A Joyous Song

The Power of Music for Children 3-5

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...a new song that a teacher or child is teaching to everyone else...recorded music that someone has brought in to share...a melody picked out on a vibraphone...While it’s always a pleasure to happen on these moments, there’s a lot more going on than meets the ear. Music is, quite simply, one of the most powerful tools in the early childhood curriculum. Whether it is listened to, danced to, played, or sung, music helps children explore and develop skills that will endure over time, bringing personal pleasure and an outlet for sharing oneself with others. As one Montessori music teacher put it:

“There is no such thing as a non-musical child; there are just non-musical adults who did not get this practice as children. Songs give children a way of expressing emotions, and the very act of singing is a physical release.”

To build on WSMS’s capacity to integrate music into every aspect of classroom life, I invited music specialist Kristin Reign Springer to be one of our school’s visiting scholars this year. I have found that providing faculty with an in-house resource for learning new educational techniques right in the classroom is a very powerful means of helping the entire teaching team enhance its effectiveness. Teachers learn by doing, and they share what works with their colleagues—thereby integrating new knowledge and ideas into the fabric of our program.

Kristin has spent the year teaching name games, chants, and nursery rhymes to the children and the teachers, often accompanied by small and large movement or percussive instrument play (rhythm sticks, jingle bells, drums). She has also been providing teachers with strategies for increasing children’s awareness of, and receptivity to, musical concepts, such as: playing an upbeat tune to signal children to clean up their work; beginning circle time with copycat activities (to promote listening); encouraging children to sit up and to stand tall (to improve breathing for singing and speaking).

To the teachers, the study of music introduces concepts of pitch, dynamics, duration, timbre, and form, as well as skills in moving, playing, listening, singing, improvising, and organizing sound. To the children, the study of
music is just plain fun. So engaged are they in singing songs with their classmates that they may not be aware of the musical ear training they are receiving, not to mention other skill building: learning the days of the week to the tune of “The Addams Family”; strengthening memory skills and learning subtraction by singing “Five Green Speckled Frogs”; learning other languages by singing “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” in Japanese (“Atama, kata, hiza, ashi”) or Korean (“Muhri, ukkeh, muryup, bal”).

While the benefits of music in the early childhood curriculum are evident, what is perhaps most striking about the music instruction at WSMS is the laughter you hear as children learn a new song, and the joy and excitement you see in their faces as they memorize that song and master its accompanying gestures or movements. The children take great delight not only in their accomplishments but in the music itself, and this in turn leads them to appreciate the sounds all around them, in the classroom and beyond.

“After doing lots of singing, playing percussion instruments, and listening to music in class, I’ve observed that children are more aware of everyday musical sounds that may have gone unnoticed before,” one WSMS teacher recently said. “One four-year-old student turned to me and said, ‘Listen to that bird outside. It’s singing a beautiful song.’”

It is this ability to connect what is learned in the classroom with the outside world—that active engagement of children in the world around them—that we at WSMS are committed to nurturing. And it is our belief that music has a unique way of kindling that joy of learning that leads directly to our students becoming lifelong learners.

The annual WSMS End-of-Year Picnic is around the corner. I hope you will join us so that you can witness the glorious sight and sound of our more than 200 children singing some of their favorite school songs joyfully in unison. Whatever it is they’re singing, it is, truly, a beautiful song.
The Music-Math Connection

The positive effects of music on general learning have been touted for years, but only fairly recently has research focused specifically on the correlation between the study of music in early childhood and subsequent strong performance in mathematics. In a study published by the *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, Maureen Ann Harris observed two groups of Montessori students ranging in age from three to five: one group given three half-hour music sessions a week for six months, the other given no music instruction during that period. At the end of the six months, all of the students took a mathematical achievement test. Those who had received music instruction scored significantly higher on the test than those who hadn’t. Citing other studies, Harris suggests that teaching music to very young children—i.e., children of the age at which they are most able to absorb, retain, and apply what they have learned—gives them the reasoning skills they need to grasp abstract mathematical concepts.

Further reading:
http://escholarship.org/uc/item/07h5f866
Music Resources

BOOKS

Meet the Orchestra – Ann Hayes
Mole Music – David M. McPhail
Mozart Finds a Melody – Stephen Costanza
The Jazz Fly – Matthew Gollub
The Philharmonic Gets Dressed – Karla Kuskin
Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin – Lloyd Moss

BOOK/CD

Story of the Orchestra: Listen While You Learn About the Instruments, the Music and the Composers Who Wrote the Music! – Robert Levine

CDS

Circlesongs – Bobby McFerrin
Beauty and the Beat! Favorite Disney Tunes in Steelband Style – The Trinidad and Tobago Showboat Orchestra
Grimm’s & Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales – Danny Kaye
Jazz for Kids: Sing, Clap, Wiggle and Shake – Various Artists
Jazz and Swing for Kids – Various Artists
Putumayo Presents: Dreamland: World Lullabies and Soothing Songs – Various Artists

SOFTWARE

Superstart: Mozart’s Musical Adventure – SelectSoft Publishing
Superstart: Tchaikovsky’s Musical Adventure – SelectSoft Publishing