodaly himself. Kodaly had made the observation that in most cultures, not just Western cultures, the music of the children, the nursery rhyme type songs shared similar musical patterns. If you for example sing "Ring around the rosie" you will hear exactly the notes used in the beginning songs taught by Kodaly. If you know anything about solfege syllables, you will recognize the notes sol-mi-re-sol as the melody of this famous nursery song.

Imagine preschoolers learning songs not just once a week, but every day as part of their regular school curriculum. An hour a day learning nursery rhymes seems a bit much. How many nursery rhymes can a kid learn anyway? The kids were taught however not only how to sing the songs, but also how to recognize the intervals they were singing. This was accomplished not only by using many songs with the same melodic structure, but also by teaching the solfege syllables to the songs, as well as assigning specific hand gestures to each tone in relation to the surrounding tones. Remember Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind?" The scientists in the movie were using the so-called Kodaly hand signals as a means of communication with the aliens. Actually the hand signals were borrowed from an Englishman named Curwen. They are better associated with Kodaly however because of the influence his methods had on music teaching around the world.

While the hand signal techniques were used to teach the kids how to recognize the movement of pitch up and down, along with listening, the kids were also taught how to dictate rhythmic movement. Musical dictation seems impossible for such young kids. It is! But this guy Kodaly was very clever, and he devised a very simple way for the kids to represent long and short notes using a handful of sticks. The sticks would be laid out on the ground or a very large table. Relating the patterns of long and short notes they hear to the patterns laid out by the sticks gave the children a means to express their understanding of the rhythmic patterns once they made the connection between what they were singing and what they were seeing.

Watch for more of this saga in the June issue of the Key News.

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