

Tapping Songs

All arts, we must remember, are phases of the social mind. We are so much in the habit of thinking of them in terms of art products that we forget that the arts themselves are groups of ideas and acquisitions of skill that exist only in the minds, muscles, and nerves of living men.

F. H. Giddings in *Civilization & Society* (1932)

At some point in my early childhood, probably before going to school, my mother and I started playing a game called “tapping songs.” It was a good game at bedtime and for getting calmed down before going to sleep because it required quiet and freedom from any distractions. One of us would tap with our fingers on the hand or arm of the other, just the rhythm pattern of a familiar melody. Try tapping “Pop, goes the Weasel” on the desk top or arm of the chair and you’ll see how the “pop” accent and following phrase gives you the song lyric and title of the song. Other songs are not so easy to guess. But it helps the other person guess if you exaggerate the dynamics of the rhythm on key words that you are singing in your mind to yourself. You really have to sing the song with energy in your head as you tap it on someone in order to get the timing right and give them a chance of guessing it.

I have no way to prove that doing this often can shape consciousness and coordination for easier and more enjoyable musicking throughout life, but it feels like that to me as I sit here sixty years later. I believe that rhythm’ing (groovology in action) and sounding (echology in action) are the heart and soul of musicking and that tapping songs is a game full of truth and consequences.

Pat Campbell:

What fun, tapping songs! In fact, it was also once a pedagogical tradition in music to tap rhythms. T. T. Giddings advocated finger-tapping every pulse, subdivision, and duration on a desk or table, and so for the first third of the twentieth century, classrooms of students could be seen pouring over rhythmic reading exercises, tapping their finger-tips on table-tops. Finger-tapping was a school music practice then, but imagine rows and rows of children sitting straight up at their wooden desks for class periods on end, tapping only their fingers. It was a deadly scene. Finger-tapping of this sort lacked the playful possibilities of feeling the music holistically, of allowing hands, feet, arms, legs, and torso to follow the music. Finger-tapping was typically absent of sound, too, for it was a technique on a mission: to develop the rhythm reading skills of students. It did not last, either, particularly when Dalcroze eurhythmics swept in to classrooms in the 1930s, where playful eurhythmic movement—skipping, hopping, gliding, and leaping—was stimulated by live music, where the point was listening and responding bodily, when symbolic notation came far later than the movement to the musical sound. Giddings’ finger-tapping is a long ways from the “tapping songs” game noted here, though, where musical play is central—no matter where it may lead. The sensory stimulation of touching, listening, and feeling while tapping songs builds that

intimate and invaluable parent-child bond. Adapted to school, children can tap the songs they sing on their own arms, or on the hand or arm of a partner. They can also “play” these songs on an imaginary keyboard that stretches from their elbow to their wrist, tapping away from low to high pitches as they sing and listen with concentration.

- Some discussion of T. T. Giddings’ rhythm-keeping technique can be found in a short historical article, (Campbell, Patricia Shehan, 1991, Rhythmic movement and public school music education: Conservative and progressive views of the formative years. Journal of Research in Music Education 39, 12-22), in which the seriously contrasting pedagogy of Dalcroze eurhythmics is also discussed as it evolved into the practice of American music teachers.
- Try tapping songs with someone. It makes for a great game at low-key times, or in constricted places, like riding a long ways in a car. How many songs can you identify just by feeling the rhythms? As you tap and feel the taps, concentrate on the “inner hearing” that seems to develop from the kinesthetic-tactile sensation.