

Tunings

by Peggy Bennett

Starting a Song

Something very subtle was missing. Several weeks ago, I sat in a first grade music class. As the children sang a familiar song they were asked for their ideas in describing animal sounds. While I watched and listened to the lesson unfold, I began puzzling over what was lacking.

Suddenly, I almost said aloud, "The song is not being treated with respect!" Then, the analyzing "me" took over, and I began to see the situation as an "Ah-ha!" for teacher preparation.

The uncertainty of just how to "start a song" has been communicated by many teachers in my classes. In response to this need, I have labeled the sequence of "starting a song" FOCUSING, PITCHING, NODDING, AND LISTENING. This sequence, I think demonstrates respect for the song, and concurrently, for the children* who are singing it.

*(Although I use the term "children" throughout this writing, "people" could easily be substituted.)

Focusing

To aid the children in a cohesive effort of singing a song, verbal and nonverbal preparation are frequently needed. A "framework of silence" surrounding the singing of the whole song lends a respect for the song and the efforts of music-making from the children.

"Is your song ready?"; "Let's sing for Cindy's turn"; and "Here comes the song" accompanied by a subtle look and posture of anticipation can give the necessary focus for the whole group's participation in the singing.

Pitching

To sing a song *ensemble*, the group must know the starting pitch. This is easily given by singing "ready" or "sing" or "here we go" on the first tone of the song. I have emphasized *singing* the pitch here, because *saying* "ready" is inadequate for our purpose.

For beginners, simply encourage them to sing any pitch. Then by subsequently listening to the students

sing the whole song, the teacher can decide whether or not to raise or lower the beginning pitch for the next singing.

Another procedure which has worked for some is to (1) sing the song in their inner hearing, then (2) sing the first note aloud, and then (3) sing "ready" on that same note. For those of us who do this automatically, it is difficult to imagine the need for such small steps and for "backing up" from the first note of the song to sing "ready." For those who are just beginning to build their confidence with leading group singing, however, they seem to appreciate an initial, systematic procedure to follow.

Nodding

Important during and following the "ready" pitch is the non-verbal facial expression and head gesture which lets the group know when to begin. I often compare the "ready, pause, nod" sequence to the conductor's preparation and down beat. The value of the leader following this preparatory sequence can easily be demonstrated.

Compare this preparation approach with simply beginning to sing and having the class join in when they can. Can you imagine any ensemble director being this negligent in preparing the group for successfully beginning together?

As your children assume the roles of "song starters" help them learn and value the "pitch, pause, nod" sequence just as a conductor would.

Listening

Perhaps more of us are guilty of omitting this last phase to "starting a song" than we would care to admit. We so often enjoy singing so much that we forget to listen as the children sing. (A confession here...I do include me in that we.)

Once a familiar song is "started" and the children are participating in the singing, the teacher should relax her hold on being the "lead singer." Listening to our children as they sing can give so many clues—clues about their range, their vocal production, and their confidence with the words and melody of the song.

I have been amazed in recent months at how many teachers have grinned and nodded knowingly when I've

mentioned the need to "back off" when the children are ready to carry the song themselves. What was amazing was *not* the "knowing nods," but the consequent "lead singing" in the same group from these "knowing nodders."

Personally, I consider this particular sensitivity—listening to the children as they sing—a discipline. And, personally, I constantly need to remind myself to listen to the group.

Let's give ourselves an assignment for the next two days. Let's be conscious and disciplined about the way we FOCUS the children to sing, the way we PITCH and NOD to cue the children to begin, and the way we LISTEN as the children assume responsibility for leading the song.

Ultimately, the results will be respect in our classes—for the songs and for the children who sing them.

California Comalia

Saturday, January 19, 1985,
10 am to 2:45 pm

University of Southern California,
Los Angeles

Room 106, Music Faculty
Work with children will be a part of
the program.

For information:

call Randy McClesney at
818-707-0466, or
the Music Department, USC at
213-743-2524

or write to
the Richards Institute,
149 Corte Madera Road,
Portola Valley, CA 94025.

ETM NEWS AROUND THE WORLD,

Vol. 2, No. 1, Nov./Dec. 1984

ETM News Around the World is a bi-monthly publication of the Richards Institute, a non-profit educational organization. Its purpose is to provide a communication and information network for members and others interested in the work of the Institute.

We invite your contributions in all forms: letters, articles, stories, photographs, ideas, announcements. Please submit material for the next issue by December 25 to Richards Institute, 149 Corte Madera Road, Portola Valley, CA 94025.

Editor: Mary Helen Richards
Associate Editor: C.W. Richards
Managing Editor: Trudi Richards
Contributing Editor: Sr. Fleurette Sweeney
Business Manager: Robert Morrison