

STEPPING NOTES

Advice Sheet for Parents #2

SUPPORTING AND ENCOURAGING YOUR CHILD'S MUSICALITY

[N.B. Throughout this sheet, the masculine personal pronoun doubles as the epicene.
This is purely for grammatical convenience.]

In Stepping Notes your child is building his musical competence from the foundations up: first, musicality (internal, body-based, subconscious understanding of the elements of music - pulse, rhythm, melody, harmony, phrasing etc.); then, musicianship (conscious understanding of these elements through symbol - note-names, hand-signals, written notation etc.); finally, translating these now-conscious elements into instrumental sounds. All these first steps are not a *preparation* for musicianship; they are the *heart* of musicianship. The better you understand these processes, the more you will be able to support your child's musical development with confidence. The more you personally involve yourself with them, the more your child will recognise music as an essential part of life. Therefore, **you, the Stepping Notes parents, are always warmly and enthusiastically invited to actively join in your child's class frequently**, whatever his age.

Also, the more you can informally extend the Stepping Notes experience into everyday life, the better your child's chances of rapidly internalising what he is learning. Singing together and moving to music are the foundation of all musical experience. If you want your child to grow up musical, you must sing, and you must move to music. If you don't, your child won't, and all the music lessons in the world will go to waste! This need not be done in a didactic manner: it can be as simple as singing together when you are out for a walk, or listening to music in the car.

Here are some other things you can do, not directly related to Stepping Notes, but of immense benefit to developing your child's musicality:

listen to good music

There is no reason why young children cannot love listening to fine music. But they need your help and encouragement to find it, and it helps to present it to them in a meaningful way, and in bite-size chunks. Here are some suggestions to get you started: -

- Listen together to Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. It includes narration, so will require no introduction on your part. An excellent introduction to instrumental sounds.
- For more studious types, Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* is also fascinating.
- Other brilliantly evocative pieces, in order of ease of listening: Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals*, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Holst's *The Planets*. These contain no narration, so follow the sleeve notes with your child, explaining the animal, scene or character described by each movement.
- Get the video of the Disney *Sleeping Beauty*. The music is all from Tchaikovsky's ballet, so by the time your child has watched it a few times he'll know all the tunes. Then get a recording of the ballet music (excerpts first, later the complete ballet) and talk through the story from the sleeve notes. Then, when he's completely familiar with the music, go and see the full ballet.
- Tell him the story of the Nutcracker. Then listen to the music (the "suites" first, then the complete ballet), before going to see the full ballet at the theatre.
- Get the Disney *Fantasia* video. Then get the music on CD: Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (for the Mickey Mouse bit), Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (for the dinosaurs), Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony (for the centaurs etc.), Mussorgsky's *Night on Bare Mountain*, Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor etc. Having seen the video, your child will love to hear the music on its own.

- Ditto for the new Disney *Fantasia 2000*: Shostakovich's Second Piano Concerto (for the tin soldier), Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (for the city scene), Stravinsky's *Firebird* (for the green fairy girl), Respighi's *Pines of Rome* (for the whales), Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

- Get the video of the Royal Ballet *Tales of Beatrix Potter* (music by Lanchbery, choreography by Ashton). The kids will love the stories, especially if you have already read them some Beatrix Potter, and the choreography is an excellent expression of the relationship between music and movement.

All this is a completely painless way to help your child to love classical music. By the time he is familiar with all the above, it will be easy for you to gradually introduce him to other child-friendly pieces of concert music, ballets and operas. Check what's on at the big London concert halls, and English National Opera or Covent Garden. Select carefully what you are going to see, well in advance. Then listen to the CD a few times with your child, telling him the story as you listen, and by the time you go to the performance he will already be an aficionado and will know the music better than most of the rest of the audience! [N.B. None of this need be expensive. You can order most of these CDs and videos from the library.]

All the above will of course, *inter alia*, help your child develop a good ear for instrumental timbres, and explore for himself what instrument he would really like to learn to play. That way you can be sure that when your child eventually does decide to start instrumental lessons he is making an informed and intelligent choice.

Do not be tempted to buy synthesised "specially for children" recordings of the classics. The reason classical music is so special is because it is played live, by real musicians, expressing with their hearts, through real acoustic instruments, some of the most profound and uplifting mysteries of life, humanity and our relationship with the immanent. Watered-down versions of this merely patronise our children.

Another enjoyable pastime which will benefit your children's musicality is watching some of the classic musicals on television. One specific recommendation: the "Doe a deer" sequence from *The Sound of Music* is one of the most glorious condensations of all that is good in music pedagogy: "When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything" could be the Stepping Notes motto!

let your child explore an instrument on his own

With the musical foundations laid by Stepping Notes, your child can learn a lot just from exploring the notes on a simple melodic instrument, and learning by trial and error how to reproduce on that instrument the melodies he can already sing. A simple diatonic metallophone is the most obvious instrument: the best-sounding ones are the ones I use for Stepping Notes, which I can order for you if you like. Alternatively, buy a cheap old (acoustic) piano and leave it accessible in your house for your children to explore: they can teach themselves so much long before they need to start lessons. An electronic keyboard is another alternative, though one which needs sensitive handling: a real piano (even an old banger) makes a far richer and more satisfying sound, and will be far better at helping the children to develop a good finger technique.

Please feel free to ring me any time if you need any further advice.

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