

CHILDREN AND SOUND

SOUND is in the air; wherever we are, we are in the midst of it. Even if we wished, we could not escape the infinite variety of sounds in the world around us. Though some people are immune to them, we must all, if we wish to retain our sanity, develop protection against many environmental sounds. They may soothe or annoy; we may welcome them or run away from them. But we may as well accept the fact that many of them are inescapable.

Children take to sounds and sound-making as ducks to water. They not only accept them, but they also have a knack of adding to them until the other members of the family cannot endure the din. Then, even though they are admonished and sent out of earshot, this passion of theirs is somehow never completely satisfied. Here is one "talent" of youth that will not be kept down. Sometimes we grown-ups like it too, especially when *we* are the sound-makers. Whooping it up, now and then, serves to let off steam at any age.

Political campaigns would fall flat without noise. Try to imagine a baseball or football game in a soundproof stadium! Returning heroes are greeted with wild outbursts. The joys of the Old Year and the hopes for the New reach their peak of

excitement on New Year's Eve. Even the quietest person can seldom resist noise-making at this time.

No, the interest in sound and sound-making does not belong exclusively to the time of childhood. "Sugar is not so sweet to the palate as sound to the healthy ear," quotes Emerson from an unpublished manuscript by Thoreau. In an essay on the subject he refers a number of times to Thoreau's sensitivity to sound, to the music in the humming of the telegraph wires, and the "z-ing" of the locust. Thoreau's "eye was open to beauty, his ear to music."

Why then are we so deaf to the instinctive early interest in sound possessed by every normal human being? Why the broken continuity between it and the study of music? Music is sounds put together. To be sure, the way in which they are put together makes all the difference in the kind of music it is. But—and this is certain—there is no one right way, no one wrong way. Nor is there any one way of teaching music to children. But if we can, in some way or another, hitch this tremendous interest in sounds and in sound-making to music, and start with the child, we shall have gone a long way toward encouraging a natural love for music.

Primitive man made music, not by playing notes but by experimenting and listening. Children learn to talk by experimenting and listening. And they can learn to make music by experimenting and listening. Unless we stop them!

It is for us to seize the children's enthusiasm at the floodtide. They will probably not turn out to be great musicians, but they will have a good time and they will most surely develop a genuine love for music. They will learn a surprising amount about it, too. And, if we do happen to have a budding genius in our child, what better way of cultivating his creative powers than to develop from the start the music he has within him?

CHILDREN USE THEIR VOICES IN EXPERIMENTING WITH SOUND

Is there anything that brings quite so much delight as the first babbling of the tiny baby? Unintelligible though it is, it tells us in no uncertain terms that this little bit of humanity is at peace with his world. He has discovered something he can do that gives him a thrill. Then it isn't long before he tumbles into the delights of sounding easy syllables and repeating them endlessly. Gradually, some of these sounds, like "ma-ma" and "da-da," take on meaning; at least, we adults are always eager to attach meaning to them. But, meaning or no meaning, Junior happily pursues his "babbling career."

One of the ways we foster this early interest in sounds is through Mother Goose and other nursery rhymes. Children revel in the clash and repetition of words. "Higgledy, piggledy," "Diddle, diddle, dumpling," "Hickory, dickory, dock"—with their meaningless sounds and infectious rhythms—give endless satisfaction.

Children open their mouths and sounds come out. Accidentally they hit upon some that have particular appeal. Over and over, they repeat these to the point of self-intoxication. Perhaps this interest reaches its peak around the age of five or six. It is hard to say, for it is generally not encouraged by the family; it is even discouraged, since grownups can usually see no earthly reason why this nonsensical prattle should send their youngsters into peals of uncontrolled hilarity. Too often they regard it only as a child's weapon for persecuting his elders.

But it is not only children who revel in this play with words

and sounds. There are, for example, certain poets who became famous because of their veritable genius in word sounds and word invention. The verse of Edward Lear is frankly nonsense and does not pretend to be anything else—and therein lies its charm. In order really to enjoy it, one must make it a part of oneself, and be able to roll it out on an instant's notice. Children are never-ceasing in their demands on someone who has a store of Edward Lear verses. They may sing along with the poetry, or be content merely to listen.

Many a bit of children's dead-end chatter can be turned into a constructive interest in what other people have done with words.

There was an old person of Ware,
Who rode on the back of a bear;
When they said, "Does it trot?"

He said, "Certainly, not!

It's a Moppsikon Floppsiikon bear!"¹

Mopp-si-kon, Flopp-si-kon—how children like to lean on these words, play with them, invent more of their own, and go jingling on their way!

Laura E. Richards has delighted several generations of children and adults with her rhymes. She plays with words as a child does, and her nonsensical humor sends youngsters into gales of laughter. What is funnier than the mixing up of "elephant" and "telephone" to *telephant* and *elephone*? And is anyone's education complete without skinny "Mrs. Snipkin" and fat "Mrs. Wobblechin"?²

Every home, every school, should possess copies of Edward Lear and Laura E. Richards. But reading to the child from

¹ Edward Lear. *The Complete Nonsense Book*. Dutton.

² Laura E. Richards. *Tirra Litra: Rhymes Old and New*. Little, Brown.

them is only a substitute for the ability to draw upon them at will wherever one is. We cannot, of course, have at the tip of our tongue all we could wish, but the more quickly we can recite or sing these bits, the more vital will be the experiences we can give to children. For, with young as with old, seizing the mood is the secret of interest and enthusiasm, and if we have to go to a book or a piano for everything we sing, we miss the spontaneous joy that comes to those who sing as they work or play, whether it be poetry or music.

Poetry is music. Not long ago Bobby's mother told us that he disliked poetry very much. She had been accustomed to reading it to him at bedtime, and he resisted it so much that she finally stopped. Then she said: "Bobby has been coming home from school recently, bubbling over with snatches of Lear, Richards, Milne, and Carroll—so I told him *that* was poetry, too." "It is not!" he shouted; "I don't *like* poetry!"

"Will you please," pleaded Bobby's mother, who has a genuine love for literature, "will you please tell Bobby that what he is enjoying so much *is* poetry?" "Not on your life," we said; "not now, at any rate, for we care not what he thinks it is. Names are 'noise and smoke.'" We knew our young Bobby too well to risk spoiling his fun by telling him something he did not want to hear.

The mature adult enjoys poetry for its construction, its meaning, its figures of speech, as well as for its sound and its rhythm. Little children judge poetry and song with their feelings, not with their intellects. This does not mean that we should expose them only to so-called children's poetry. If we go back in our own memories, we may be surprised at what we find. One recalls the magic-sounding words in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*; another, Noyes's *The Highwayman* and its impelling rhythm; another, some special Psalm of David; and still another, Shel-

ley's *The Cloud*. No doubt these had little meaning for us at the time, but they are remembered for their sounds, their rhythms, and their associations.

Children's lives are made rich with these experiences if those with whom they live have a genuine love and appreciation for the music of poetry. Play with them as they play with words, give them stories and verse to stimulate their imaginations, and—especially, let them enjoy it all in their own way. The fun of living it with father and mother, with teacher and friend, will take care of the learning process.

Many little children have an uncanny ability to imitate the sounds around them. Their ack-ack guns or fire sirens can be so realistic as to startle us out of our wits. They reproduce these sounds naturally and with little conscious effort. Take the time to listen thoughtfully, and you will be amazed at the flexibility of their voices, the control they have over them, and the skill with which they use them. Many a trained singer would fail in an attempt to follow such youngsters' vocalizations.

In Roland Hayes's autobiography³ the author tells of his childhood interest in sound and its influence on his musical career. His father spent a great deal of time wandering through the woods and along the streams. He loved nature, lived close to it, and was able to reproduce any animal call at will. Roland Hayes learned this art as a young lad from his father, and he attributes much of his later success to this early use of his voice. He acquired, naturally, the flexibility and control that most singers have to acquire through years of exacting exercises, and with (he believes) far less strain on his vocal organs. Children have unlimited imagination; their ability to identify themselves with an idea provides sufficient motivation to ac-

³ *Angel Mo' and Her Son*. Little, Brown.

complish the "impossible." The "how" does not stand in their way. When Roland Hayes's father called a deer, he became a "buck" himself.

Not many have the genius of a Roland Hayes, but there is in children plenty of hidden ability that we grown-ups do not have the wit to see or hear. Listen to a child or a group of children anywhere, in their make-believe play or in their sheer physical exuberance, and you can catch innumerable uses of their voices. Then if you still have little respect for this natural ability of children, try to reproduce some of these sounds yourself!

A fire siren, for example. Musicians work hard to achieve the crescendo and decrescendo that children emit without even trying. The whir of an airplane motor, its gradations of intensity, its rhythmic rise and fall; the call of the bullfrog; the radio and its sound effects—all these and countless others the children can turn on and off at will.

Children's make-believe continually calls upon the use of sound to make their play more realistic. They do not merely imitate: they *become* a steamboat, a train, or an animal at the drop of a hat. The child who will not sing a song beyond the range of his speaking voice will spontaneously produce a high-pitched whistle or horn. With younger children especially, the most effective musical guidance may come in connection with this type of play. Recognition and encouragement of it, and *sometimes* participation in it, provide a real opportunity for furthering children's interest in sound.

What parent or teacher has not at some time been driven to exasperation by the incessant "click-clack-clucking" that children make with their mouths? This particular form of recreation has a way of turning up at rest or meal time, and it has a higher rate of contagion than any other childhood disease

yet known. A design for tormenting grown-ups? Yes, it may be, for any smart youngster who gets such a reaction will not miss an opportunity to make it just that. But for the child it is essentially, *fun* to be able to do all these tricks, and he is constantly discovering new and strange noises he can make. We ask children to stop, tell them it is time to rest or time to eat, and not the time for such monkeyshines—that they can pursue this activity later. We have a right to make this request, but *too, too* often we forget about the later time, ourselves. And since these children want someone to listen to them (that being nine-tenths of the fun), we must do our share and take time out to pay attention and *experiment with them*.

In writing of his childhood, Stravinsky says: "One of my earliest memories of sound will seem somewhat odd. It was in the country, where my parents, like most people of their class, spent the summer with their children. I can see it now. An enormous peasant seated on the stump of a tree. . . He was dumb, but he had a way of clicking his tongue very noisily, and the children were afraid of him. So was I. But curiosity used to triumph over fear. The children would gather round him. Then, to amuse them, he would begin to sing. This song was composed of two syllables, the only ones he could pronounce. They were devoid of any meaning, but he made them alternate with incredible dexterity in a very rapid tempo. He used to accompany this clucking in the following way: pressing the palm of his right hand under his left armpit, he would work his left arm with a rapid movement, making it press on the right hand. From beneath the shirt he extracted a succession of sounds which were somewhat dubious but very rhythmic, and which might be euphemistically described as resounding kisses. This amused me beyond words, and at home, I set myself with zeal to imitate this music—so often

and so successfully that I was forbidden to indulge in such an indecent accompaniment."⁴

One little group of five-year-olds made up a "sympathy" (as Miguel called it) by combining their "cluckings"! It was in three "movements": in the first, sounds were made with their mouths wide open; in the second, sounds were made with their mouths partly closed; and a combination of the two with clapping hands constituted the finale!

What do we do about this ability, especially in our schools? We clamp down on it and try to teach our children "music." We give them a course of study that has been logically worked out—simple and harmless, but usually too anemic to hold children's interest. We are blind to the vigor and vitality of the music children have within themselves. Many a youngster is labeled an "out-of-tune" and is the despair of the conscientious teacher or parent. How about turning the tables, how would it be if we ourselves got in tune with the "out-of-tune"? We might well consider Ruskin's idea: that the only way to help others is to first find out what they have been trying to do for themselves, and then proceed to help them do it better.

One of these "out-of-tunes" was five-year-old Mary. When she sang with other children, she never seemed to be able to stay with them. She had a sweet, lovely voice to which she consciously listened when she sang, and the thoughtful way she used it and her feeling around for a pleasant effect in sound restrained us from urging her to try to sing on the same pitch as the rest of us. One day, while we were singing *Ach du lieber Augustin*, Mary's voice suddenly came through clear and steady. She was singing a third higher than the group, and she was able to go through to the end. Her eyes shone with delight—she had hit the spot that satisfied her and gave her a

⁴ Stravinsky, *an Autobiography*. Simon and Schuster.

thrill, and "the moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life."⁵

Of course, Mary could easily sing on the same pitch as the others if she wished; her mother told us that she sang a great deal at home. It happened, however, that at the time she started to school she was interested in singing in a different way and—as children so often do—she had accidentally tumbled into a significant musical experience. She would wait until the song was started, then she would feel around with her voice until she found a comfortable place.

If Mary had been placed in an "out-of-tune" group or been compelled by adult pressure to sing on the same pitch, not only she but the entire group would have lost something. For this episode offered an ideal opportunity for teaching them about two-part singing. They had come upon an important aspect of music. As they all tried to sing Mary's way (with varying degrees of success), they experienced and recognized—at five years of age—the essential element of harmony. This was therefore the time for them to be told that when different sounds sound well together, we call it harmony. We did not care whether or not they remembered the word—though most of them did; but we "harmonized" off and on throughout the year. Most of this experimentation went on informally on the playground, during the work period, and at home. Singing simple two-part rounds with an adult supporting each part helped to enlarge experience and give much pleasure.

Again let us listen to children. Two-year-old Jonathan was riding high on his father's shoulders, one summer day, on a walk around the lake. "Ooh!" he squealed, surprised and startled, as his head was brushed by a low branch. "Ooh!" his father called back, so quickly that Jonathan forgot his fright in his enjoyment of this new game. Father found himself going

⁵ John Dewey. *Art As Experience*. Minton, Balch.

back and forth under the trees at the young man's demand, so that more "oohs" would be forthcoming. And even though their pitch was occasionally varied, Jonathan was able to reproduce the call every time.

Several days later, a cuckoo clock arrived at Jonathan's home. But he was disappointed by the cuckoo's unpredictability: it simply would not "cuckoo" when he wanted it to, and usually when it did perform he was not near by. After a few frustrated days, Jonathan was observed one morning standing in front of the clock and calling repeatedly: "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!" It was so like the clock that his mother found the place on the piano in exact tune with Jonathan's voice, and later, when the clock struck the hour, she discovered that he had imitated it exactly in pitch and interval.

Perhaps this was an accident, but it was no accident that Jonathan could usually find some member of the family to play back and forth with him. On rainy days he and his older sister used to love playing a singing "question and answer" game, the long hall between their rooms being an excellent conductor for their voices.

We are told⁶ that the artist Artur Rubinstein used only "song language" until after he was three years old, refusing to tell what he wanted or to call on other members of the family except in a singing voice. It is just as natural for little children to relate their doings in this way as in any other, and we find them doing it continually. They sing about their play, washing their hands, going to bed, getting dressed—in fact, about everything they do. Unfortunately, but for obvious reasons, they lose this natural ability as they grow older; for children do what others do, and other people do not go around singing in this fashion.

⁶ Amram Scheinfeld. *Youth and Heredity*. Stokes.

We have described a few, a very few, of the many ways in which little children use their voices. What can we do, as we live with them, that will insure the maximum of enjoyment and learning from these experiences? What guidance can we give, in the home and in the school, that will best contribute to their musical education? For music in these early years is *not a matter of half-hour lessons or music periods; it is part of children's everyday life.* They use it in a functional way and unless we have a broad conception of music, we are likely to "educate" it out of them.

First of all, we must have confidence in ourselves, and have respect for the music that is in us. We must blow away the air of mystery with which it is surrounded for many of the uninitiated. This, of course, does not imply shutting our ears to new and unfamiliar experiences. But no one is utterly devoid of music in some form or another. It is contagious; if we feel the need for it, then those who live with us will not go untouched by it. If we are trained musicians, so much the better, provided we are truly broadminded, and flexible in our use of it.

If we provide for children, at home and at school, a happy environment and freedom to use it, our first piece of guidance is accomplished. Children also need some form of recognition of what they are doing. This may be a smile in passing, or a friendly interest, or, if in a group, in finding a quiet spot where they can do their own thing. At times, our actual participation in what a child is doing may be exactly what is needed. That participation may be the form of following his lead entirely, or we may feel that the time is ripe for helping him see the next step ahead. Whether we do this or not depends essentially on our sensi-

spirit of play. If we are not musicians, we should familiarize ourselves with the fundamental elements of music. In recent years, a number of excellent books about music have been written for the layman. They are interesting and easy to read, and they help to open up to the reader many of the "mysteries" of music. Better still, if we can find the time and an understanding teacher, we should plan to spend half an hour a week with him, and at least a few minutes a day with ourselves, in exploring the world of sound. No matter what instrument is our choice—piano, voice, guitar, harmonica, or drums—we shall get many a thrill, and this may be exactly the relaxation we need to bring down our blood pressure or unjangle our nerves.

Many opportunities for this type of guidance occur in a child's make-believe play. "This is the way your train whistle sounds," we may say, imitating his voice. Going a little farther, we may sound our whistle on a different pitch or with a change of intensity. "Listen to mine—it is far away." He will enjoy this game and gain much from it provided it is carried on in a spirit of play.

If we are not musicians, we should familiarize ourselves with the fundamental elements of music. In recent years, a number of excellent books about music have been written for the layman. They are interesting and easy to read, and they help to open up to the reader many of the "mysteries" of music. Better still, if we can find the time and an understanding teacher, we should plan to spend half an hour a week with him, and at least a few minutes a day with ourselves, in exploring the world of sound. No matter what instrument is our choice—piano, voice, guitar, harmonica, or drums—we shall get many a thrill, and this may be exactly the relaxation we need to bring down our blood pressure or unjangle our nerves.