

Creativity Begins in the Cradle

from Julie Wylie

Work with one of the best choirs in New Zealand. The singers are musical, enthusiastic and work well as a group. Their singing is quite beautiful. The vocal styles range from very clear and bell-like to pure "rhythm and blues". Unlike other choirs the members are babies aged from four months to nine months.

Rosa is the lead singer. She has a pure clear singing voice. She is poised, confident and her arias are dramatic, highly creative and her singing involves long sustained notes usually on the dominant note of the scale, ascending and descending glissandos, often accompanied by grand hand gestures and whole body movements. She makes meaningful, playful eye-contact to everyone in the group and knows the power of the dramatic pause. Now aged seven months, Rosa became lead singer at four months of age.

Thomas aged nine months is a reliable "bass" singer. He likes to take the accompanying role and has even taken to holding hands with Rosa the lead singer. He sits and bounces in time, all the time watching everyone else in the circle with his big soulful blue eyes. He has learned to hum along. At times he places an encouraging hand on another singer's shoulder. Annabel is more of a prima donna. She sings, but on her terms and has her great singing days and her non-vocal "I'm just going to watch" days. Twins Thomas and Grace are learning to work together as a dependable singing team. They bounce in time. The more they bounce the more vocal they become.

There are other members but they are still learning the ropes about how to sit without falling, or how to use their singing voices without startling themselves and needing to be consoled. They are watching and listening intently. Soon they too will be taking a more active role as choir members.

Our choir always begins with vocal warm-ups singing up the first five notes of the scale. We sit in a circle with parents playing a crucial role sitting on the floor with their infants in their laps until they are old enough to crawl off. Parents provide singing support. We sing the *Feet, Feet, Feet* song outlined in Helen Willberg's article from *Sound Arts* Vol.1, No.2 p16. This song is recorded on my *Sing Baby, Dance Baby* CD. We usually sing it through twice and have a pause at the "Head" part of the song.

It is generally at this point that Rosa comes in with one of her long sustained notes. I wait for Rosa and we listen together. Sometimes she needs to sing her note several times for maximum effect. We echo her note or notes.

We then play Beth Bolton's *Baa Baa* singing game from *I Love My Family, Rock-A-Bye-Blues*. This is sung around a large stretchy rainbow ring made from polar-fleece covered bungy cord. The babies can see, hear, feel, taste the beat. Small hands reach out to hold onto parent's arms or to hold onto the ring if they are strong enough. They all move in response to the beat.

The most special time however is when we all sit around a German tuned slit drum with an amazing resonance and sound quality. As I play the pentatonic drum the babies sit all with their hands resting on the drum. It takes a little time of concentrated listening before the improvised singing begins. When it does it can be a remarkably moving experience. One infant likes to mouth the drum as he listens. He is receiving vital sensory feedback. All the infants are totally absorbed. Rosa waits for her entry point and then sings with great feeling and a wonderful sense of rhythmic flow. I match my playing to whatever she does. If she starts to jig, the music becomes more dance-like. Gradually the singers contribute their creative offerings.

During dance time within their parent's arms the babies are rocked, flown, jiggled and swung through space, always with an emphasis on the development of a sense of rhythm, weight, time, space and energy. Some dances involve a very clear predictable structure. Others involve slow, fluid movements. A variety of meters and musical genres are used. At the moment a favourite is *Teddy Bear's Tango*.

One particular dance is repeated every week. Eight steps one way, eight the other, Stop. Four slow steps into the middle and four back to our places are then followed by the same eight steps around and stop. All the babies are predicting when to stop and when to turn. Usually on the seventh beat little heads are turning in anticipation of parents taking them around in the opposite direction.

Every week a familiar "Hello" and "Goodbye" song is sung with a



marionette puppet being walked around to sing goodbye. The babies are learning to wait for their turn for the puppet to reach them.

Benefits of Musical Play

Musical play should be fun. It is something that is not taken too seriously. Music shared in a sensitive, playful way can nurture not only the babies but also those who care for them. Music has enormous potential for calming the system, and de-stressing both parent and child.

One of the most exciting outcomes of these baby music sessions is the way that the infants are teaching the parents to be playful. Parents might think that something should be done a certain way. The babies often have other ideas. Following the infants' lead with gestures and vocal sounds is helping the parents to play. Musical social play promotes secure attachment, sociability with others and pleasure and involvement in action songs, games and routines. The parents are reassured that there is no right or wrong way to play. If Thomas crawls away, his action can be developed into a crawling song.

Helping parents promote musical creativity

An important goal for parents is to stimulate and develop the musical creative imaginations of their children. If they respond positively to the actions of their child, there is a flow-on consequential effect on their child's behaviour. When the baby's creative offerings produces positive consequences, it gives the child a feeling of competence.

It is not surprising that Rosa takes such a prominent music role. Unlike the other babies in the group Rosa has had considerable music since long before her birth. Her mother Sarita Muir is a music teacher. Her mother and father both sing, dance and enjoy musical play with Rosa. Rosa loves to watch her parents dance together.

Trevarthen, (2002) believes that:

"We see in infants innate psychological foundations of both musical behaviour and musical awareness that are unique to human beings. A baby's selective orientation to musical sounds, critical discrimination of musical features of sound, and vocal and gestural responses that are timed and expressed to contribute to a joint musical game confirm that music, which is clearly a cultural achievement of human society, has strong roots in human nature".

The roots of our feelings of self-worth and competence are to be found in the cradle (Lewis, quoted in *Chance* 1979). The creative imagination peaks in young children around age four to four and one half, but can begin to decline about age five as a result of cultural, social and other influences (Burton and Kuroda, 1981)

"Music has enormous potential for helping to lay the foundation for adults with high self-esteem, providing many opportunities for carefully nurturing the inherent creativity that is within every child. Through music, parents or caregivers can communicate their love clearly and unambiguously. Children assured of their parents' love are able to face the world with confidence. Once a child feels truly secure he or she is free to become an independent thinker". (Wylie, 1995 p.16)

References:

- Burton, L and Kuroda, K. (1981). *Arts Play, Creative activities in art, music, dance and drama for young children*. Addison Wesley.
- Chance, P. (1979). *Learning Through Play*. Gardner press Inc. New York
- Trevarthen, C. (2002) *Origins Of Musical Identity: Evidence From Infancy For Musical Social Awareness*. Edited MacDonald, R., Hargreaves, D& Mieu, D. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- Wylie, J. (1995). *Music and the Small Child*. *Studies in Music Education* No.6. Edited Sell, D. School of Music University of Canterbury

Real materials for real creativity

Our proper role in the creation of children is helping them to become themselves. We give them lessons all the time about what is valued, what is important.

Do we give them the message that conformity is valued over difference, that compliance is valued over assertiveness, that being unique is insecurity-making rather than confidence-building?

Young children do not get bored with open materials that they can use according to their developmental level. What drives them to explore and experiment are the real activities and the real materials used by people important to them.

Stonehouse, A. (1994) *Not Just Nice ladies: A book of readings in Early Childhood Care and Education* pp 86 – 98

The Adult Role

3 things to enhance creativity:

- Encourage children by asking well-phrased questions, to produce more than one solution to a problem
- Permit them to explore new ways to use equipment, and try out unconventional ideas
- Foster their ability to create imaginative, self-expressive stories (Hendricks 1988 p.357)



Model and value creativity:

- Improvise
- Demonstrate valuing of creativity in all its manifestations
- Protect the children's right to a private, personal, non-commercial imagination - licensed characters (e.g. Mickey Mouse, Simpson's etc.) comprise 'the buying and selling of children's imaginations']
- Be respectful,
- Make self-expressive materials freely available.

"Creativity is imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value."
(Robinson. *All our Futures Report*, 199: 29)

Creativity may be seen as part of our intelligence, a way of thinking or making sense of life, or even linking ourselves with the eternal. It can also be seen as synonymous with play. Creativity engages us in the bringing out of new ideas from the imagination and gives us power to break away from the expected. However it always involves managing originality within a cultural, social or personal context.