

Teaching music to deaf children

by William G. Fawkes

Music? For deaf children? What can they possibly gain from music? Such is the common reaction when the subject of this article is mentioned. It is assumed that because a person cannot hear music correctly, as hearing people do, then it can have no point for him or her. Schools for the deaf generally ignore the subject. A few isolated deaf children receive some tuition in piano or flute, but they are an exception.

In spite of this I decided about six years ago, to attempt to teach the deaf children in my school, the Mary Hare Grammar School for the Deaf, at Newbury in Berkshire, to play at least a few simple tunes on the descant recorder or to strum a few chords on a guitar. My motive was not to improve their speech or sense of rhythm but to see if it were possible for deaf children to enjoy making music for its own sake.

The beginning was humble enough. Two seventeen year-old boys wanted to learn to play the guitar. Another fancied himself as a drummer. A pop group! A deaf pop group!! Crazy. From acoustic guitars they moved on to electric guitars. The noise was awful. Peaceful lunch hours were shattered by twanging discords and thumping a-rhythmic drumming. The staff eyed me with suspicion. Bill Fawkes has gone mad!

On a quieter note, a few girls wanted to play recorders. A couple of them had already learnt a few notes at junior school and wanted to continue. We began in the usual way - "The Old Grey Goose", "Summer Good-bye", "London's Burning".

The rate of progress was slow, painfully slow at first, but it was progress. I learnt as much as the pupils - the problem of breath control for deaf children is a big one. The basic sense of rhythm needs working at constantly. The children became discouraged easily; they needed constant assurance that it would all be worthwhile in the end.

It soon became clear to me that the idea of teaching music to deaf children was not so silly after all. The number of children wanting to learn grew. After playing in unison we decided to try simple duets, two-part tunes for two descant recorders. From this came the idea of trios, not for descant only, but treble and tenor. These larger instruments appealed to one or two and before long we had a real Recorder Trio.

After a year's work, done during out-of-school hours, the Principal of the school agreed to place group music lessons on the curriculum for the first three years. This presented a real challenge. Up to now only volunteers learned music. Now everyone would be expected, during his or her first three years at

school, to spend at least forty minutes per week making music. Not all children show musical ability. Add to this the fact that the children cannot hear it properly either and you have a problem on your hands!

One thing, however, was quite clear in my mind. Music is fun. We are going to have fun, if at all possible. Basic duple, triple and quadruple rhythms had to be tackled in a way that all could enjoy. Armed with an old piano, three battered tambourines and the ability to act the fool, I set to work.

Dreams came true

I soon discovered that my deaf eleven year-olds did not know the lyrics of such songs as "Old MacDonald had a Farm", "She'll be coming round the Mountain", or "Grandfather's Clock". I soon discovered also that they loved to chant these songs, to act them, and some to play them on recorders. As the school year progressed these deaf first formers gradually built up quite a collection of songs, with seasonal items such as Christmas carols and Easter hymns to boot. There were also such things as clapping to the rhythm of the "Match of the Day" theme music played on the piano, followed by other football songs, chants and actions which added to the fun. It soon became apparent that outings in the school bus were to be accompanied by communal singing such as hearing children indulge in. Progress was being made.

After some three years of this kind of activity both inside and outside the curriculum it became obvious to me that simply singing songs and playing elementary duets and trios was not going to suffice. Two girls wanted to learn to play the flute, another the clarinet. I wanted a full-blown four-part recorder ensemble playing Elizabethan and Jacobean music!

Our dreams came true. By sheer hard work and a growing love of music some of the pupils achieved the impossible. Deaf flautists could be heard playing Couperin in the dormitories. Music by King Henry VIII, John Dowland and others in three and four part arrangements floated out of the school windows, to the delight of all.

But inevitably questions arise. How much are the children themselves hearing of the music they are making? What about expression - loud, soft, fast, slow, and the rest? I discovered that the children listened very acutely with what residual hearing they had. Hearing-aids were never neglected in music lessons. They wanted to "hear" all. They listened to each other, followed each other's finger patterns on the recorder holes, became

annoyed when things went wrong which had gone right before. They became critical of their own performances. They wanted to improve.

Progress in the group lessons on the school curriculum evolved steadily also. We began to group the second and third year pupils into classes according to musical ability, and these classes did not always coincide with degree of hearing loss. Severely deaf children were emerging as competent musicians, able to hold their own, and surpass others with less severe hearing problems. We soon had second year and third year bands playing for the school's morning assembly and for parents' visiting days. Before long public performances were to become common-place. Such songs as "Bring me Sunshine", "Take Me Home County Roads", "Yellow Submarine" and a host of others were emerging from these groups. Every Friday lunchtime we met in a large band of thirty or so musicians, flautists, recorder players, guitarists, drummers and percussionists and worked our way through the pops with gusto. On these occasions anyone with a few notes to play could join in and feel part of a group united in spirit and song.

Making music together, as anyone knows who has done so, is a wonderful experience. The human psyche enjoys such occasions. Empathy between players locks them together in that indescribable joy that musicians experience. Deaf musicians experience this too. There are moments in our music sessions when one can almost physically feel that unity among players. Expressions on faces, movements of bodies, unity of souls in music. I have one or two budding drummers. Occasionally one or other of them will come along and drum whilst I play the piano. Then two or three instrumentalists will pick up the theme and join in. This casual half-hour becomes an experience. Drummer gets lost in his inner self and begins improvising. Recordists and guitarists catch on to the idea and join in whenever we return to the original tune. In its own simple way it's like Oscar Peterson and his trio of jazzmen, all locked together in music.

Music can do so much also to cultivate the emotions of sadness, joy, elation or religious experience. Some of my pupils have had tears in their eyes as they sing such songs as "Nobody's Child". One big, muscular seventeen year-old lad who hailed from Belfast, told me one day how the beautiful little melody which two flautists played hauntingly during the procession of the Cross in our Easter play, moved him profoundly and helped him act his part better. He was playing



Ann Rachlin, founder of the Beethoven Fund for Deaf Children, with a fascinated group of youngsters.

the part of Christ. Even his defective hearing had allowed him to gain a new experience from the world of music.

Besides actually making music it is important also to listen to other people doing it. Of course, the school record players are always in use, but we have also had visiting musicians to the school to play for us. The London Brass Ensemble gave us a memorable concert some time ago, with their deaf audience agog for more. Chamber groups of strings and wind have played, pop groups have stomped their way through Summer Balls for us, to mention but a few. Groups of children have visited concert halls outside the school. Ballet, with its musical accompaniment, is a wonderful experience for deaf children, combining as it does the visual with the audio. Perhaps the most memorable occasion in this respect was the visit made by eight of our best musicians along with three members of staff to the Royal Festival Hall to hear Lorin Maazel and the Philharmonia play Beethoven's *Missa Solennis*, with the Philharmonia Chorus. After the concert my eight musicians had the privilege of playing "Happy Birthday to You" for Lorin Maazel (the occasion was his fiftieth birthday) in the presence of the Prince of Wales.

There are two other areas of experience with which I am engaged at the moment, each with its own peculiar problems for the deaf; they being music with drama, and the musical.

To take music with drama first. By this I mean the provision of music for the inter-scene moments of a play and the combination of music and dance within a play.

With children whose hearing is far from good the great problem is the timing of music interludes to coincide exactly with the entrance/exits to and from the stage or acting area. The visual attention of the pupils is essential, since cue-lines can be and usually are, lost to them. Hence the "Musical Director" has to be all eyes and ears all the time but also make sure that the third or fourth recorder player

has not gone off into dreamland and so miss the cue. Such a musician must then be nudged into attention, but not to the extent of taking over the show! In such situations as these it is the teacher's task to enthuse both musicians and actors to the extent that they are constantly on full alert and fully engrossed in the proceedings.

One problem I tackled for a production of *Romeo and Juliet* was to get deaf actors dancing on stage to the accompaniment of music by deaf musicians! This took many hours of rehearsal, but in the end was quite successful. The secret was to make sure that a few of the dancers could see the conductor and so synchronise their steps with his tempo, and for the rest of the dancers to cue from them. It can go horribly wrong, but it can also succeed and then it is delightful.

"The Trojan Horse"

The problem of producing a musical with deaf children is very difficult and is the task to which I am addressing myself at the moment. I am hoping to produce Hubert Chappell's "The Trojan Horse" complete with singing! Singing as such is almost impossible for the deaf, but not quite. A few can modulate their voices to the point of actually singing as opposed to chanting rhythmically and it is upon these few that I am pinning my hopes.

The problem of singing or chanting rhythmically while at the same time performing some action such as building a wooden horse or miming war will also be a large one, and rehearsals of such actions are about to begin. It is too early yet to say whether success will come, but we shall not give up easily.

We also have our own disco equipment plus budding "disc jockeys", who entertain the pupils at their regular disco sessions during the winter months at our boarding school. The pupils dance in the modern way to all the latest "hits" and in such ways unwittingly increase

their rhythmic sense, to the ultimate benefit of music lessons.

What, you might ask, are the "spin-offs"? First and foremost, I think, it boosts enormously the deaf child's sense of achievement. Self-confidence grows. He or she can make music, like their hearing contemporaries. They can participate in the local (hearing) schools' Carols Concert in the town for example. They know the songs their brothers and sisters sing.

They also listen more acutely. Most deaf people have some residual hearing. This is put to good use in musical activities and it flows over into the class-room too, thus increasing their ability to understand class lessons.

Their speech can also benefit. Pupils have told me that the tongue movements needed in recorder playing have aided their ability to speak more clearly. Linguistic rhythms also benefit from their music sessions. Breathing patterns for speech also benefit, since this is a basic problem for deaf people.

Finally, one is often asked what kind of qualities are needed in a teacher of music to deaf children. I suppose the first requisite is a thick skin to withstand, at least initially, the criticisms of those who do not see the point of such activities. One also needs a strong sense of humour, to be immensely enthusiastic about all forms and styles of music, and a deep conviction that it is a worthwhile thing to do.

Patience is certainly needed, at least in the class-room. I get rid of my frustrations after difficult sessions by listening to Tchaikovsky's Fifth, or Act Three of *La Bohème*, or playing the piano furiously and fortissimo. The pace of progress is much slower than with hearing children, and many deaf pupils, like hearing ones, will never be musicians at all. But quite a few will, and these make it all very worthwhile.

It is very important to be relaxed with the pupils. One's facial expression must be genuine. It is necessary to enjoy pop songs as well as Mozart, to enjoy "Old MacDonald had a Farm" as well as Dowland. A good music session with a group of deaf children is a very energetic one for the teacher, as well as being mentally exhausting.

Being an amateur tenor I often sing for my pupils. It is necessary that they realise music affects you a great deal. But the response is not always applause! "I don't like that song", "Why do you sing so loud!" and other remarks help to keep one's own ego under control!

As I have said earlier, deaf children, like hearing children, like to criticise their own playing as well as other pupils. It is important that the teachers allow this, and add their own contributions too, thus creating a stimulating environment in which to work.