

Freedom in Education

June 2005

Welcome to the June newsletter, apologies for the delay. The topic this month is music. I find it a very interesting topic, because music is such a wonderful thing, something which everyone innately loves. Completely invisible and never lasting beyond the moment that it is in, it nevertheless has the power to awaken feelings of joy and sadness inside, the power to make one leap up and dance, or sit down and listen, in a way that nothing else can. Children seem to have an inborn interest in music, and when they hear it played it is often impossible for them to stay still, they just have to dance. It is a rare child who will not run over to a piano and start banging away when they see one, and perhaps it is for this reason that people are tempted to teach children to play instruments when they are very young, as well as because they believe it will make them better in the long run. Maybe this is sometimes the case, but a parent will have to be careful not to prompt or remind their child to practise, or the child might grow up never wanting to touch the instrument again.

Whether or not children should be taught to play music at a young age is certainly an interesting question.

I know for a start that when one has the urge to make music, it is seldom coupled with an urge to learn to read music. This is an academic process which is much easier to do when one is older. Something which is seldom said is that you do not need to be able to read music in order to be able to play an instrument, just as you do not need to read before you can speak. Reading music is only necessary when trying to play what somebody has played before. If you want to play something purely your own, reading music doesn't make a difference, and if you learn to play by ear you also do not need written music. It is an extremely useful skill, but it is not one which is necessary to have in order to play music.

I didn't learn an instrument when I was little, although I always liked singing, but I now play the piano and violin most days. It would be nice to become really good at these instruments, but that is not the reason I play them. I play because I feel there is a need inside of me to make music, there is a rhythm which wants to come out, and when I feel happy there is no better way to express it than by giving that happiness a sound, which sound must surely be music. For these reasons I believe that music is an important part of any balanced education.

The Contact list is still growing, and The Jamboree has three new updates, the wonderful account of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, India's sage King who only lived a hundred and fifty years ago, a recipe for donuts on Bethan's cookbook., and a little article about Wood Sorrel, that pretty plant with tasty leaves.

I hope you enjoy this month's updates,

Wendy

If you would like to send a comment, link, favourite quote, or news about an upcoming event to be included in next month's newsletter, please [contact](#) me.

Quote of the Month:

*"The man that hath not music in himself
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons stratagems and spoils."*

W. Shakespeare

Music

A musical education is not about producing musical prodigies.

If parents of young children do think about the musical education of their children, they probably imagine them having music lessons, working their way up through the various grades, and, if they show particular musical ability, one day playing in an orchestra – and then moving on to a more regular career. People see that only a tiny proportion of even highly-skilled musicians actually earn a living through playing music, and thus music is not considered to be of primary importance in education, and certainly not something that should be included in the core curriculum of ordinary children.

Furthermore, music has come to be seen as something that is difficult and which requires special skills. This puts off parents who are not themselves skilled musicians from teaching their children about music.

Music in Society

In order to come to a more rational understanding of music, it helps to consider the role that it has played in human life throughout the ages.

As far as one can judge, before the advent of modern systems of entertainment and modern technology, music was something that simply happened when people gathered together for any reason whatsoever. A relatively modern example of this is provided by the slaves in the plantations of the southern United States: they received no musical training (in fact their ‘owners’ made a concerted effort to ensure that they received no training in any skill whatsoever which might make it possible to support themselves outside the plantation) and yet they are reputed to have sung almost continuously, and they succeeded in creating what is widely regarded to be the best music to have come from the United States. Similarly, reading between the lines of village life in the UK (and Europe) up until one or two hundred years ago, it would seem that songs and music were never far below the surface of day to day life: villages did not have ‘professional’ musicians living within them, but when people got together to celebrate a wedding, the harvest, a birthday, or a local festival, it was never long before someone produced a fiddle, someone else a flute, someone improvised a drum and music started to be played. A similar phenomenon can be observed in just about every human community around the world.

The main exceptions to this are Western societies, in which people seem to have lost faith in their own ability to make music and have instead developed the habit of switching on the radio, playing a CD, hiring a disco, or paying a band, when music is required.

The Importance of Music

The fact that music arises spontaneously in every human society ought to have alerted us to its importance – after all, there are plenty of places where people do not read and write, where they have only the most rudimentary grasp of mathematics, where technology is still in the stone age, and where no one has even dreamed of inventing a computer, but, everywhere, people have music. In such circumstances it seems strange that in our system of education, music should have to take second place, behind almost every other subject.

Perhaps the origin of this situation can be traced back to the origin of schools – as has been mentioned previously in this magazine, it was never imagined when schools were created that they would ever be expected to take responsibility for the really important aspects of life. Their job was just to ensure that children learnt to read and write, and parents were still responsible for everything else. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that it was here, at the very beginning, that things started to go wrong: parents failed to understand the difference between allowing someone else to assist in an aspect of a child’s education, and actually relinquishing responsibility for a child’s education.

It seems to have been only a short step from expecting a school to teach children to read and write, to expecting them to be responsible for every aspect of a child’s life: from learning how to conduct themselves in public, to cooking, to gardening – and even to music.

Unfortunately, no one ever sat down to reassess priorities and to ask questions such as: ‘Is it more important that a child learns to read and write or to cook?’ ‘Is it more important that a child learns science or how to grow vegetables?’ or ‘How important is music in a child’s life?’. Instead, the system proceeded blindly with everyone assuming that someone other than themselves was responsible for each child receiving an all-round, balanced education.

If such a reassessment were done, most people would surely agree that music is, in fact, of paramount importance: other subjects, such as those traditionally taught at schools, are useful when it comes to earning a living, but music is central to the very essence of human life. Music touches one’s emotions directly, it allows one to express what one feels more eloquently than words; it has the power to change one’s mood; it can inspire joy; it can make one want to get up and dance; and it can also be the medium for expressing grief. Singing and making music brings a group of

people together more closely and more quickly than almost any other activity. In terms of education, one could say that other subjects ought not to be even considered until one is sure that a child's musical education is in hand.

A Musical Education

Of course, a musical education does not mean the sort of programme outlined at the beginning of this article – music lessons, tests, grades, public performances, etc. It has to be something that is completely natural and part of everyday life.

Young Children: Surprisingly little is ever said about the relationship that young children have with music: very young children cannot play musical instruments and the sounds that they create by banging things together when they are playing can be quite discordant, but anyone who has spent time looking after a small child will know how they are drawn to music. If you watch people walking past a busker in the street, you will see that the young children always want to stop and listen and, at the sound of live music, their faces lose the vacant expression that they so often wear round the shops, and instead light up with interest and pleasure.

It is probably in these early years that the foundations of a person's understanding of music are laid – in the same way that it is at this age that children acquire their knowledge of speech, of physical coordination, of caring relationships, and really of all the things that are of fundamental importance to life.

Older Children: As a child grows older, they develop the potential to make music for themselves, rather than to simply listen to music created by other people.

Everyone talks about the stresses and strains of the teenage years, but the fact that there are natural (and harmless) antidotes to these difficulties is seldom acknowledged.

It is not possible to play a joyful tune and to remain sad; it is not possible to play a soulful tune and to remain frivolous; it is possible to be feeling sad, to sing a sad song, and to end up feeling uplifted. Music has the potential to take a young person (or an older person) from a state in which they are worried and anxious about the future and focus them on creating something of beauty in that moment of time.

Teaching Music

There is a common misconception that you have to be a musician to teach music. This idea fails to take account of the fact that everyone – especially children – has an innate attraction to music and an innate ability to learn about music, without external instruction. The task of a parent or teacher is not to teach music but to create an environment that allows a child's feeling for music to develop of its own accord.

In this respect being a 'musician' can actually be a disadvantage – in one's enthusiasm to teach a child one's own ideas about music, one can prevent them from developing their own.

Modern sounds: One of the reasons why music is so much closer to the surface in non-westernised societies must, at least partly, be due to the fact that everything in the world of nature is inherently musical, while the sounds of machines and city life are not. A child who grows up surrounded by bird song, the sound of the wind in the trees, the rustling of leaves, and the silence that envelops the world when the sun goes down, is never going to be far away from making music for themselves.

Learning from this, it makes sense for parents in Western countries to protect their children from the noises of the modern world as far as is reasonably possible, i.e. not to play radios, televisions, CDs, computer games, etc. around young children, and to at least ensure that the home is a place of peace and quiet, whatever noises children have to endure when they are out and about. In this respect many people are also concerned about the effect of nursery schools on young children; nursery schools are often characterised by a cacophony of noise which must be very disturbing for any child who has to spend time there.

As has been hinted, however, music is not simply about sounds; a child's ability to develop a feeling for music depends primarily on the emotional atmosphere in which they grow up. Thus, even parents bringing up children in the centre of a big city, with no garden and no open space round about can still create an atmosphere conducive to musical appreciation by allowing a child to feel loved, free of stress, and unhurried – a sense of peace is perhaps at the heart of the musical experience.

**New to the Jamboree website:
Donuts**

Fresh home-made donuts are some of the nicest things to eat, and after trying one of these, I am sure you will agree!



Learning an Instrument

When they get older, a child becomes able to decide for themselves whether or not they want to learn to play a musical instrument, and, if they do, what sort of instrument, and how they wish to learn.

Lessons from someone skilled in an instrument provide the easiest way to learn, but such lessons do not have to be weekly, and do not have to be regular. A committed student can glean enough to keep them occupied for weeks or months from just a single hour with a teacher who knows what they are doing.

In the absence of a good teacher, a child can teach themselves to play an instrument by practising upon it, and can also use books, CDs, tapes, etc. Musical theory can perhaps be learnt more readily from a book than from a teacher.

The Aim

In the modern system of education it is assumed that the only reason to learn music to a reasonable standard is in order to become a concert performer; otherwise, music is simply an interesting social accessory that one uses when one is young but which one will have no time for when one is older and enters serious work – or else it is the preserve of artists and misfits who live on the fringe of normal life.

A more sensible approach would be to view music as a primary skill, more important than reading and writing, more important than arithmetic, more important than science and more important than knowing how to use a computer. Having recognised its importance, people could then perhaps also recognise its ordinariness: the aim of a musical education should not be to produce virtuosos and musical geniuses, it should be to produce people who love music, and who have music in their souls, no matter what career they choose to follow.

If it is true that in the old days people made music whenever they got together – whether they were village folk celebrating a wedding or tribal chiefs conducting a serious meeting – then one of the most worrying thing about today's world is that this is no longer the case, and that it is particularly not the case amongst so-called educated people. In the televised debates from the houses of parliament, there is seldom much singing; nor does one hear the delegates at the United Nations singing harmonies with each other; and when serious-faced scientists get together to discuss the world's problems there is seldom the sound of music coming from their meetings.

We are all to blame for trusting our fate to such unmusical people, and one of the aims of any parent or educator should be to ensure that the children in their care have a chance to develop a love of music which they can take with them into whatever line of work they choose to follow during the rest of their lives.

Gareth Lewis

Slave Music

The slave songs of North America are something of a musical phenomenon. The unique beauty of their tunes, words, rhythm and harmonies never fails to enrapture listeners, and yet the more they are admired the more they are wondered at, for how could slaves, people ask, ever have produced such masterly music?

Kept in ignorance as to anything beyond the daily chores of a plantation, forced to work from sunup to sundown, without spare time, sufficient food, clothing, or bedding, let alone music books or instruments, how did they find the time, skill, or inclination to make such music?

It seems that their physical hardships, rather than suppressing their need for music, only increased it. Many slaves said that without their songs, slavery would not have been bearable. When they were most unhappy they expressed in it all their woes, and the more they sang the happier they became, which perhaps explains why some of their songs are full of a joy and exuberance which is seldom heard in other music. It really seems that the people who inflicted the hardships on the slaves were actually suffering more than the slaves themselves, for they suppressed their feelings for the sake of wealth, and in so doing lost the precious virtues of kindness, pity and humanity along with their desire to sing.

Many of the songs were tunes the slaves had known in Africa, but the words were changed and over the years hundreds more songs developed.

The overseers encouraged this singing in the fields, for a silent worker was thought to be plotting escape, but this was not the only singing the slaves would do. When their 'owners' were asleep, in the few hours between sunset and sunrise, they would rise from their beds and hurry far away from the house, at the risk of being severely whipped if caught. And then in the dark woods, beneath the night sky, on bent knees, with hands upraised they would pour forth wild, sweet music from the depths of their souls, prayers of longing sent to the heavens above.

Anyone walking through the woods, as there occasionally was, would stop with wonder as they heard the hum of voices in harmony, vibrating through the air. They would come closer and listen to this midnight concert, and one traveller records with what pity he heard them chanting again and again the chorus of one of their saddest songs: "*O Lord, O my Lord, O my good Lord; Keep me from sinking down*".



It was not until after the American Civil War, when all the slaves were set free, that the songs were heard for the first time outside of the Southern states. A small choir made up of freed slaves travelled the globe and were greeted rapturously by all nations, from the aborigines in Australia, to Queen Victoria in England. No one who heard them could fail to be humbled by songs which were born out of slavery, and yet surpassed anything they had heard before.

The slave music did not stop there. It continued to develop into America's folk music, jazz, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, soul, honky-tonk, and rag, giving America the musical culture for which it is known the world over.

WL

Letters

A Happy Family

Dear Wendy

I last contacted freedom in education about six months ago- we had just taken the two eldest of our four children out of school and were filled with the doubts and anxieties of probably everyone who makes a choice that completely goes against what in society is perceived as being the 'right' thing to do. We are now six months older and our children are happy, confident, continuously inspired, spend most of the time in creative play - they are aged 7 weeks 4, 5, & 7 yrs and there is never, ever the mention of being bored - there are moments of stillness and thought yes, but that lasts a short while and then they are off on another adventure.

We are often complimented on their good behaviour, yet to us it is completely natural that they should be this way. We treat them as we would want to be treated. I am a firm believer that what you put in to the role of being a parent (a vocational parent that takes joy in 'nurturing' their child - not one who 'can't wait until they drop them off at the school gate'-and then finds no end of out of school activities to tire them out) is rewarded with sensitive, creative, vibrant young children who find life an absolute joy and who are allowed to live in that wonderful state of "innocence," (Is that a dirty word these days?) that as far as we can see in this country, seems to be almost non-existent feel sad that in a class of 32 pupils, each of our children could not find one single person that was in any way 'innocent'- the pressure to conform to what is 'acceptable' in society i.e., that you should have your quota of television every day or else you must be deprived, violent play in the playground, peer pressure to have all the latest commercial toys and brands, disruption in the classroom, just plain awful behaviour, would eliminate any ounce of innocence that a child would have on entering the school system. I have to say that the biggest gift we have given our children is the absence of the television - it is simply not a part of our lives (we are too busy running our theatre company) and so they have never had it and have never missed it. I do believe it to be the most powerful of mediums if only those in control had the bravery to make dignified decisions not just to pander to what 'keeps the viewer watching'.

I do worry about the future of this country - I worry for the future generations - those that will be our children's peers - will they ever find compatible people or will they only find people who have never been allowed to think for themselves and have spent their lives being told what to do without being taught to 'discern' what is good or bad , right or wrong?? I must say thank you to you all for the good sound advice you give in your books and periodicals - we always reach for them for inspiration and guidance.

Best wishes from a happy family here in Falmouth'

Tanja x

Replacing the Extended Family

Thank you for your excellent book One-to-One and the Freedom in Education magazine – we've been reading it with great interest and it has greatly influenced our decision to HE our two children aged 2 and 4.

There are a few things concerning me and I would like some ideas and comments on potential difficulties that can arise. Apart from the past 60 years or so, children were brought up in an extended family where they would often be in contact with many adults and 'real' work. Is the nuclear family with an average of two children able to provide such a diverse environment?

We find that if we accommodate the children's wishes (demands) and plan quite a few activities, they seem to expect more and more. Will HE completely take over our lives and how much time can parents claim for their own well being?

Finally, how does one balance a child's inclinations/interests with an overall education?

I'm sure most of these things will sort themselves out but the responsibility is great and the idea of getting it wrong daunting – as I can't blame anyone else for my children's shortcomings.

Yours sincerely, Susanne Teufel

Home Education in France

We receive a lot of enquiries about home education in France; examples are cited below. A fact that is often not mentioned is that many people do home educate in France without encountering any difficulty, and sometimes even with the support of local officials. Recently enacted laws relating to home education will probably prove to be unenforceable if they are ever tested in the courts.

We currently reside in Austin, Texas U.S.A. We have been home schooling since 1990 and have seven children ages 19 through 2.

My husband is exploring the possibility of a relocation to France with his employer.

The Home School Legal Defense Association here in the U.S.A. had an interesting article regarding a development towards home educational recognition in France at this time.

Please could you advise us about the current and possibly future situation for home educators in France from your point of view.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Jeanette Meditz

I am a South African citizen married to a French man and now living in Reunion Island. Reunion is a French department (all laws, education system, lifestyle, commerce is exactly alike to France).

Although it will be a while before my son starts school I would like to have all the information about home education. I am disappointed and discouraged by the education system here, and I find the schools are becoming more and more violent and aggressive institutions rather than proper learning ones. Education here on the island is not a priority for children. I am desperate to give my son a healthy education with which he can work and live anywhere in the world and also compete for good positions in future. I asked around here and I was told that home education is not allowed here - but if it is possible in France I am sure since we are part of France as a department we can also be able to do it? What are our options? Do I need to be a teacher? How do the examinations work?

Thank you,

Ratnam K Desriaux

Teenagers

I really enjoyed the recent articles on teenagers. I am home educating my two sons who are both teenagers and are not at all antisocial, rebellious or litter louts! It is such a shame that young people seem to have this awful stereotype attached to them. Your articles reminded me of Alfie Kohn's books "Punished by Rewards" and "No Contest" and there's another one I've come across recently called "Unconditional Parenting." Interesting reading!...

Kind regards,

Sally

Please send contributions to: wendy@freedom-in-education.co.uk

Or you can write to Gareth Lewis at gareth.lewis@freedom-in-education.co.uk

The contents of this newsletter appears in the Freedom in Education Magazine.