

The following article was written after the first year of development of Come Children, Sing! Online Music Classes. Building the website took yet another year, while maintaining pilot classes through email. A functioning website has provided for two additional years of research and development. The program now offers about three years of online music instruction and has reached students in 34 states and 8 countries.

"Laptop Activities"—Online Music Classes for Babies

Mary Ellen Pinzino [TI:ME—Technology in Music Education, 2006]

The Come Children Sing Institute has launched online music classes for babies. Classes deliver one lesson each week to computers of enrolled students, with MP3 files and suggestions for parents, providing blogs for music development, parent exchange, and tech assistance. Parents can make Come Children, Sing! portable with a CD or iPod. They can engage in activities on their own schedule and in their own home, without missing classes for travel or illness. CCS online music classes have been in development for a year. Babies are thriving. Music activity has become as much a part of day-to-day activities as reading books to little ones, with the computer chair becoming second only to the rocking chair.

It all began when I wanted to recycle some MIDI recordings from the Come Children Sing Institute SONG LIBRARY to use with babies. Recordings had all been done for music teachers, and were recorded on a Disklavier. At the time of recording, a conscious decision was made to record the chants on a single piano pitch rather than on a drum track, so music teachers could hear durations rather than just taps, as unusual meters were challenging. The question arose as to whether babies should hear taps or durations. Why not ask the babies? I enlisted a friend with a new baby to work with me on the baby project I was contemplating. I transferred one of the piano files to drum, sent both to her via email, and asked her to play them for her baby repeatedly and let me know if she observed any preference. I also asked her to send the files to friends with babies. A number of responses came back from moms. None were as significant as my friend's passing comment in email, "My baby and I are looking forward to the next activity."

Was this how to reach babies with music activities? The computer could provide a consistent and accessible musical model. Unlike a CD recording, the computer could engage parent and child interactively. I began experimenting. I converted a few Finale files to drum and recorder and sent them to the moms along with piano files. The babies and moms were so involved in the activities that I decided to try voice files, as the voice would more naturally invite moms to "sing along." Several years ago, I tried recording the many songs of the SONG LIBRARY with my voice, but I didn't have the voice quality nor endurance to be the model for all, hence the Disklavier. I wondered if I might track down those voice recordings to experiment with, not remembering the extent of what I had recorded nor whether I had even kept a copy.

Fortunately, the technician kept the originals. How was I going to sort through 8 tapes of recordings for a few 4 bar songs and chants, and what would I do with them if I could locate them? Cubase, the audio editing program, became my new friend, allowing me to take these little songs with my less than fine voice and repeat, edit, and occasionally even improve the performance. I couldn't make my voice better, but I was a teacher, not a performer, and it was a teacher that was needed here.

I discovered that a sound editor was also needed! It took some doing to get enough facility with Cubase to provide adequate sound files, but parents were thrilled to have this “musical nanny” come into their home via computer, bringing new goodies each week, and being there to assist them at any time, including 2:00 am feedings.

Additional pilot groups were started throughout the year. Parent reports, surveys, occasional phone calls and home visitations, along with my many years in music learning with preschool children, fed curriculum development and design of activities. Each lesson includes a Rhythm Activity, a Tonal Activity, and a Song. A class is defined as 10 lessons, with one lesson delivered via computer each week, with continued access to previous lessons, and with ongoing successive classes available. Email delivery of MP3 files and parent info gave way to a full website where parents can access the activities through streaming audio, learn about their child’s music development, communicate with the parent community, enroll in classes, and participate from any computer.

Web development presented many challenges. As with educational software, a user interface was needed that would both guide and accommodate student use. It had to also provide for streaming media, podcasts, and blogs, and simulate the classroom community with access to teacher and to other parents. There were many technical challenges with database and e-commerce so that parents could enroll in a class at any time and begin immediately, with one lesson delivered each week, and records maintained of who is in what class in which week.

As children progressed, parents needed additional information. “What if my skills are limited?” “How do I know if my child is developing musically?” Parent education was necessary, but had to be in a format parents could read on the fly with a baby in one hand and a bottle in the other. Articles took the form of short postings about a single topic, which could be read at a time other than “Laptop Activities.” It was stimulating to write so sparsely, yet deliver so much to parents about the young child’s music development. A custom blog provides an appropriate forum for these short postings.

Parents appreciate being empowered about their child’s music development, and are comfortable singing and dancing with their little one without anybody watching. They use Come Children, Sing! at the computer to help them fill the day with meaningful activity and quality interaction with their little one. They sing CCS songs to their babies at the changing table, in the tub, and in the stroller. They download the activities and take them along in the car. Children are hearing unusual meters and modes on a regular basis, and parents are growing musically with their children.

My many years of teaching infants, toddlers and preschoolers in live classes presented many rich songs and activities in one class, but moms could only “take home” what they remembered. Online classes provide for “aural toys” to be stored in the “electronic toy box,” offering parents greater flexibility, know-how, and creativity with music activities than just playing a CD for their child. Parents and children are actively involved, together, in music learning, as a regular part of childhood.

This project taps into uncharted territory on two fronts—music education and technology. The “old model” of live music classes for parents and little children provided a laboratory in which to study the young child’s music development.

Computer delivery of music activities creates a very different laboratory. Our field has never dealt with music activity being as much a part of everyday life as reading books to young children, with round-the-clock access to rich activities in various tonalities and meters—tailored to the child's disposition, and with parent competence in "parenting music." Language acquisition may be a closer model for music learning in this new laboratory than our previous notions of music learning based on subjects involved in live preschool music classes. On the technology front, music education online opens new doors for children of all ages, presenting new challenges for music educators, and fueling the passion to reach the masses with quality music instruction.

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