



At the Top of Their Lungs

by Erika Alexia Tsoukanelis, from *Chronogram*

In the West African country of Ghana there is no word for performance. The act of sharing music is instead called play. Children spend their days crafting elaborate clapping and singing games, and their nights watching adults offer traditional songs to each other. Drumming is common. Singing accompanies most daily activities. Music generates togetherness.

Not so in our modern society, where many people have grown up feeling that they can't carry a tune or keep time to a beat. They feel that music is something for the gifted to make, while they pay to take in its mystery.

The truth is that making music and exploring movement is for everyone. It's not about performance; it's about expression, celebration, growth, fun, emotional honesty, and community.

This is the spirit behind the groundbreaking program called Music Together. In a time when music education budgets are being slashed in public schools, Music Together cultivates children's musical development from infancy through kindergarten with classes where parents and kids sing, dance, chant, and play instruments together. Specially trained teachers, exposed to the latest research in early childhood music development, encourage the native ability in all human beings to make music and dance.

Callie Hershey is a new teacher at Mid-Hudson Valley Music Together in New York. When her daughter Reina was 15 months old, they attended their first Music Together class, and Hershey was blown away. She had been teaching in elementary schools for 10 years, but she had never seen a program do so much to unite parents and children in open, cheerful exploration.

The program gives families a new way to communicate, says Kelleigh McKenzie, director of Mid-Hudson Valley Music Together. Children are respected and their caretakers are empowered. Parents get to watch children learn, but in the end, they are the real students. They are the role models for their children, the ones who will weave the richness of music and dance into their family's everyday life.

"Your child thinks your voice is the most beautiful voice in the world," Hershey says.

The Music Together organization, now 20 years old, has just moved into a large new international headquarters near Princeton, New Jersey. Considering the group's humble roots, this is a great achievement.

Kenneth Guilmartin established the Center for Music and Young Children in 1985 using the royalties from a copyrighted version of the song "Happy Birthday to You." His grandfather published the song for its writers, sisters Patty and Mildred Hill, and helped them funnel proceeds from their classic to early childhood music education programs that came to include the center. In 1987 Guilmartin and Lili Levinowitz offered the first Music Together classes.

While it is true that schoolchildren who learn music tend to do better in math and that high school seniors who have studied music appreciation score higher on SATs, academic achievement was not Guilmartin and Levinowitz's primary motivation. They looked instead to work by psychologist Howard Gardner that viewed music as a separate human intelligence and learning theorist Edwin Gordon's evidence that most people have at least average musical aptitude. They believed that this aptitude had been stunted in many children because it was not nurtured during crucial preschool years.

"The music in and of itself is worth it," says Susan Hoffman, editor of Music Together's national newsletter, *PlayAlong*. "So much is learned through music: rhythm, meter, melody, tonality. There's lots of information in the simplest song or chant. We teach body awareness. We stimulate emotional intelligence. Music is a uniquely coordinating experience, connecting eye, ear, voice, brain, heart, and the kinesthetic self. It is the essence of being human. We are on a mission to change the world, one song at a time."

With Music Together classes now offered across the United States and in 22 other countries, they seem to be well on their way. Guilmartin and Levinowitz continue to collaborate, offering original music that is pitched in the right range for children's voices (slightly higher than adults'), in a full assortment of tonalities and meters. Instrumental play-alongs, rhythmic chants, and songs with thought-provoking lyrics make Music Together classrooms around the world reverberate with wonder and feeling.

Outside the classroom, children show the impact of the Music Together experience in how they express themselves and relate to others. Lucas has been taking classes since he was three months old. His mother reports of her ten-month-old that if he is upset when they are, for example, at the grocery store, she can calm him down by singing a song from the class. Lilly has learned how to walk and how to dance at the same time. Four-year-old Elizabeth, introduced to Music Together at six months, was able to comfort a little girl who began to cry after her nanny dropped her off for a play date. Elizabeth sang "They Always Come Back," Music Together's song about separation anxiety.

Parents frequently report that they have rediscovered the delight of creating music. They thought they were tone-deaf or inept dancers, and they have been able to release this self-judgment and have fun with their children.

Like the people of Ghana, those involved in Music Together—administrators, teachers, parents, and children—have made music a way of life. It is not performance, it is play, and it enriches all they do.

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