

Introduction

The Reasons for a Research Study

One day, six-year-old Michele returned home in tears: “Mama, the teacher told me I sing out of tune.” His mother was surprised; to her, the child usually sang in tune. Maybe at times he was little bit off key in some passages, especially if he did not know the song well or if he was playing; sometimes, he had fun distorting the songs with his little sister. He never thought that he sang out of tune; in fact, he was quite proud of his musical abilities. This was why the teacher’s comment frustrated and humiliated him. What could have happened? Perhaps he sang badly at that moment because he was distracted, and the teacher, who did not yet know him well, had immediately passed judgement and put him in a category that some teachers appear to use often quite confidently.

Episodes like this appear to be very frequent and we hear it over and over again from teachers and parents. Is it possible that so many children sing out of tune? Or is it something that is not generally understood, particularly by educators? Should their role not include “teaching children how to sing in tune”?

This last question is how it should be, in fact. Nevertheless, we very often hear, on precisely such occasions, a prejudice that does not die easily: you are born with a good ear! The ability to sing in tune is a “gift” of nature from which some are excluded. Is this really the case? Or is it simply a convenient excuse to justify this widespread failure in education? What if we should try to discover when and how this skill is formed? What if we should attempt to understand the mechanisms, to find out how much can depend on hypothetical gifts of nature and how much comes from the development of physiological and psychological processes, in addition to the influences that come from the environment and education? These nagging questions gradually led to the idea that there was a need for scientific research to investigate, in a rigorous and systematic way, the development of the ability to sing in tune.

What really convinced me of the importance of this objective was the anthropological, cultural and social value of singing in all cultures. It is a profoundly human activity, practised in the most diverse circumstances as a collective (as well as personal) instrument of shared communication. On the numerous occasions when people sing together, events like festivities and religious functions, as well as political gatherings, if a person feels that his or her voice does not blend with the others but is out of tune with the rest because he or she is not producing exactly the same melody that the others are singing, it causes embarrassment, both for the person in question and for the people nearby, and the individual feels somewhat excluded. Singing can be, and in fact is, a significant instrument for uniting or dividing.

Before initiating the actual fieldwork of the research project, it was necessary to do something that in practice was the first step of the project itself, and that was to embark on a thorough study of the theoretical fundamentals of the problem and the research already undertaken.

This groundwork led me progressively to a wider research project, from both the temporal and musical perspectives.

First of all, I saw that there was the need to study younger and younger children: age 3 ..., age 2 ... until, on the basis of important research results, I came to the point at which the auditory system begins to function, and that occurs during the final months of prenatal life.

Secondly, I saw the limitations that would ensue from following only the vocal production of children, isolating this from the ensemble of instances of musical production from which it derives, develops and becomes apparent.

It was in this way that a rather demanding project began to take shape. To begin with prenatal life, follow up the children for several years, at least until they were about to commence elementary school and to take into account various aspects of musical development: this all meant preparing a research protocol that was rather complex, yet highly appealing.

I spoke about this with my friend and colleague, Donatella Villa, a teacher at the Vassura-Baroncini Municipal School of Music in Imola and she was soon as enthusiastic as I was. Yes, we would definitely have to get to work on this. We felt that it was worth the effort. Friends and colleagues who are psychologists and musicologists gave their approval and encouragement.

In this way the *inCanto* project was born. It was to be a longitudinal research project (meaning that it would take place over a fixed number of years) to study musical development, in particular the ability to sing in tune, in children of age zero to six. Whilst making an initial overview of the panorama of studies available in this field, I became aware of their variety and also noted a definite change in perspective. Notable advances had been made since the 1940s when Revesz claimed that the first year of a child's life is unimportant for musical development and that musicality (musical sense, talent) is innate and impervious to education (as recounted by Teplov, 1966, p. 53).

The first (and until now the only) ample and systematic study on the musical development of children during the early years of life was that undertaken by Moog in 1960–61 for his doctoral thesis (published in the English version of 1976), a work that still marks a milestone in this field for the number of subjects (about 500 children), for the period examined (ages zero to six) and for the musical experiences taken into account (singing, motor responses to musical stimuli, language-music-rhythm).

On the basis of the results obtained, Moog traced an interesting profile of musical development – from which we shall note some aspects in the pages that follow – but his research left some questions open. One of these related to the influence of family and environmental conditions on the development of the identified skills.

From that time on there was a progressive increase in studies undertaken on the perceptive-cognitive and productive skills of infants from the neonatal stage to the first years of life. Whilst retaining Moog's study as a basis, we could not ignore the fact that almost forty years had passed. This was another factor that convinced me to embark on new research that would put greater focus on methodological aspects and would respond to the questions left open by Moog himself, as well as by subsequent studies.

The Reasons for this Book

This book is not meant to be a research report in the strictest sense. That would mean employing a literary genre with precise rules as used by the scientific community. Particular results of this research had been published already in recent years in specialized journals as segments of the whole project were studied and interesting findings emerged. However, this book is intended to be an instrument for the general transmission of the major research outcomes. These are examined panoramically in a synthesis that highlights the most important data. We shall not describe here all the results obtained during those six years of work. We shall limit ourselves to highlighting those obtained during the first three years. The main reason for this is because, during the course of research, we realised that these are precisely the decisive years in which the ability to sing in tune is indicated and is decisively established. The activities of the further three years (three to six) can confirm or contribute to its development in the event that this has not already occurred, but they do not appear to have the same decisive importance as those of the previous phase, a period to which there is normally not enough attention paid.

Accordingly, in this book, we wish to describe a process of development related to the musical ability of children, taking into consideration the space of time from the later months of prenatal life until age three. The innovation of this work that we are presenting here lies in the fact that it is the first research project to deal with the systematic study of the development of several musical abilities through observation of the skills gradually learned by the same group of children, stimulated by an appropriate programme of activities and accompanied by the support of family members.

As the programme of musical activities offered to the children in this research study had a specific role, this book also presents some pedagogical-didactic guidelines that had proved to be effective when applied during the study. The plentiful results that were obtained allow for educational processes to be planned that take into consideration the initial predisposition of all children, and that follow the stages of development of musical skills from the first months of life. In this way, it is suggested that all can achieve the full development of their musical ability.

The first part of the book deals with the research. It opens with a panoramic view of the most significant studies carried out on the musical development of children. Besides the intrinsic value of the data, it is hoped that our presentation will also help to better capture the significance of the results of our research which is the subject of this book.

The next chapter presents the core of the *inCanto* Project encompassing the stages of planning and execution.

The results are presented in the succeeding chapters from two points of view: that of the researchers (Chapter 3), which is the point of view of those who adhere to the data with precision and methodological rigour, and that of the parents (Chapter 4) who relate how they lived through that long experience with the children, actively collaborating in their education and in the execution of the research.

The sources used to create Chapter 3 are of different kinds: on the one hand, they are from the diaries prepared by the researchers and completed by the parents and, on the other hand, we have the recordings of the children produced at home by the parents and at times during our encounters.

The sources for Chapter 4 are the accounts that the parents gave freely in answer to a letter of invitation that gave pointers to make sure that nothing would be overlooked. After six years working together, the parents' point of view could not be left out. It was they who were with the children every step of the way and who proved to be the real educators by creating in their homes the best conditions for learning. They spoke out spontaneously, freed from the rigid interrogation of the diaries and they were able to cast more light on the processes followed by the children in the intensive experience that they had lived through at home.

The second part of the book focuses on the educational aspects: the theoretical-methodological stipulations that constitute the basis of an educational programme (Chapter 5) are followed by a series of specific recommendations of musical activities (Chapter 6) which stimulated and accompanied the children of the *inCanto* Project in their growth.

Who Does this Book Address?

Instinctively (probably because of my professional background), I would say that this book is intended for educators of music, primarily those teachers and other adults working in early years' settings, such as nurseries, playschools and kindergarten. They will find here a series of educational proposals that are justified by theoretical-methodological fundamentals. These derive from the research and from the results obtained from those same programmes.

In a more general way, it is intended also for all music teachers, whatever age their pupils may be. Awareness of what happens during the first years of life should make teachers more attentive to the skills that can actually be achieved in the early years and hence to the kind of progress that can be encouraged at later stages.

However, if we ask ourselves who the first educators may be, without any doubt we must reply that it is the parents. Therefore, this book is addressed to them, not only the “musical” parents who might find it useful in assuring them of their own intuition on the subject and who wish to find further encouragement in their educational activities, but to all the parents who may wish to sing for and with their children, and to listen to music with them together. It is intended for parents who may already have a certain background in music and parents who have little, each can take the opportunity of their baby’s arrival to set out on a musical path together. It is for all those parents who wish to respect their children’s right to develop their musical abilities.

In addition to parents and educators, I would like to address this book to a set of people who dedicate their lives to the care of children: paediatricians, the real pillars of the childhood years who do not limit their attention to physical care. I am sure that many of them already have combined (I am thinking of the paediatricians in the Paediatricians’ Cultural Association who gave life to the project “Born for Music”) or might like to combine an interest in music with medical science, and they will be happy to discover the important role that the musical experience can have in the lives of children and family life in general.

Addressing such diverse readers has presented a challenge of style. How could I make myself understood by colleagues in the world of music and also by early years’ teachers, parents and paediatricians who are often not familiar with musical techniques and (with the exception of the paediatricians) to the methodological demands of scientific research? How could I reconcile data, tables and statistical calculations with educational requirements?

It would be necessary to use language that is agile and at the same time scientifically correct. It would have to balance the requirements of theoretical premises with practical proposals and examples. It should not have too many numbers and tables that would make it tedious, but at the same time there should be sufficient for scientific requirements.

I have accepted the challenge. Let the readers respond.