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## **Infant Musicality: A Review Essay**

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### **Introduction**

Johanella Tafuri's research study on infant musical development presents a series of findings that speak to the diversity and variation in infants' musical growth within a detailed context in which their musical skills (particularly the ability to sing in tune) develop. It points to the importance of providing parents with sustained opportunities for interactions in singing and subsequently sustained musical engagement between parents, particularly mothers, and their children throughout the early years. The research study is significant in that it is the first longitudinal study, after Moog's 1961 study, that gives focus to this very young age group (0 to 3 years), dealing with "the systematic study of the development of several musical abilities through observation of the skills gradually learned by the same group of children, stimulated by an appropriate programme of activities (inCanto project) and accompanied by the support of family members" (p. 3). The book should be of interest to parents, educators and

researchers in providing a sound theoretical foundation for early childhood music education while providing useful practical music activities for parents and educators to consider in their interaction with children at home and in school.

### **Overview of contents**

The book begins in chapter one with a review of literature of musical development from zero to three years of age, detailing major research pieces that have given insights into: prenatal memory and early experiences of newborn infants; vocal communication of infants in terms of speech and song; evidence of imitative and original songs in infants and children; and insights into the use of rhythms, instruments and movement by infants and children. Chapter two details the inCanto project, a program created by the researchers for the development of musical abilities (singing, instrumental playing and movement) in 0-6 years. The inCanto project was guided by educational principles that look to: the centrality of the child; attention to the child's needs and interests; the natural manner and pace of the child's development; the individuality of an education that is "made to measure"; the demands of the social dimension; and the significance of concrete experience (p.31).

Documentation of the research project included observations and recordings at the inCanto project, a series of diaries prepared by the researchers to be completed by the parents at home while interacting with the child and audio/video recordings of the child produced at home by the parents. The documentation allowed the researchers to trace the musical development of the same group of children over an extended period from 0 to 6 years old, with 0-3 years being reported in this book. Voluntary participants were elicited through the Health Service of Bologna and Imola (Italy) with the condition that the participant needed to be about the sixth or seventh month of pregnancy. A total of 119 participants started with the inCanto project with some attrition after some mothers have given birth and others giving up after one, two or four years for various reasons.

The procedures and results of the research study were fleshed out in chapter three, detailing research protocol that served to investigate: i) if infants showed signs of recognition of a song that they had heard repeatedly before birth. The results confirmed the existence of prenatal memory; ii) the effects of infants' listening when the mother sings and/or plays recorded music. The diary entries from parents suggested the tendency for singing and playing recorded music to calm babies and allowed them to fall asleep sooner; iii) the frequency and effects of playing with songs like making up words to known songs and using singing games. These activities brought enjoyment for both the parent and the child; iv) the occurrence of musical babblings, which in this study suggests that "the babies who have been exposed to musical experiences during prenatal and neonatal stages produce vocalizations... that appear earlier, in great number and with greater musical value with respect to those of other children who have

not had such a rich experience” (p.58); v) the transition from musical babbling to singing where a vocal production typology was developed and the recognition that young children are expressive in song and are creators beyond imitators; vi) children’s singing in terms of his/her ability to sing in tune. It was found that the “perceptive-cognitive and phonatory mechanisms are ready before the age of three” and children are able to imitate a melody correctly though the ability does not develop at the same time for everyone and is not yet stable (p.68); vii) the invention of songs by the young children; and viii) their use of rhythm, instruments and movement. The data suggested that interest in musical instruments was very high and, sound and movement are the beginning means that newborns express themselves and communicate, indicating an inalienable right that these needs ought to be satisfied from birth.

The results point to the ability of all children to learn to sing in tune under conditions where rich musical experience exist, defined by family time dedicated to singing and listening in an atmosphere of encouragement and praise. The pace of development varies “according to changes at home, personal enrichment through different kinds of experience (not only musical) and the development of the temperament-character of the child” (p.85). Tafuri brought forth the notion of “musical deprivation” (i.e. children who cannot sing in tune, do not keep in tempo, do not respect the rhythm of a song, etc. in the first year of elementary school) as a result of a lack of a musically stimulating environment provided by parents, caregivers and musical teaching in the first three years, including the last three months of prenatal life.

Chapter four is devoted to the parents’ testimonies about the progress of their children and what they thought of the research that was done. An end-of-project report, framed by guiding questions, was requested by the researchers and a total of 30 reports were collated from the parents. The reports spoke to: numerous aspects of motivations and expectations about the project; the difficulties of staying with/attending the project due to distance, time, and child factors; progress made by the children in their initial perceptions of listening to music, their development of musical skills in singing and instrumental playing and wider benefits in terms of memory, facility in learning and creative skills development; good beginning school experiences during musical activities; satisfying moments for the parents in terms of their gain in knowledge and interest in music, confidence in singing, and better communication with their child; family involvement where music bonded the family and created new friendships; parents’ view on the future musical skills and wider skills development of their children.

Chapter five attempts to link the results of the study to learning and education as proposed by Howard Gardner and Albert Bandura, pulling together notions of musical intelligence, the need for favorable social and cultural contexts and the significance of observational learning. Chapter six then presents musical activity suggestions taken from the inCanto project, for use

by educators and parents to aid in the development of musical abilities in each individual child.

### **Thoughts on methodology**

It is curious to me the emphasis Tafuri takes on quantitative data being “the eyes of science” (p.89) as encapsulated in chapter three. Tafuri strongly reiterated that, “This observation had to be objective and to keep strictly to the data. It had to use precision and methodological rigour and, where necessary, statistical instruments, in order to verify significance of the results” (p.89). According to Tafuri, the qualitative data presented in chapter four of the parents’ testimonies provided “warmth” to the scientific data and she had to “beg the reader’s forgiveness for our detailed presentation that might seem to be rather long” (p.89). Suffice to say, without getting into a heated debate (and because it is already declared a non-war) about the merits of qualitative methodology and data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), that there is no need for an apology and the suggestion of a hint of hierarchy that exists which favors quantitative methodology, needs to be strongly dispelled. One may refer to Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Smith & Heshusius (1986) amongst a vast range of literature that point, for instance, to the distinction between positivist and non-positivist epistemologies.

While the ‘scientific’ results of the study prove useful to the continual examination of musical development in young children, to me, the more significant part of the book lies in the presentation of the candid and honest views and reactions of parents and researchers on the inCanto project and their interactions with the growing child at home, providing insightful thoughts and reflections on methodological, pedagogical and practical considerations for current and future work. Also, while I appreciate what the book offers in its familiar and standard presentation of music education research work, I hunger for and challenge future authors in the field for new and perhaps provocative ways of structuring their presentation, making the explicit implicit in examining underlying assumptions and deconstructing procedures and result; after all, we are living in a post-positivist and post-modern world. I would also use this book to open up critical dialogue with researchers and educators from other arts disciplines (visual art, dance and drama) who have ventured into early childhood arts education, to discuss and examine their assumptions, methods and strategies while re-examining ours; making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, and allowing outsiders to inform insiders in an attempt to broaden and deepen our understanding of and approach to the field of music education.

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### **About the Author**

Chee-Hoo Lum is assistant professor in the visual & performing arts academic group at the National Institute of Education/Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include children's musical cultures and their shifting musical identities; the use of media and technology by children, in families, and in pedagogy; creativity and improvisation in children's music; elementary music methods and world musics in education.

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