

# **The Teaching of Music to Hearing Impaired Children and Teenagers**

by  
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This account of methods used by myself during the years 1975-1988 at the Mary Hare School to teach hearing impaired children to read and play music is being made at the request of various old pupils of the school who experienced it and enjoyed it. It is a method devised by myself, and not in imitation of other teachers greater than myself. It grew from the experience gained with these young people, aged between eleven and eighteen years and whose hearing losses and causes of deafness range over the whole spectrum. Whilst teaching these young pupils focus was placed on the development of rhythmic and musical potential rather than upon what could be expected musically from different types of hearing loss. Indeed, the latter is far more likely to fail than the former. Innate musicality bears no relationship to degree of deafness. It is there to be exploited.

## **Why Music for the Hearing Impaired?**

Music, in some shape or form, influences almost everyone from the cradle to the grave. Indeed, one could go further and say that it has been mooted that an expectant mother, by playing music or singing, can bring benefits to the unborn child. Yet, in spite of this, of all the arts, music is the most difficult to define. It cannot be seen or touched but it can be heard and felt. Music attracts us in an indefinable way. As listeners we are drawn to its rhythms its moods and its beauty. As performers we feel all of these, plus an empathy with fellow performers. An indefinable bond links musicians in their common aim of producing music together.

But of what use is this to the hearing impaired? Can music be of any value to them? To some the answer is no. But, to quote one sixth former, "Music at this stage of my life is something that I cannot imagine the world ever being complete without. It is such a pleasure to me and I cannot imagine anyone else not having any musical interest" Those are his exact words. Another pupil, this time a fourth former, wrote this, "I started music in 1978 when I was eight years old. My mother had gone to music as a child and she thought that I should not be treated any differently to a hearing child". Again, these are her exact words.

I personally agree with all these two have said. This agreement comes, not from philosophical speculation or scientific 'evidence', but from the practical experience of teaching, and listening to, hearing-impaired children on the road to music making.

Of all the constituent elements which go together to make music, perhaps the most fundamental of them is rhythm. All music has some rhythmic element in it. Rhythm can also stand by itself, without melody or harmony, thus giving it a certain self-sufficiency. It is also a basic element in all human life. Every society, whether 'primitive' or 'developed', portrays rhythm among its members. Pre-industrial African tribes show this rhythmic basis in their lives through chant and dance. Kodaly and Bartok discovered highly developed rhythms within the folk music of Eastern Europe. In industrialised Western Europe and elsewhere young people, (and the not so young!), express their feelings through rock music and disco dancing, both of which activities are based on rhythmic movement.

If rhythm, then, is so basic an ingredient in human life, it is obvious that human beings with a hearing problem also need to express their feelings through rhythmic activity. Indeed, the frustrations they endure as a result of their disability would seem to make it even more important that they develop their rhythmic sense in order to ease tensions. If we approach the subject of music and the hearing impaired as a human activity necessary to their emotional development and less as a contradiction in terms, then progress can be made.

Having said all this, it is obvious that not all hearing impaired people will be musical in its fullest sense. But, then neither are all hearing folk. What is needed is the opportunity to experiment in order to discover what musical abilities lie dormant in us.

## **Methods useful in Developing a Rhythmic Sense in Hearing Impaired Children.**

With reference to what has already been said, we can reasonably assume that rhythmic sense is as old as humankind. Hence, in attempting to develop the rhythmic

sense of hearing impaired children we could do worse than following, in very broad outline obviously, the methods and progress of humans throughout history.

Before musical instruments were invented humans used their own bodies to express emotions and ideas. When this instrument of expression appeared to need assistance, primitive instruments such as simple drums and bamboo flutes were invented. These acted as extensions or additions to the body as a means of expression.

Even with eleven and twelve year old hearing impaired children, bodily expression through rhythmic activity is often completely undeveloped. Hence it is necessary to go back to the original musical instrument, the human body, and develop that to some extent before moving on to the next stage of development, manufactured instruments.

Since none of the pupils I taught suffered from physical disabilities to their legs or arms we were able to begin at the beginning and use the most basic two-beat rhythm of humanity, walking, and then add hand clapping. Walking 'on the spot' rhythmically became thus a first activity in the music programme. Add to this hand clapping, firstly separate from and then along with 'on the spot' walking, or actual walking if the space is available, some strong rhythmic chords on a keyboard or rhythmic drum beats, and you have the beginnings of rhythmic development.

Even at this early stage some pupils will make faster progress than others, (as is the case with hearing children), so patience plus enthusiasm must be the key qualities of the teacher or teachers involved.

As this activity becomes familiar, so will the sense of group feeling. Ten children moving rhythmically together in this way produces the first primitive experience of communal activity, which can grow later into a full empathetic experience which all musicians feel.

Further movements of the body follow. Gentle swaying from side to side can produce a sense of sadness, dreaminess, or pleasant relaxedness, depending on what you are aiming at. This, again, accompanied by some rhythmic music produced by the teacher. This, along with the clapping and/or walking movements, leads to a considerable sophistication of rhythmic development. With steady, enthusiastic coaching, hearing impaired children can become quite proficient in these activities. It will not be too long before individuals within the group will want to add their own variations to the activities performed so far. Watch out for this and encourage it. Some early form of 'disco dancing' can result from this.

As these activities develop so will the need to introduce another basic human faculty, the voice. To use the voice involves, of course, the art of breathing, another rhythmic activity of humanity. When we speak or sing we interrupt the natural rhythm of breathing in order to produce sound. For the hearing impaired this activity of producing sound and of producing intelligible sounds in the form of speech, is an art more difficult for them than for their hearing counterparts.

Rhythmic activities can aid in the development of speech, though in the case of our present thesis this is not our main area of discussion. It is an important product evolving from the development of rhythmic and musical senses. To bring the voice into the rhythmic activities we are discussing can be aided by using deep breathing exercises and combining these with voice. One way of achieving this is to ask the children to stand comfortably, with their feet apart and then to breathe in deeply through the nose, then to exhale through the mouth whilst vocalising the sound 'aaaaahh'. (In this matter it is interesting how few hearing children are accustomed to taking deep breaths). To make this activity interesting and amusing, whilst they are exhaling, tell them to relax the body as if they are going to fall to the ground, or as if enjoying a beautiful smell! This exercise can be repeated several times using the sound eeeee or ooooo. Such activities are of short duration, mixed in with the other activities mentioned earlier, and kept joyful. The amount of time spent at this will depend upon the abilities and keenness of the pupils and it is the teacher's task to bring out the best in them.

### **The Next Step.**

The ground has now been prepared for the first venture into 'singing'. I place the word in inverted commas because, as everyone knows, singing in tune for the hearing impaired is a tall order! But do not let this come in the way. Most, if not all, the 'singing' will be chanting, at least at the beginning, but having heard a group of

pupils sitting in the rear of the school bus on their way back from a concert chanting the lyrics of a Beatles' song made me realise that the effort was not in vain.

The song that lends itself most readily to the skills learnt so far is 'Old MacDonald had a Farm'. By arranging the sounds used so far in a certain order enables the pupils to vocalise the sounds ee ai ee ai ou. Now teacher and pupils can take alternate lines and sing:

Teacher: Old MacDonald had a Farm.

Pupils: ee ai ee ai ou.

Teacher: And on that farm he had some cows.

Pupils: ee ai ee ai ou.

After performing this a few times, teacher and pupils reverse rolls, singing the alternate parts, and thus the first song is well under way. In subsequent sessions the remainder of the song can be learnt, as can other simple songs.

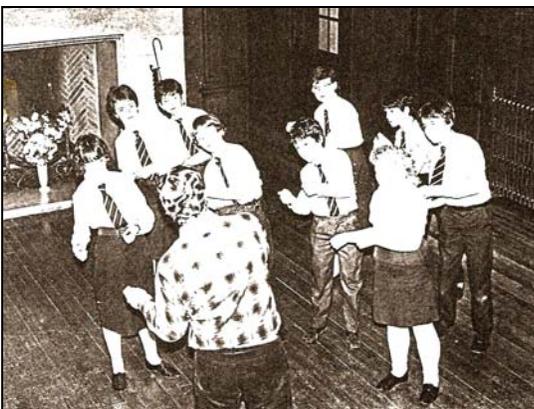
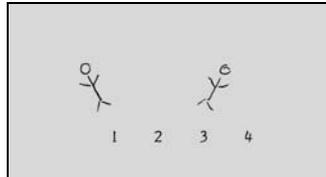
### Music Notation

It is now time to introduce music notation, those symbols which enable us to pitch a note, either with the voice or a pitched instrument. I began this by getting the pupils to clap two sets of four, thus:

1234 1234

The next move is to bring the whole body into this by swaying the body, clapping and counting two beats to each side, thus:

12 34 12 34

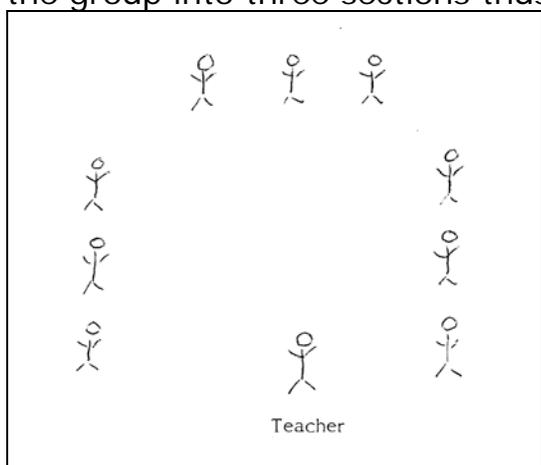


Next we 'march' 1234 1234 then repeat the body sway movement, 12 34 12 34 counting evenly all the time. As the pupils become more and more skilled at this, the activity can be shown on a wall board thus:

♩ ♩ ♩ ♩	♩ ♩ ♩ ♩	Clap
1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	
♭	♭	Sway
1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	
♩ ♩ ♩ ♩	♩ ♩ ♩ ♩	'March'
1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	
♭	♭	Sway
1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	

Gradually the pupils associate the black notes with one count or beat and the white ones with two counts or beats. This preliminary work will be of great use later when music notes on a staff will be introduced.

By now, using our analogy of the historical development of rhythm and music, the point has been reached when people began to invent instruments as 'extensions' to their bodies in order to produce more interesting sounds. Among the earliest of these instruments were drums. For the children we are concerned with here tambourines may be used to serve the same purpose. Up to now, also, they have acted in unison. The next stage is to prepare for ensemble work. So, divide the group into three sections thus:



As can be seen, each pupil has a tambourine. Show them how to hold it and how to strike it. (This insistence on accuracy will be invaluable later, when some pupils move on to pitched instruments). Then begin by asking them to strike four-beat rhythm, all together. A piano or keyboard accompanying them is useful because vibrations and some audible sound will assist their accuracy in rhythm playing together. All the time maximum use is being made of residual hearing, and, as the development of hearing aids, cochlear implants and the like continue to develop, more and more sound will be available to the pupils.

Next, each of the three 'sections' of the group should play when indicated by the teacher, the other two sections remaining silent. Each section in turn should be asked to play, and, as this becomes understood, fun can be had by rapidly changing the section to play. This could end in chaos and laughter. Great!! Do it again! What is happening is a sharpening of observation and attention to the work in hand, very useful! Also, one, two or all three sections can be brought in as confidence grows. There are many variations available now.

### Extra Instruments

The time will come when additional instruments, other than tambourines, can be brought in, such as triangles, shakers, small drums, and so on. The same procedure as before can be used, but now one section could use triangles, another tambourines and another shakers or whatever instruments are available. Then let each section exchange instruments with another, thus giving them the opportunity to experience the different sounds and vibrations of the different instruments. Some will respond more readily to one instrument or another, thus beginning to

decide which instrument they would like to use regularly. Later the choice will widen.

These activities prepare the way for more complex ensemble playing, when recorders, melodicas, glockenspiels and drums will be used. Alertness and dexterity in hand and arm are growing. The gross rhythmic movements of the earlier stages are now somewhat refined and will further refine as experience is increased.

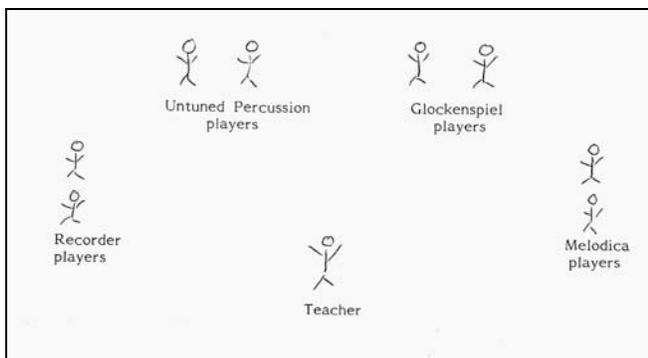
It is now readily noticeable that some of the pupils are progressing at a faster rate than others. Some will find it difficult to keep the rhythm and tempo. There is nothing unusual in this. Some hearing children also experience this. It should be regarded as a natural problem to be worked at steadily and not to be taken as a sign that deafness has conquered. It takes time and patience and good humour to develop the rhythmic capabilities of some. Depending upon the rhythmic capabilities of the group in hand, either continue with further percussion work, intermingled with more songs, using various percussive instruments, or move on to the next stage, involving recorders, melodicas, glockenspiels and drums.

### THE NEXT STAGE

For this next stage I found William Salaman's 'Concert Starters' a very useful book of tunes for primitive orchestra. It can involve the use of descant recorders, harmonicas or melodicas, tuned and untuned percussion and open string violin. The great advantage of this book is that the number and type of instruments used may vary extensively, to enable even the most rudimentary players to participate. Real musical concepts are now being absorbed by the pupils. Rhythmically the values of crotchets and minims are introduced in the first book of the series, as are time signatures, bar lines and repeat marks. The dotted minim also makes its appearance with the introduction of triple time. The use of the rest does not appear in the initial book. Dynamics and expression marks are not met with at this stage, but loud and soft playing can be used by introducing 'echo' effects in the pieces.

By now the pupils have been accustomed to section playing through the earlier percussion work. The actual arrangement of the group as used then can be the basis for this next stage, while using 'Concert Starters'. The extra pieces of equipment now introduced include music stands and music scores as well as new musical instruments. It is an exciting advance and the pupils love it – that is, until difficulties arise! At that point the teacher's ingenuity must take over.

For the sake of description let us take a group of ten pupils and divide them into sections, in order to begin work on such a book as 'Concert Starters'. The arrangement could be as follows:



Possible arrangements for complex ensemble playing.

Note that each section has its own music stand with the appropriate score. The rhythmic base for each section is the same. Using the knowledge gained so far the crotchets and minims will make rhythmic sense to the pupils, but their pitch will not. Hence we begin by getting the whole group to clap the rhythm of the score, one line at a time. Next we get the recorder players to blow their notes to the given rhythm, the rest of the group clapping an accompaniment. The recorder line is the easiest to begin with since the letter names of the notes are given as well as the notation on a staff. Show the pupils the fingering of each note. There are only three in use at this stage, the inevitable B A G! Initial sounds may well be unusual, but practice makes perfect. Next get the melodicas to play their notes. Show them where they are on the instrument and teach them how to blow. They can be accompanied by the untuned percussion on first attempts and then by the recorders also. Finally the patient (!) glockenspiel players are shown their notes

and, lo, we have liftoff! The initial sound will probably persuade the teacher to apply for transfer to another department, but it will be pleasing to realise just how rapidly this initial orchestra grows, especially when the pupils are joined by the teacher on a keyboard.

These initial efforts can be quite tiring for the pupils, as also for the teacher, so intersperse the session with a spell of singing and a replay of earlier music (which, by now, has become 'easy')!

After a few sessions of this kind of work pupils often want to swap instruments. This is good because it gives each of them a chance to discover which kind of instrument they prefer. Note that no attempt has been made to match instrument with hearing loss. I know of cases where a child has been persuaded that he or she would not be able to play a particular instrument because of their particular hearing loss. No, the pupil will discover for his/her-self which one to choose.

### **WHAT ABOUT MUSIC THEORY!**

Oh yes. Theory! How often it is neglected by teachers until the pupil wants to take Grade Six exam but has done no theory! Suddenly large lumps are needed to get past this post. I am a firm believer in keeping music theory abreast of musical development. Stave, clef, note names, expression marks, are all needed from the early days onward and not as an afterthought.

In between sessions of ensemble playing I occasionally throw in a question such as 'What is this?' pointing to a stave or clef or whatever on the board. This way boredom fails to arise. It becomes a voyage of discovery, not an academic study.

### **MUM, I PLAYED IN ASSEMBLY!!**

Having reached this level of playing it is a great thrill for the pupils to make their first public performance! Shouts of feigned horror emerge when the group is informed that they are ready to play for Morning Assembly. 'Oh no!', they say and immediately spread the news abroad.

The amount of ground covered up to this point can take from one to three school terms to complete. The rate of progress will depend, obviously, on the abilities of the various groups. One outstanding first form group of mine advanced as far as one of the second year groups within its first term of music. But the rate of progress, while obviously necessary in order to maintain interest, should not become more important than the fun and satisfaction which should emerge from the weekly music session. The degree of enjoyment is largely in the hands of the teacher and the wear and tear on him/her is considerable! The summer holidays are always enjoyed!

Action songs are popular, even among eleven and twelve year olds. They thoroughly enjoy singing 'Kumbaya' for example, to actions invented by themselves or the teacher. One profoundly deaf group made up the whole of the actions for 'He's got the whole world in His hands'. It served for a long time as a very good final number to the group session since they invariably departed in a good mood even if everything within the lesson had not gone too well. They also enjoyed 'Banks of the Ohio' with its boy-girl theme, which appealed to their emerging emotional development in this area of life.

### **LATER DEVELOPMENT**

So far we have been concerned with the initial stages of rhythm and music. The question is, where do these initial stages lead us? The answer is, as far as the developing talents allow.

As the first and second year ensemble work in class grows, it becomes apparent that certain pupils show more musical abilities than others. It is these pupils who will form the basis for future development. As certain pupils show promise in recorder playing or melodica playing or percussion playing they can be formed into separate groups outside the school curriculum time and thereby make more rapid progress. A recorder group of five or six players, meeting for half an hour each week, can be encouraged to play very pleasantly. Maybe one or two percussion players can be encouraged to have extra tuition. It will soon be possible to form your first band of mixed players, using drums, bongos, recorders, synthesisers, (some pupils take piano lessons and so can perform also). On top of this, a recorder group playing simple trios or quartets will also emerge in time. Music now is really becoming important to them and to the school. As we move into the third,

fourth and fifth forms and beyond the more able pupils became really ambitious and ventured in to the flute, clarinet, trumpet, guitar and full drum set. Music exams were taken and passed! By then we had several groups of players performing and a variety of music played.

I have attempted in these few pages to give a general outline of a possible course of activities to encourage children with hearing problems to make music. This was my way of doing just that at Mary Hare during the years 1975-1988. We had considerable success, and that success has continued ever since, as others have taken up the challenge.

### **CONCLUSION**

Should all deaf children be taught music? This question arouses a considerable controversy. There are those in the deaf community who disagree with it, saying that deaf culture has no place for it. I respect their view. They, after all, know what it is to be severely deaf and I do not. However, I do know that I have seen and taught many deaf youngsters to play and enjoy music and wish to continue to do so. My wish is that both parties may respect each others views and get on with living the way they feel best.

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