

## **“There’s A Track Winding Back...”: Re-Discovering The Music In Us All** **Susan West, School of Music, Australian National University**

A group of junior high school students, boys and girls aged 13 and 14, are waiting outside a retirement village in the ACT. They are behaving like high school students generally do: playing about, teasing each other, ignoring the teacher’s request to keep the noise down. After a wait of five or ten minutes, a bus pulls into the car park. The high school students gather by the bus’s door. Out tumbles a class of Kindergarten children from another local school. The two groups have already met once, at the Kinder children’s school. The older students are greeted with shrieks and a rush of hugs, which they return. They take the hands of their younger ‘charges’ or piggy back them into the retirement home where a group of senior citizens is eagerly awaiting their arrival. The senior citizens are happy to see them all but their eyes seem to be more focussed on the younger children. One of the high school students sighs and says, “I’m not the cute one anymore.” An elderly lady overhears and reaches out her hand, “Oh yes you are, dear!” she says. In a moment, the students have spread around the room, older with younger, hand-in-hand now with a senior citizen as well, and then the singing starts – “There’s a track winding back...”

For the next hour, everyone: primary students, high school students, senior citizens, teachers and venue staff, make music together. There is no ‘choir’ and no separation between the groups. The students move around the room, singing with first one person then another. They encourage those residents who are fitter to stand and dance with them. The high school students watch over the younger singers while interacting with the residents, who show care and attention to the visitors, chatting between songs and encouraging the singing by singing themselves.

This is the ANU School of Music’s *Hand-in-Hand* program in operation. The combination of high school students with Kindergarten students is an experiment. It is not absolutely necessary for the younger students to be chaperoned in this way. Groups of young children have been involved in *Hand-in-Hand* for ten years. But the high school students, as part of their on-going involvement in *Hand-in-Hand*, have asked to mentor younger children and they have been responsible in large part for the preparation of this particular group, with the aid of the class teacher.

*Hand-in-Hand* is one way of providing an avenue in our society by which music making can be returned to the place it belongs – with all of us, from the very start of our lives. As John Kaemmer says, ‘in modern industrial society one of the major features of music is that it has become a type of commodity to be bought and sold...the prevalence of phonograms has caused musical behaviour to shift from actively producing music to passively listening.’<sup>1</sup> This development in the way music occurs is not common to all societies. Ian Cross agrees, saying that ‘...the notion that *the* predominant mode of engagement with music lies in the listening experience appears to apply only in certain (largely western) cultural contexts.’<sup>2</sup> Christopher Small also writes that, ‘...in nearly all non-European societies music is not separate from everyday life but is an integral part of it.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kaemmer, John E. (1993), *Music in Human Life*. University of Texas, Austin, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Cross, Ian (1999), ‘Is music the most important thing we ever did? Music, development and evolution.’ *Music, Mind and Science*. (ed. Suk Won Yi), Seoul National University Press, Korea.

<sup>3</sup> Small, Christopher (1977), *Music, Society, Education*. John Calder Ltd, London, UK.

Small believes that one of the reasons for this development in our society is that ‘we have passed our experience into the hands of experts...who filter our experience through their expertise.’<sup>4</sup> How many adults have we heard say, often with what may sound like a degree of pride, that ‘I can’t hold a tune’ or ‘I’m tone deaf’ or ‘I had to mouthe the words in choir.’ Mothers protest that they can’t sing because their children tell them it sounds awful. Yet writers point out that ‘there are non-Western cultures in which musical achievement is regarded as the norm rather than the exception and where, although there are variations in the degree of skill and ability, every member of the culture can dance, sing or play instruments...it also seems likely that [in Western cultures] there is a widespread underachievement in the population at large. The source of this lack of participation might be cultural or pedagogical or both.’<sup>5</sup> In societies like ours we both realise that music making, particularly singing and dancing, is ‘normal’ and yet can’t seem to escape from the paradigm that sees most of us disengaging from music as we become adults.

As suggested by the writers above, the reasons for this may be cultural, as, for example, in the development of the recording industry that reduces us to a more passive role, and/or pedagogical, as in the way we teach music to children. We don’t, in general, adopt the principle of ‘learning through social experience’<sup>6</sup>, as happens in African tribes, when it comes to music. James O’Brien makes the same point with regard to Native Americans when he says that ‘in general there is little systematic development of musical abilities in most tribes. Music education occurs as a natural acculturation to tribal ways.’<sup>7</sup> In order to help replace the lack of music making in our culture, we provide music education in schools. But, since this education happens in a formal context, we often apply formal approaches to the learning, whether the learning involves singing or playing an instrument.

Singing, at least, often maintains a communal aspect. With instrumental learning, this aspect is often also lost. The many hours students may spend alone in a room (with the door closed!) playing their instrument, has no relationship to the social development of music making skills as practised in many other societies. As Murray Schafer said ‘the solitary playing is antithetical to the traditional notion of music as a social activity.’<sup>8</sup> The idea that this playing leads to some development in skills is also one that does not necessarily ‘compute’ for other societies. Small, again, discussing music-making in Bali, says that ‘...activities in general are carried out not as a progression towards some desired but deferred goal but as inherently satisfying in themselves.’<sup>9</sup>

*Hand-in-Hand* is seeking to address this very problem and re-create, albeit through the school system, elements of music-making that have been lost to us. The program is designed to allow children of all ages to share music in the community with various social groups. As in some other social traditions, the music is never seen as a performance but a group activity, facilitated by the students who actively encourage the shy, the infirm, or the unwell to actively participate in whatever way they are able.

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<sup>4</sup> Small, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Cope, Peter & Smith, Hugh (1997), ‘Cultural context in musical instrument learning.’ *British Journal of Music Education*. Volume 14, No. 3. Cambridge University Press, UK.

<sup>6</sup> Small, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> O’Brien, James P. (1994), *Music in World Cultures*. Kendall/Hunt, Iowa, USA.

<sup>8</sup> Schafer, Murray (1973), ‘Further Thoughts on Music Education.’ *Australian Journal of Music Education*. No. 13, October.

<sup>9</sup> Small, *ibid.*

The program empowers the students to see themselves as both making music for enjoyment and using music as a force for social benefit for others. There is no focus on ‘correct’ musical outcomes, no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and no ‘practising’ to achieve a required technical result. There is ‘just’ the learning of songs that others can easily sing and providing opportunities to sing them with others. I put the word ‘just’ in inverted commas because this is one question that sometimes comes up when explaining the program to others: “Is it ‘just’ about singing?” The answer to this question is “yes” and “no.”

The fact that the vast majority of adults in our society don’t sing even on their own, never mind in front of other people, is one reason why we can’t ever really talk about ‘just’ singing, as though it’s a simple and uncomplicated human activity like walking. For many cultures, it is ‘just’ that, but no longer for us. The very fact that singing in *Hand-in-Hand* does *not* centre around achievement and musical development makes it immediately different from most other music-making that does happen in our society. This singing is about social and emotional connection. It is, to paraphrase Beethoven, about music travelling from one heart to another. *Hand-in-Hand* doesn’t operate on the tacit but prevalent belief that heartfelt music making and degree of music skill are inextricably linked: that is, the better you are at making music the more ‘heartfelt’ will be your musical communication with others.

Indeed, *Hand-in-Hand* is working from the opposite premise: that young children who have not been ‘taught’ music are more easily able to express themselves joyously and altruistically through music making because they are not considering the rights and wrongs of what they do. Altruism is at the core of the approach. As John Diamond says, on aspects of whose work the program is based, ‘the basic idea of altruism is to direct the music outward for the benefit of another – as the mother does with the lullaby.’<sup>10</sup> This is an idea shared by other writers like John Frohnmayer who writes that, ‘music is giving. It expresses the natural human characteristic of generosity...The great paradox of music is that the more we share it, the more we receive back.’<sup>11</sup>

The philosophy of *Hand-in-Hand* is very simple but its practice requires training and understanding, particularly for those delivering the program, rather than just the children themselves. By approaching music in this way with young children the program is not aiming to *prevent* musical achievement. Musical achievement occurs naturally as it does in other cultures where music is an active part of the social and communal life of all. *Hand-in-Hand* is simply moving away from a paradigm that values achievement more highly than involvement. As Christopher Small says, ‘it is possible to restore the communality of music which we have lost in our pursuit of what are finally illusory ends.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Diamond, John (2001), ‘The Therapeutic Power of Music.’ *The Handbook of Complimentary and Alternative Therapies in Mental Health*. (ed. S. Shannan), Academic Press, San Diego, USA.

<sup>11</sup> Frohnmayer, John (1994), ‘Music and Spirituality: Defining the Human Condition.’ *International Journal of Arts Medicine III (I)*. Summer.

<sup>12</sup> Small, Ibid.