

## Where *NEVER* is heard a discouraging word

What do we say to people who have been told they are “amusical” or “untalented” or just don’t have “musical intelligence?” The simple truth: someone lied to you as a child, and many people may have given subtle or blunt reinforcement to that lie with their commonly held prejudices over the years.

Usually it is one person who tells a little lie of convenience or who is “just making fun,” and as the twig is bent away from singing or dancing or whistling or drumming, so grows the tree. For lack of participation and practice most children don’t find a “sound” or “get into the groove,” and then life becomes continuing proof of: “born to be quiet,” “born to see but not be heard,” born to “listen and appreciate” within the limitations of “not having an ear for music” or “not having rhythm” or “not being able to carry a tune” or just being “a little too clumsy” to dance or stay in time. I have heard many, many, many stories of people being turned off at an early age; asked to “just mouth the words” is the typical tale.

There are very few stories of a parent or sibling or friend saying “I’ll find a teacher or teach you myself,” but those stories often have happy endings about someone becoming a lead singer with local bands.

There is the crucial story from Kelly Asher (“Movement, Music and the Small Child” in *MuseLetter* #2). teaching her out of tune daughter how to sing by first matching the out of tuneness so they could sing together, and then matching her son's out of time dancing so they could dance together. There is always a way to sing together, dance together, music together, if we first match the people who are “abnormal” or not in time, in tune, in synch – by our narrower standards. Teachers are hired to teach because they “know better” so matching the misfits may be difficult to do one on one, and perhaps impossible for most teachers and children to do in public. Maybe this is something that a parent, sibling, or playmate can do in a play or intimate mode.

And finally, there is the not so well kept secret that some great drummers and dancers can't carry a tune, and some wonderful instrumentalists on fixed pitch or well fretted instruments don't need a great sense of pitch either.

Given the five binaries or toggle switches for swiftly, simply and efficiently turning people off in this culture (see Allen Farnelo’s “The Five Obstacles” Section 5, Ch. 38) at various stages and ages, it is a miracle how many people resist all five “turn offs” and remain “on” the path and “into” music.

In almost any other culture being in tune and being in time are not fetishized or standardized as they are here. The minute those little devices for calibrating in-tune-ment were available all the guitar players I know were using one to be sure they were as in tune as they could be. Fortunately, the internalized standards are not as strict for “being in time” and no convenient little gizmo will calibrate the degree to which your pulse or

“time feel” matches a metronome; you have to buy a giant Japanese karaoke machine (with laboratory attached) to be told by a machine that your timing is off.

In most music traditions the premium is put on participation in ceremonies, rites, parties, rather than on qualifications for performance in front of an audience. There is no reason to turn anyone off. As Fleeta Hill, a Haudenosaunee clan mother put it (Ch. 35) , “to laugh at someone dancing or singing is to laugh at the Creator;” obviously not a good idea.

I realized just how extremely sensitive we humans are to criticism of any kind when I read one of the last term papers I received as a retiring professor: “Why People Stop Singing in the Shower.” A roommate or sibling casually says “you sound silly” or “boy, are you sour” and that can shut someone up for life! They don’t sing when anyone is around, and then they lose the habit. If they are not singing in the shower, where are they singing? For some “alone in the car” or “with the radio in the car” is the last refuge. If a casual three word comment can turn off an adult, what does a serious negative comment from an adult do to a child?

It seems a few simple rules would do the trick. Play with infants and children in ways that build performing confidence, synchrony, harmony, togetherness. Never discourage in word or deed. Always encourage. Look for ways to maintain participation. If some child is singing so loud and out of tune that others are annoyed (be sure it is not you that is annoyed because you, of course, are valuing participation and would never say “just mouth the words”), you could challenge them to sing and drum at the same time and say that getting the drum pattern right is the top priority. You could ask them to join the dancers and just hum along with the song. One of the great strengths of teaching drumming-singing-dancing as one performance process is that children can build on their individual strengths, keep participating, and work on their weaknesses later. You could ask the loud and off pitch child to sing the tonic as a drone and have two or three other children join in the tonic-holding so that the “off” kid gets practice in hanging on to one pitch with others. You could . . . . . and should. . . . fill in the blanks with some awareness of the child who is annoying, of the group dynamics overall, and make an educated guess as to what solution will keep the most people participating happily. Probably anything would be better than the make believe of “mouth the words.” For example, “sing softly until you are more certain of being with everyone else.” Or “fake it till you make it,” because the assumption is that you will make it in time.

Music teachers are under pressure from taxpaying parents and nervous school administrators to “come up with something” respectable during the holiday season or for a spring performance. So sometimes they might just shut up, put down or cull out anyone who is not in pitch or who is out of synch in some way. Couple this enforcement of Western performance standards to an ever decreasing ability to encourage music making skills in the very youngest. Budget cuts always impact the youngest kids and lowest grades first, and we have had a lot of cuts since the early 1970s. It all adds up to very little encouragement for pre-K to 3rd or 4th grade and then sudden discouragement for any who were warned away from ever trying to sing or ever trying to pick up an

instrument, but tried it anyway. Time is money, money is time, the little window of institutional opportunity opens for some at 4th grade, and is quickly snapped shut. Remember, a single discouraging word is all it takes to steer someone away.

A final discouraging word from me about the current situation in schools. Remedial. It has taken a lifetime for me to figure this out: just about everything we are currently doing in music education is remedial and should be understood as such. After the age of 1 or 2 we are almost always trying to fill losses, repair damages, start stalled engines, build foundations, hard wire into the brain/body what could have been more swiftly and easily incarnated much earlier. If we understand this -- that by school age almost all musical instruction is remedial -- then we will be more patient, developing methods to include everyone. And we will be putting 80% of the music budget into the pre-K programs, 15% into the Kindergarten year and the remaining 5% into first grade, because by 2nd grade nothing will stop these children from being active, successful and satisfied singers, drummers, dancers, performers for the rest of their lives. If we do what needs to be done early enough, they will be able to form and rehearse their own ensembles without much coaching. And they will be such a pleasure to teach and conduct that music teachers will be pleading for a chance to play with them.

In this new era there won't be any discouraging words because many of the children will be more "talented" than their teachers, most of whom never benefited from early intervention and early remediation.

Pat Campbell:

It can be discouraging to teach music in a climate where prime tributes are paid to the three R's but not the fourth R – for aRts, or to be music-specific, Rhythm! Children deserve the artistic and musical training that takes a school budget to make happen, and they deserve it at an early age, to be continued all the way through their secondary school years. It's a fact that where there are strong and spirited high school band programs, and award-winning choral and orchestral programs, there are typically very lively elementary school music programs that feed them because musically accomplished teenagers were once children with opportunities to learn music. High school powerhouses that pride themselves on their winning-est football teams and the numbers of national merit scholars they can produce would seem also to be the likely venues for raising up expressive young musicians who make it to all-state select choirs, jazz bands, orchestras, and wind ensembles. High-profile accomplishments, be they athletic, academic, or artistic, do not spring up all of a sudden when the young people hit their teens. Rather, they are the results of programs of learning that happen early on for kids in kindergarten, first and second grades, or sooner, as in the preschools when little ones are wide open to all they can acquire through sensory means. Like aRts, Rhythm, musicking in many sensory modalities.