

Rosemary Dunn, a member of the International Society for Music Education, the British Society for Music Therapy and the British Association of Choral Directors, has been Head of Music at Dover Grammar School for Girls for eighteen years. Her Music Department has the distinction of being the first in the country to have a sponsored Composer-in-Residence from the Royal Academy of Music and the first to be chosen to assist in the training of Music teachers in association with Trinity College of Music.

At present Rosemary Dunn is compiling a book on Contemporary Music notation and is in demand as a lecturer. She enjoys taking music to the wider community and founded Dover Music Centre in 1988. She has pioneered several educational initiatives, among them being the work her Sixth Form girls undertake with Primary School children and with the Aspen Unit, described in this article.

MUSIC: A SHARED EXPERIENCE

ROSEMARY DUNN

'Rhythm and Harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten'. Socrates thus perceived the power of music and all of us, familiar with the stories of David calming a disturbed King Saul with harp music or of Orpheus affecting the very trees and mountain tops by the sweetness of his lute playing have long appreciated music's unique qualities

For some people, however, the therapeutic power of music is not just something to wonder at but a most valuable and valued part of their personal development. Although

ROSEMARY DUNN WITH LEAH



it is beneficial to 'all sorts and conditions of men', it is especially useful for children whose language development is delayed, who lack confidence, who are autistic or who otherwise find life 'in the fast lane' more than they can cope with.

About five years ago, at the suggestion of a friend who works with children whose development is delayed, I approached the Aspen Unit, based at Whitfield Primary School, to see if they would welcome a few sixth-form musicians from the Girls' Grammar School with myself, the Head of Music, who would endeavour to use their musical skills for the benefit of the children.

Although Music Therapy training is intensive, requiring a Degree or equivalent in Music (three years) followed by specialised training for a further year, it is also true that sensitivity to the needs of others together with good musical common sense can be very effective. So it proved to be with the sixth-form musicians who undertook this work.

82 'The Aspen Unit' is a name with somewhat clinical overtones, perhaps giving a less than accurate impression of the warmth, love and astonishing expertise to be found in the interaction between the staff and pupils there. About twenty-four children are on roll at any one time, ranging from three to nine years of age. They all have 'Special Educational Needs' and the range of impairments they bear is wide. These might include lack of speech, inability to walk, incontinence, autism and all-round developmental delay. The teaching they receive from the skilled and devoted staff has an emphasis on language development and the acquisition of social skills.

Happily, it was arranged that once a week (although individual girls often spend spare time continuing their work at the unit) four or five girls from the Grammar School should spend an afternoon helping the Aspen Unit children with music. This is largely done on an individual basis with Nick Andrews, Teacher-in-Charge, suggesting which children might benefit most on a particular day. A small room is set aside for us and we use an electronic keyboard, a bass xylophone designed for classroom use and a lot of hand-held instruments like tambourines, maracas and hand-chimes (individually tuned hollow metal tubes with a rubber beater attached, which produce a beautiful mellow sound),

The kind of music we use is entirely dictated by the needs of the children. With our stock of nursery rhymes, rhythm games, songs and instruments, we have helped to calm disruptive behaviour, to soothe fear in a new pupil, to stimulate a passive child and to discover real musical talent.

Vicki is an example. She loves to play the electronic keyboard. We use this in preference to a piano, as it has a large repertoire of varied sounds, can be moved around, is less cumbersome and we can arrange to sit opposite a child while he plays or hold a child securely on our knees. When we first knew her Vicki seemed to be unhappy and to approach the whole idea of music very tentatively. After much persuasion she would place the heel of her hands on the keys and tap gently. One day

EMMA, Visiting Student, CAROLINE NEWTON, HEIDI, LAURA PINKHAM, AMY, CHERI KINSELLA





LEAH WITH CAROLINE NEWTON

she 'played' with more gusto and for a while enjoyed banging the keys at random, until she gradually refined her technique to using her fingers. Suddenly she became really aware of sound. We had selected an 'organ' voice for her at a low volume and she happened to alight two fingers together onto a discord of adjacent keys. I was sitting opposite her, with my face at her level. She raised her eyes, continued to hold down the discordant notes and gave me a long, clear look of understanding that this was what music was all about!

To many people discord is unacceptable, but if anyone cares to try the experiment, two adjacent white notes on an organ should be held down for about twenty seconds. A secondary effect becomes apparent – that of a 'beat' set up by the conflicting vibrations. (It is this beat which the piano tuner will endeavour to get rid of by tightening or relaxing the string tension, so 'tuning' the instrument).

Here, then, was a child whose hearing was acute enough to prefer the 'beat' to a concordant sound. This is usually found only in experienced musicians. Vicki is aware of 'the hidden music' which lies behind all sound, so some of her apparent discomfort in life may be because she finds the overloaded sound-world in which we live intolerable. We continue to work with her to provide her with the pleasure she gets from playing the keyboard and she has started to be interested in other musical instruments too.

Leah was quite different! Like Vicki, she was three years old, but energetic to the point of hyper-activity. She was a challenge. At our first encounter, I matched her mood by sweeping her onto my lap and bouncing her up and down to a nursery rhyme. She promptly sank her teeth into my shoulder! Ignoring that, I held her even more firmly with my left arm and played a lively tune in a major key on the keyboard with my right hand. She loved it. I then decided to try to change her mood with music. With my spare hand I played some simple chords in the soothing key of E flat major. She stilled. I tried

84 again, this time in the even more soothing key of C minor. She fell fast asleep for quarter of an hour!

Since then Leah has ceased to regard musical instruments as missiles to be hurled and has developed a particular fondness for the bass xylophone. This is a floor-standing instrument at small-child level, with robust wooden bars on a resonant wooden box'. It produces a rich, deep tone. Leah tends to hit it in a rather unco-ordinated manner, apparently at random notes, but it is clear she knows which notes are which. If I play simple chords upon the keyboard she will play xylophone notes that harmonise and we are refining her technique so that her concentration develops and her pleasure in music increases. She claps rhythmically to Nursery Rhymes and loves resting her head against the side of your face while you hum quietly. (A trick I have since tried to soothe fractious babies - it works!)

David was also three years old when we first met him and he was extremely shy, so much so that he hid his face in his hands when he thought anyone was looking at him. Even the sound of soothing chords played on the keyboard seemed too much for him and after several anguished glances around the room he went to the door connecting the room with the main play area where the other children were and sat on the floor looking through the lower glass panel. One of the girls sat on the floor behind David, pushing various small instruments like maracas into his field of vision, hoping to interest him. After a time, during which we all remained still and quiet, she placed a tambourine beside him and tapped on it three times. Slowly, Derek's hand found the instrument and, without looking anywhere other than through the glass door as before, David tapped three times in reply on it.

An interesting 'conversation' between Ruth and David then ensued. Her taps on the tambourine were answered exactly by David; two by two, four by four, and so on. I then softly sang his name to a musical interval known as a 'falling minor third' (such as 'Mary' or 'coo-ee' might be sung in a sing-song voice to attract attention. This usually elicits an immediate response from the hearing children). At that, he looked at me for the first time David's response to music is, in fact, quick and accurate and he very much enjoys being sung to.

We now welcome every child into the room by singing his or her name and often lead them into a musical activity by singing instructions to them. It never fails to enchant the youngest in particular. We also encourage them to dance if they can, or at least to move to the music.

The sixth form girls respond magnificently to the challenges presented to them by the Aspen Unit children. They invent ways of their own to capture the attention of the children with music and have enhanced the lives of some children with severe problems of communication, such as autism. Their patience is exemplary and at least one past pupil of Dover Grammar School for Girls is to train as a Music Therapist as a direct result of the inspiration of the Aspen Unit.

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