

## **More About Children's Artistry.....Fourth Conversation with Mary Ellen**

*(Series of conversations conducted by Dr. Rick Townsend, Managing Director, Early Childhood Music and Movement Association, for ECMMA, 2012)*

Rick Intro: In the three previous conversations with [Mary Ellen Pinzino](#), [Exploring Children's Artistry](#), [Art Songs for the Very Young](#), and [Considering the Online Territory](#), Mary Ellen encouraged early childhood music teachers to tune into young children's artistry. Today we probe teachers' and parents' roles with activities designed to develop children's artistry.

Rick: How do you describe the difference between traditional classroom activities and those designed to develop children's artistry?

Mary Ellen: Traditional activities offer pure joy, engage parent and child in delightful interaction and movement, and pass on the culture, drawing musically from our rich heritage of folk songs and other songs for children, with song words driving the activities. Those designed to develop children's artistry also offer pure joy and engage parent and child in delightful interaction and movement, but their goal is music learning, drawing musically from various meters, tonalities, Art Songs and Gem Songs, with musical content rather than words driving the activities. (See [Art Songs for the Very Young](#).)

Traditional folk songs, play parties, finger plays, and other children's songs have traditionally dominated the early childhood music class. These "Play Songs," with their words the predominant force, can be a delightful addition to any music class without regard to music learning, and they can model parent-child interaction in song that can be applied to activities of greater musical depth. It is time, however, that we put "Play Songs" in their rightful place, engage young children in far more musically sophisticated rhythms, melodies, Art Songs and Gem Songs, and uncover the wonder of children's artistry!

Rick: What balance do you recommend between the use of songs and activities designed specifically for artistry, and the use of more familiar play songs and games?

Activities that develop children's artistry compel children so intensely, that punctuating a set of these highly musical activities with an occasional "Play Song" breaks the intensity and balances the class nicely. For example, a teacher might begin with a rhythm activity in duple meter, followed by a tonal activity in Dorian tonality, then a "Play Song," followed by a rhythm activity in triple meter, a tonal activity in Mixolydian tonality, then another "Play Song."

This pattern of "rhythm activity-tonal activity-song" can be carried out throughout the class with additional meters and tonalities, or inserted within the class while teachers get their feet wet with activities that develop children's artistry. The more children are exposed to the various meters and tonalities, the longer they attend to meter and tonality, the more they interact musically, individually, and the more they devour Art Songs and Gem Songs. The amount of time with "Play Songs" in the class necessarily becomes less as rhythm and tonal activities expand in length and musical interaction, and Art Songs and Gem Songs are added. "Play Songs" become the icing on the cake, while children grow musically through increasingly difficult rhythm activities, tonal activities, Art Songs and Gem Songs.

Rick: Are activities designed for children's artistry fun or playful for the children?

Mary Ellen: Absolutely! Activities designed to develop children's artistry can be every bit as playful as traditional activities, limited only by the creativity of the teacher. We are

developing musicians. "Playing Music" is what musicians do! It seems that somewhere along the line, "playing music" with young children has become more about play and less about music, with toys, accompaniments, and gimmicks used to get children's attention. Perhaps that is because the musical content does not compel attention! Music that merits children's artistry allures children far more than peripherals. Tonalities and meters without words and Art Songs and Gem Songs with words draw attention to the musical content and draw the artistry out of the child.

Immersion in various tonalities and meters can be highly playful and highly musical, led by a teacher's own brand of creativity and sheer musicality. 3-4 year olds with fire hats and a pretend hose enthusiastically chant and improvise in a meter to put out an imaginary fire. 2-3 year olds happily go on a "Phrygian picnic," immersed in Phrygian tonality and flowing movement with their "picnic blanket" scarves, all the way around the room to the picnic spot. Sitting on their "picnic blankets," they anxiously await surprises the teacher has in her picnic basket. Speaking on the resting tone to maintain the tonality, the teacher peeks in her picnic basket and finds a recorder that she plays in Phrygian tonality. She then discovers a tone bell in the picnic basket and continues to sing in Phrygian tonality while children take turns playing the resting one. She then pulls out a puppet who sings the resting tone, enticing individual children to sing the resting tone in response to tonal segments. Everything in the picnic basket extends immersion in Phrygian tonality or engages individual children in musical response. The Phrygian experience winds up with singing and flowing movement with the "picnic blankets" all the way "home," without ever having been interrupted by talking. Phrygian tonality dominates the activity until the children return from their "picnic" to the parents, who were sitting there all along.

Props can facilitate immersion in meters and tonalities, and they can entice children to interact individually with the meter or tonality, but props are counterproductive with Art Songs. Engaging with the songs themselves becomes "playing music" for young children, just as it is for professional musicians, as children's artistry interacts directly with the energy of the line, the turn of a phrase, the change in meter, the intertwining of rhythm, melody, and text. The joy of Art Songs for young children is in their musicality. Little children are musicians, and they have fun being musical! Gem Songs present their own kind of play and delight, with their more whimsical texts tickling the child's sense of humor as well as musicality.

**Rick: How do parents in your classes respond to songs and activities designed to develop children's artistry? Does it make a difference if the parents are not musical?**

Mary Ellen: Parents are charmed by their child's imagination and total absorption in make believe. They are equally charmed by their child's musical imagination and total absorption in musicality. Parents who are musical are drawn in by their child's musicality. Parents who are not musical are drawn in by their child's attentiveness and enthusiastic participation. Parents cannot help but embrace songs and music activities that compel their child to attend with such uninterrupted focus. They sense that their child is engaged on a deeper level than the child is with traditional music activities. They may not understand that level, and they may not be there themselves, but they respect their child's sensitivity to what they themselves may not perceive. Witnessing their own child consistently spellbound by songs and music activities that the parents may not understand is very convincing.

Parents are not enamored by a duck on a mobile hanging just out of a baby's reach, but delight in the child's enthusiasm for the duck and the drive to touch it, feel it, and chew on it. Music is an "aural mobile" for a child, with rhythm and melody turning and twisting overhead, just out of reach. We can engage parents and children in music activities that

make rhythm and melody tangible for young children, enabling them to touch and feel rhythm and melody and “aurally” chew on them. The parent may be no more enamored by rhythm than by the duck, yet the parent will be as enamored by the child’s attention to rhythm as to the duck. Well designed music activities provide for both parent and child to develop the necessary readiness to engage together in successive music activities of greater difficulty, whatever the parents’ musical background.

Parents of little children often grasp the process of music learning more easily than music teachers. Parents live every day with their child’s process of learning language and delight in the slightest growth. They can witness similarities between the process of music learning and that of learning language. Parents know how to engage with their child in language at a level the child understands, responding to the child’s meaning, modeling more developed response, and gently leading the child forward. Parents recognize the similar process when a music teacher engages a child rhythmically, tonally, or artistically at a level the child understands, responds to the child’s musical meaning, models more developed response, and gently leads the child forward.

**Rick: In what ways do you feel that popular media influence parents’ views about their child’s artistry, and how do you address this with parents?**

Mary Ellen: The wonder of the young child’s artistry is not at the forefront of popular culture. The entertainment industry floods the market with CDs and videos for children’s entertainment. Toy companies have acted on the assumption that music makes a child smarter, adding music even to toy trucks. Music is used to teach numbers, letters, languages, and any number of concepts. Parents are led to believe that because their child is involved in music every day that their child is learning music. They don’t realize that the many delightful music activities do not begin to develop the musical brilliance of their child.

Children are also involved with water every day. They bathe in it, wash their hands in it. They play in wading pools and sprinklers. They play with toys, pitchers and sieves in bathtubs and at water tables where they can explore the properties of water, measurement and volume. The many wonderful activities with water do not, however, develop the innate potential of the child to propel himself through water, which takes a long period of time, guidance, and consistent immersion in the water to develop and sustain mastery.

Similarly, the development of children’s artistry takes a long period of time, with consistent immersion in a “sound environment” rich in meters, tonalities, Art Songs, and Gem Songs. It is up to music teachers to break through the dictates of popular culture and lead parents and children together to the wonder of children’s artistry.

Parents often view music as an option in a vending machine, selecting music one term and swimming or soccer the next. The more early childhood music teachers move from traditional music activities to those that develop children’s artistry, the greater the chance that parents will find value in sheer musicality and embrace the long-term process of music learning. Young children deserve an ongoing developmental music program that goes way beyond traditional activities, developing greater levels of musical competence throughout early childhood and empowering children with their own artistry.

Parents in my children’s online music classes, like teachers in the online courses for professional development, (see [Online Professional Development](#)), grow with their child, developing the readiness for successive lessons and witnessing online materials come alive in their own child. They have the benefit of recordings for all music activities, the introductory audio, “[Parenting Music](#),” and the extensive writing I have done for parents

that addresses music learning throughout early childhood in terms that can be understood by the non-musician.

Rick: Thank you, Mary Ellen, for sharing your heart with us these past several weeks. I hope you will consider writing often for the ECMMA Guest Room, and I wish you well as you continue to develop opportunities for teachers to enrich their own lives, as well as the lives of their students.

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