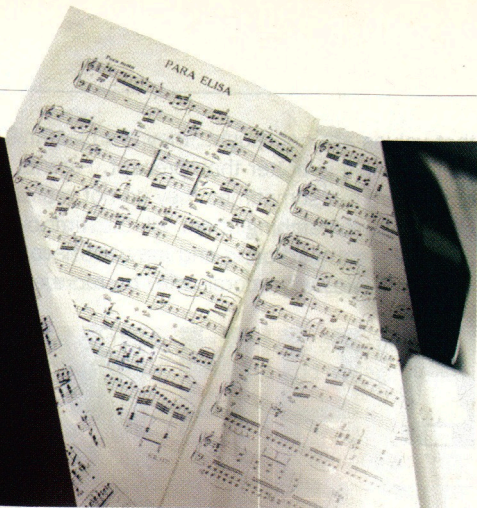


# Musical Education

Music is more than just a hobby or interest. **Jenny Ong**, President of Musikgarten Malaysia, enlightens us on the importance of musical education for children.



## Early childhood music classes: What is their value & what is appropriate?

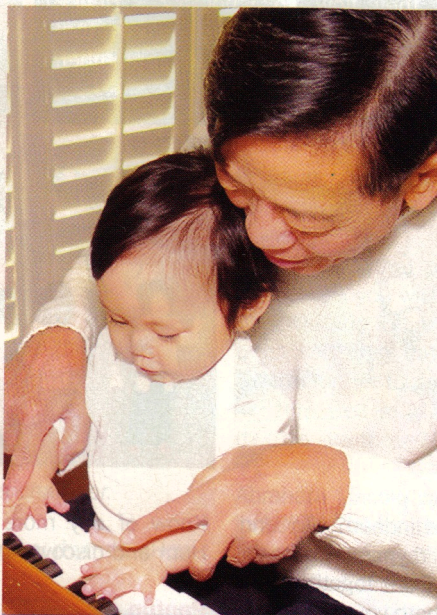
According to Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, music has the power to affect the moral character of the soul. He believed that we must direct and educate the young in music. Dr. Lorna Heyge, one of the foremost pioneers in the field of early childhood music education and author of Musikgarten, an early childhood music program, holds the same belief and stressed that early childhood music education is now considered so important that it is a teaching field of its own.

Fourteen years ago, when I started teaching early-childhood music classes, very few people understood or accepted what I was doing. A music class that did not teach children how to play an instrument was something unheard of! For the parents, music lessons meant 'learning an instrument'. At that time, and even nowadays, the piano is an instrument that every parent would like their child to be able to play, even from as young as three years old! Music lessons also meant preparing for music exams and acquiring certifications. Often than not, music lessons are more of a stress than an enjoyment for the children. It is not uncommon for children to lose interest and give up learning the instrument! Why should this happen? Simple, because they have not achieved instrumental readiness.

Learning music is like learning a language. The four stages in learning a language is listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is unimaginable to ask children to

read or write a language before they have listened to the language and learnt to use it to communicate. A similar sequence should occur in the learning of music. If children have not developed music-listening and music-speaking, will they be able to understand what the teachers are teaching them to read? It is only when children can sing in tune, in time and on pitch, and able

to feel and move to the beat/rhythm of the songs they sing and the music they hear, they have achieved instrumental readiness. Unfortunately, most parents push their children to learn an instrument when they are still not ready with the physical skills as well as the aural/oral experience. When their children are not able to achieve the success or results they wish to see, they would then brand their child as being lazy or unmusical.



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All children are musical beings. They are born with music potential and an aptitude for music. Although aptitude varies between individuals, all children can achieve musically and are greatly influenced by the timing and quality of their early experiences. Research indicates if children are exposed to music at an early age, they experience greater ease in music learning and develop good musical skills. Music activities

help children develop a good sense of timing, physical coordination, listening skills, memory, language and social skills.

Movement is central to early childhood music experiences as it is children's natural mode of being, expression and learning. That is why early-childhood music classes are movement-based. A good early-childhood

music program will consist of music and movement activities that are developmentally appropriate for children at their different stages of development. They not only provide children enjoyable and meaningful experiences, but at the same time help nurture the children's musical development and readiness for an instrument.

### Music & movement activities in an early-childhood music class

#### Singing

Just as we talk to our children long before we expect them to join us in conversation, we should sing to them



if we expect them to join in our songs! Through songs, children experience different tonality and meters. In class where children are being sung to and then sing along, we are laying the very important aural/oral foundation required for future musical growth. Children learn by repetition. Singing offers them the repetition that they need to learn and acquire new skills.

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When children sing and chant, they are exposed to and physically experience the rhythms and patterns of language, speech sounds and rhyming words. Pattern awareness is important to learning and memory. Songs, rhyme and chants are great methods for storing information that would otherwise be difficult to retain. When children listen, sing, move and

play instruments, they are experiencing and exploring music as a whole. For instance, when they jump like a frog to 'jumping' sounds or music, or wriggle like a worm to smooth, 'wiggly' sounds or music, they are experiencing music on many levels. Not only are they listening, they are expressing and creating with their body, mind and spirit. In terms of musical growth, they are experiencing concepts of 'legato' (smooth) and 'staccato' (short and detached) with their bodies through movement.

#### Movement activities

Movement activities include sing-and-dance activity, cir-

cle dances, moving or dancing to music. Through these activities children experience beat, phrase, meter and form. Movement activities also provide opportunities for children to refine and expand their motor capabilities. They gain better control of their bodies, develop good coordination through loco motor activities and movement games and, fine motor dexterity through finger plays.

#### Playing of simple instruments

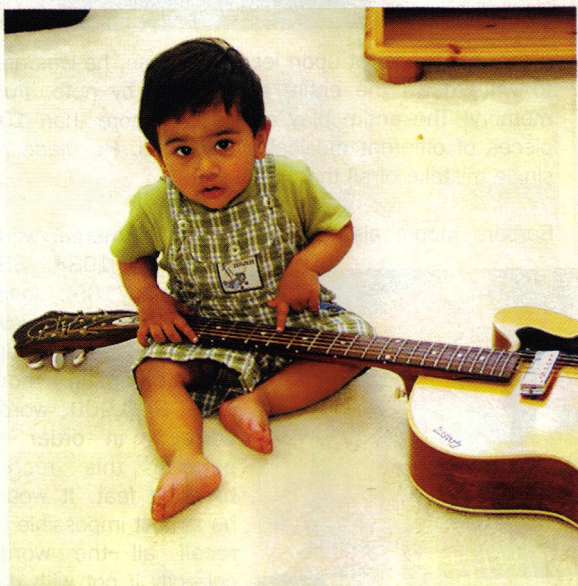
Children are exposed to simple instruments that are appropriate for their age and their capability. They are simple rhythm or percussion instruments, such as rhythm sticks, jingles and drums, which children can manipulate without difficulty. These instruments not

## Learning Lab

only offer children opportunities to explore the many different ways to feel and play the beat of the songs they sing or the music they are listening to, they also offer them a new challenge.

### Simple but essential

While the activities described may seem simple, they are exactly what children need to help nurture their music potential. If a child cannot sing in tune and move



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in time, he will not be able to play an instrument with good intonation, expression or rhythm. Playing will be more technical than musical. With a strong foundation of listening, singing, movement and playing of simple instruments, s/he will be equipped with the skills necessary to figure out how to play his favourite song without relying on sheet music. In other words, s/he can achieve success easily and learning an instrument will become a pleasure not a pressure. If music is a source of joy and success for children, they will have a life-long appreciation for music.

Early childhood music classes, as can be seen, do not only lay a strong foundation of basic musical skills but, more importantly, allows the children's love of music to deepen. We should all see music as a part of our life.

I would like to end with this comment from a Parent: "Even if my child doesn't have a great voice or isn't the best dancer, she can sing and dance her way through life". **P**