



Thursday, November 20, 2008

This week, I'd like to share with you the impulse behind [Classical Kids](#). The CDs weave together drama and music by drawing on **noticings and inter-connections** – the root of how humans learn. We must build our "noticings" onto a strong historical "scaffolding". If our aim is to help children blossom into creative, agile thinkers, deeply in touch with their feelings, we might start by finding connections between seemingly unrelated things. This inter-connectiveness is the basis of the Integrated Curriculum.

Integrated Curriculum My children went to a school that tied together math, science, reading and social studies into themes. It obviously worked. One daughter is now a student of neurobiology in California and the other is a gifted Grade 4 teacher in an inner city school. Both use the skills in "lateral thinking" they learned in an interdisciplinary curriculum. [Don Campbell](#) best expresses a key advantage to this way of thinking:

The more angles we approach a subject, the more it is embedded in memory.

Memory and Thinking Visit [The Mozart Effect](#) on this site to see more about Don's ideas. I believe that memory is under-taught in schools. How can we possibly "move things around" in our brains if there is nothing in there? Children love to memorize songs, verses, and eventually facts. Let's use that facility to build up that mental scaffolding at an early age.

Classical Connections Classical Kids may appear to be just about music, but it secretly develops four skill sets:

1. Music: how to listen to it and how to make it.
2. Literacy: Classical Kids' rich language can serve as a model for kids
3. History: composer biographies and social history.
4. Other Arts: complex thinking and creativity across the arts.

Picture of the Week It seems that many of you liked the picture-reading, so we'll start with the last skill. Pictures let children advance from concrete to abstract thinking. Our [Slideshow DVD](#) in the [Teaching Edition](#) points out that we must look at pictures ACTIVELY rather than passively. For example, in the last blog, I suggested an art activity – painting a scene with a focus on form rather than detail.



Above is a picture of Haddon Hall. It is a "great house" in northern England, now often used by producers for movies about Elizabethan England. This picture shows the dance hall on the top floor where ladies would "take their exercise" during the long foggy winters. Can you hear the rustle of silk skirts and murmured voices? Dance skills were paramount, as were needlepoint and crafts. This was an age of conversation rather than computers.

Now, exercise your noticing and active artistic skills as you talk about the plaster ceiling. (It has family coats of arms at the crossings – design your own!) Examine the windows. (Stained and bottled glass – very expensive in medieval times. Design your own stained glass.) The chairs. (Are they comfortable? Design some elaborate chairs.) Read more about Medieval and Renaissance times in the [Teacher's Notes](#) to [Song of the Unicorn](#). Research online to learn and see more about this beautiful castle.

Writing Skills Let's move to the next skill, writing. Annie Lamott in her excellent (funny) book, *Bird by Bird*, encourages writers to notice things. I once taught a class of advanced musicians to develop their communication skills by writing a paragraph about their childhood. The rule was that they had to go concrete and involve the senses like visual, auditory, taste, and touch — rather than using abstract words like "creativity" or "imagination". Some wrote about kindergarten lunches. Others about playground favorites. The coldest day. The hottest day. What they remember about autumn. This "noticing" or attention is the stuff of a creative life, be it in writing, art or music. As Paul Medul, founder of the Listening Centre in Toronto, says:

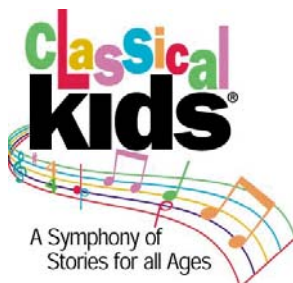
Listening is wider than hearing. It is attention.

Music Applying this idea to music, listen to Beethoven's Ode to Joy and go beyond the left-brain identification ("Oh, I know the name of that piece.") to notice things about its composition. Instead ask, what makes this a great melody? (Perhaps the step by step movement lovingly encircling the first note.) What gives it a sense of home in the harmony? (Sing or accompany it on merely 2 notes to see how strongly it sways from the dominant to the "home" tonic.) How does the timbre change in the repetitions? (From low celli, up through to violins and vocal.) What is the phrase structure? (Carefully balanced like a poem in AABA.) What makes it great? (Simplicity? Singability? Proportions? Beauty of orchestral sound? Its roots in musical elements like scales, chords and simple rhythms.) And finally, what might be its meaning? (Write new words to the Ode to Joy, making sure those words reflect the wider meaning for you. Is it an image? A belief? About love? About floating? Only you can decide.)

Closing thought When I was 16 at Banff School of Fine Arts, the teacher quoted this essay to me. I never forgot it – though if I have the wrong author, please correct me:

Make your living any way you can, but undergo no sacrifice at your chosen altar. It may break your heart. It may drive you mad with its wandering fires. But it will fill your heart before it breaks it. (Maxwell Anderson)

[Contact Sue by clicking here.](#)



Thursday, November 6, 2008

Welcome to the world of Classical Kids. Did you know that we just celebrated an important birthday? Exactly twenty years ago, Mr. Bach 'came to call' on young families for the first time. Ten titles later, we're still going strong – because children keep coming 'online' – as you are now. It's been a gratifying journey for me as a parent, producer and teacher, to watch this project mature beyond its humble beginnings on a dock in Algonquin to what it is today.

We've moved from cassettes (remember them?), to CDs, to digital downloads. We've expanded from CDs into books, videos, arts-based educational resources and an active symphony concert series. Nothing thrills me more than when university students, young mothers, receptionists, and musicians come up and say,

"I remember those tapes! We grew up on them. My brother and I secretly listened to them even when we were teenagers – and so did our parents!"

Now a confession – I'm not exactly sure how to write a blog. I know only that I'd like to create a warm personal space where you and I can meet each other. Personally, I love to talk about music, its stories, and what makes children blossom into complex thinkers. Let's use this place to rummage around for ideas to enjoy Classical Kids recordings and explore a life in the arts.

Hmm, so what would you like to talk about? Here's a start. As a serious pianist and sometimes-singer, I'd like to share ideas in music education and the craft of music-making. As an avid photographer, I'd like to post a new slide each time to show the beauty of Europe.

Here's my first offering below. It's a picture of palace gardens in Bellagio on Lake Como in Northern Italy (the country where Vivaldi lived). Notice how the eye is led along the two paths, out over the water, the mountains and sky beyond. Bliss! Draw this garden if you like. Think about form as much as detail.



Now, a second confession. I personally find it hard to live in our consumer culture. It steals our money and time. We can't buy transcendence. Or joy. Or self-esteem. Or connection to something bigger than ourselves. **Correction:** you can keep buying Classical Kids, but that's another thing! Just remember:

Art steps lightly on the planet because when we're practicing, or painting, or writing, or listening, we're not shopping!

Why is all this important?

Because I believe that great art changes us as people. It

deepens us because its emotions are never superficial. It makes us patient because its meaning is revealed only slowly. It makes us curious because it's complicated and layered. It asks us to live in the 'now'. And if we progress from listening to making music, we become disciplined, expressive, thoughtful, and soulful. Art spills into every aspect of life.

So, let's create a special space here, far from the dumbed-down culture that makes so much

noise we have no time to experience and express all we feel and learn.

Just as we breathe in and out, the key to living a rich life is taking in and putting out.

Oh yes. I'd like to close each blog with a quotation that inspires me. This first comes from a book about the pianist Alfred Cortot, written by Thomas Maschardt.

"... [There is this] incredible loneliness of Earth around us. Art is a way of reaching out. Of offering to others what one has loved. Music cannot offer ideas. But it can offer the value of feeling. And feeling of life determines whether life has value ... There is such a thing as beauty of feeling, and when it is present, I am glad to be alive ... The most important things in life are not necessary, yet they make life worth the living ..." (page 148)

Now, don't be shy! Parents and teachers, send in your questions, favorite quotations, impressions and ideas. Encourage your children to send their thoughts, letters or scanned-in pictures. I promise to answer them here. Send any or all of the above to moreinfo@childrensgroup.com or just click [here](#). Let's talk! Or should I say, let's blog!

Yours truly – Yours enthusiastically – Yours bloggedly – Yours in music,
Sue Hammond