

# Babies Praying Twice

*A new program, Making Music Praying Twice, offers music ed for the Catholic child*

Walk into St. James Parish in Basking Ridge, NJ this fall and you may see moms and toddlers sporting colorful streamers dancing in a circle around mesmerized babies. The boom box plays a song called “Moroccan Melody”: A duet of Middle Eastern oud and riq play rhythmically while the voice rings out “Dai dee dai dee dum.” The song ends and everyone settles down on the floor to chant a jazzy version of “Old King Cole” while the children take turns coming up with ideas for verses of their own. Then everyone turns to a statue of Our Lady, and chants a Gregorian



*Each child participates at his own developmental level, during this shaky egg exercise.*

“Magnificat” with several four year olds remembering the Latin verse more accurately than mom. Finally, the class sits in a circle, swaying and tapping their knees singing “God bless Jacob.....” until everyone has been blessed. They chant a psalm together and start chatting and packing up. You just witnessed the last 12 minutes of a Making Music Praying Twice class.

## The Early Childhood Music Movement

Like *Kindermusik* or *Music Together*, among other programs, *Making Music Praying Twice* addresses children from birth through the preschool age. The approach is similar. *Kindermusik*, based predominantly on Karl Orff’s work, introduces children systematically to music and progresses through a series of steps designed to help a child with intonation, music creation, and beginning reading skills. *Music Together* is based more heavily on Edwin Gordon’s work. It takes a less structured approach, encouraging growth of music aptitude through a carefully designed exposure-oriented curriculum. *Making Music Praying Twice* probably is best grouped with the latter as it is also heavily influenced by Gordon, imposes little structure and like *Music Together* involves mixed aged classes.

Why create a program with such similar influences and goals? The answer is a matter of Catholic education verses secular education. The other programs serve a variety of families of various faiths. Songs with Christian roots are secularized for use in the classes. While the curriculums are seasonal, there is no mention of Christmas or Easter. My husband, John, and I were thrilled with what our daughter gained in her secular music class, so much so I trained and became a teacher. However, something was missing. We wanted more for our children. We wanted the music of their lives to include the seasons and themes most central in their lives, those of our faith. Thus, we developed Making Music Praying Twice.

### The theories behind *Making Music Praying Twice*

Research shows that in the early stages of music development, it is vital that the child be exposed to a wide variety of music with various meters and tonalities. Dismissing certain meters or tonalities as too complicated or rarely used, would compromise a child's future abilities. We include music from many tonalities and traditions with an emphasis on American and

*... (S)acred polyphony, in particular that of what is called the 'Roman school', constitutes a heritage that should be preserved with care, kept alive, and made better known, for the benefit not only of the scholars and specialists, but of the ecclesial community as a whole. [...] An authentic updating of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony."*

— Pope Benedict XVI as quoted by Sandro Magister in *A Change of Tune in the Vatican – And Not Only in the Secretariat of State*. Trans. Matthew Sherry

Catholic music. Each season, we teach Gregorian Chant, valued for devotion and music.

Adaptations of world folk music (like “Moroccan Melody”) are balanced with traditional music, and original pieces. We must write music, as we rely on the original pieces to give us specific activities for class, like chants or finger games, and to fulfill curriculum objectives.

When my one and half year old went on an “Uh-oh” kick, I noted that the melodic interval he was exploring was very consistent. It only made sense to use this in a song which would relate to a child's daily life. I used a non-major tonality, which we include in careful proportion in each collection. Similarly, I used a 5/4 meter. The song covers many educational

*“... (P)arents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it.”*

(Vatican II #3, Declaration on Christian Education)

bases and is a class favorite.

Parents receive a take home CD, illustrated songbook, and newly developed baby-safe song cards designed to introduce written music to growing brains. It is vital to engage the parents as much as the children. Both in class and at home, the parent models musical behavior as fun and engaging without placing expectations on the child. The child observes and participates **as he wishes**. Usually the child is drawn toward the teacher and



*Parent participation is key to each child's development.*

*“To stimulate life, - leaving it then free to develop, to unfold, - herein lies the first task of the educator.”*

-Maria Montessori

(The Montessori Method, Robert Bently, Cambridge, MA, 1965. pg 115)

the other parents and children in the class. However, it is **his own parent's** modeling in class and at home that will most impact the child's music education.

### Can children this young really learn music?

Experience has proven that early childhood music education programs work. The brain of a child under the age of three is, in the words of brain researchers, “plastic”, or moldable. This is because the human brain does much of its growth, after birth, in its environment. The brain's synapses grow to meet the demands placed upon it. Different environmental demands grow unique brain synapses.

*“In part, there are predetermined sequences of development in childhood, including windows of opportunity for laying down the basic hardware necessary for later learning. That is why new languages as well as the arts ought to be introduced to children very early in life.”*

-Renate and Geoffrey Caine

(Principal Ten, *Mind/Brain Learning Principles*. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative. 1997.)

For fun and educational value, we use:

Scarves

Shaky Eggs

Rhythm Instruments

Streamers

Bells

Parachute

To create the new synapses necessary to achieve natural, musical ability, the brain must be exposed to music while the brain is growing. The rate of brain growth declines with age and so does the opportunity to “hardwire” the brain for optimum music aptitude. Research and statistics have shown that children in early music education programs reach musical

milestones up to five years faster than their counterparts, and are more likely to continue with formal music training later in life. (statistics provided by The Center for Music and Young Children, Princeton)

### Improving Music Aptitude

Music aptitude is greatly misunderstood. Most people believe that good musicians are born with higher music aptitude or “talent” than the rest of us. Gordon’s clinical research has confirmed what Sinichi Suzuki proposed years earlier: “Talent” is not predetermined. A child’s aptitude can increase and decrease. Aptitude is not like a full bottle of wine waiting patiently to be served. It is like a sapling. It must receive proper nourishment from its environment to grow into a tree. The infant brain will go to extraordinary means to adapt to its environment. The environment will determine how the brain will grow in the effort to promote or abandon different natural aptitudes.

#### **\*\*\*Ask yourself these questions\*\*\***

- H If a child did not hear any language until the age of seven, would he be able to speak?
- H If a child hears little or no music, singing, dancing or playing of instruments, will he be able to learn music?
- ◆ What if this child watches music-rich shows on television and hears the classical station in the car or at bedtime, but no one sings or dances with him?
- ◆ What if a parent never spoke to or in the presence of the child but had her watch educational shows on television and played recordings of Shakespeare in the car? Would she learn to talk?

Realistically, it is perfectly natural for even a very musical household to be quite language-oriented in our culture. Parents talk to and read to their children, and talk, read and write around them all day long. Mom decorates baby’s room with the alphabet and cries out with joy at the first “Dada”.

On the other hand, most household music environments are moderate. When baby explores his music abilities, it is dismissed as babble while mom and dad push for words. The music behavior modeled in many homes is a passive response to produced music from CD's, radio, and television. No wonder most American children, though born with **average music aptitude**, progress much slower and to a lower degree of achievement than children from more inherently musical cultures. The average American child does not learn to carry a tune until age eight, if at all. (The average age is three in more musical cultures.) This is verbally akin to not being able to speak in sentences until the age of eight!

To put things in perspective, many symphony musicians are tested to show **average music aptitude**. This is the achievement level that can be expected of the average child, with proper environment from birth, and formal training later in life, if they pursue the study seriously. This means 84% of the population are born with the aptitude necessary to become a symphony musician. 13% of these "talented" people possess even higher aptitude. Isn't that beautiful and amazing? What would God have us do with this aptitude?

"There is no telling what heights children can attain if we educate them properly right after birth."

- Sinichi Suzuki

(*Nurtured by Love*, Exposition Press, Smithtown, NY, 1983, pg. 15)

Despite the statistics, every Kindergarten music teachers knows that 84% of the class is not demonstrating this level of aptitude. Many of the children have not had the environment to support the growth of their God-given aptitude. The greatest challenge the music teacher or youth choir director faces, beyond that of other disciplines, is the incredible range of abilities in each class. Almost all children attend Kindergarten knowing how to speak in sentences, but many average fourth graders walk into youth choir unable to carry a tune consistently.



*Regular "free play" with rhythm instruments gives opportunity to observe each child's development.*

**"Much of our learning is unconscious in that experience and sensory input is processed below the level of awareness.**

**That means that much understanding may NOT occur during a class, but may occur hours, weeks or months later."**

-Renate and Geoffrey Caine

(Principal Eight, *Mind/Brain Learning Principles*. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative. 1997.)

Watching a young student progress at a good rate, I was surprised by his seven year old sister who tagged along one day. Her beat skills were barely beyond her two year old brother's and she did not sing on pitch. She did have fun,

though. Inevitably mom revealed that the older children did not take music classes when they were young but she has taken piano lessons for a year! I have seen this more than once. The lessons are coming too late.

By giving the children more at a younger age, we allow them to continue toward their God-given potential. And, the sooner we start, the better. Very few parents will bring a child under the age of six months to music class, but for those that come with older siblings, what a difference! Long before they can prove it to you, children are busy learning.

The case study, *Music and child development* conducted by L. Kelly and B.S. Smith illustrates the importance of early environment. The study began at birth and marked musical expression and milestones with regular testing.



*Often children who start young can keep a steady beat and sing clear pitches well before the age of two.*

The children from “musical homes” began their musical expression over a year earlier than in the “nonmusical home”. When the study ended at the age of two, the child from the nonmusical environment had not yet sung clear pitches and spoke most of his words when trying to sing. I have personally encountered children aged 4 and 5 who are still in this

stage of development. The children in the musical homes passed this milestone before age two. Musical training must begin at home long before a child enters school.

### Bringing it to Church

Making Music Praying Twice is unique in that it is “faith inclusive” for the Catholic child. We recognize faith as an important and, in fact, central aspect of life. This is not a religion class, but like other programs, we aim to present the music of a child’s culture in ways that impact her daily life. Unless faith is recognized as a part of a child’s culture and a part of a child’s daily life, the music program will fall short of it’s

#### The Seasons

The class seasons revolve around the Liturgical Year

- H Ordinary Time - Fall
- H Advent/Christmas/Epiphany
- H Ordinary Time - Winter
- H Lent
- H Easter/Pentecost

goal. By presenting music from a faith perspective, the child's mind and body, as well as his soul, are respected and educated.

One mother was surprised to see her 10 month old attempt to make the Sign of the Cross during his second class. She hadn't considered teaching him to pray at his age, but he was instantly drawn to this physical prayer.



*Dancing with scarves helps young children to slow down, develops the dance technique of extension, and encourages larger, fuller movements.*

When young families come to the parish for social and educational activity, relationships are formed. Many parents of young children participate in early childhood music programs. It is a class they want for their children and in which they invest time and money. It is a place where they make friends. In offering quality music education at the parish, parents who are normally less interested in

“church” activities may be drawn into parish life, making relationships with other parish members.

### The Program's Growth

While in development for almost six years, this program has been implemented in different venues for three years. Last year, the parish program was piloted at St. James. Now, the program is growing and can be applied to other parish and Catholic school venues. Teachers invest in training and equipment, but reap the financial benefits of class tuition together with the parish. Making Music Praying Twice is a ministry, but a business, as well. For more information on bringing this program to your parish or school, contact Making Music Praying Twice, PO Box 435, Basking Ridge, NJ 07920 or email [john@makingmusicprayingtwice.com](mailto:john@makingmusicprayingtwice.com) with questions or requests.