

# FREEING THE CAGED BIRD



Developing Well-Coordinated,  
Injury-Preventive Keyboard Technique  
with  
BARBARA LISTER-SINK

## *Joy Through Balance: Musical Ecology and Kindermusik by Barbara Lister-Sink*

*"I have never lost my sense of wonder and awe at the richness of life."* This was said to me by an 85-year-old man who knew that he was close to his own departure from that rich life. His name was John Duke. He was a beloved teacher, composer of art song and lover of life. Most important for me, he was my friend and someone who for twenty years nurtured my sense of joy in music. Although other teachers have given me the finest in musical and professional training, that joyous attitude toward music is alone the reason I will always be a musician.

There are many reasons why Kindermusik is increasingly popular in our country. However, one reason stands foremost in my mind as related to John Duke's attitude. Kindermusik promotes the total well-being of the child through a joyous experience of music. What a combination! It is certainly the reason I enrolled my daughter, now 8 years old, in Kindermusik, and why at the 1991 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music in Orlando, I cited Kindermusik as one of our most valuable models for training music students of any age.

Why does the joy of experiencing music and the process of music-making often diminish and even die after the Kindermusik experience? Young musicians grow up, acquire more knowledge, more skills, more experience. The disturbing drop-out rate of young people from music could be attributed to a number of factors: lack of parental, peer and societal encouragement; the waning of discipline and active involvement in intellectual pursuits; materialism; television; or the lack of understanding in our country of the intrinsic worth of music study to the overall development of the human being. These factors, although real and disturbing, are often beyond the scope of our influence as music teachers. Moreover, in my experience, most young people who develop a serious interest in music are disciplined, bright, creative and often have the support of parents and teachers. They are often willing to persevere and continue with music in spite of all the odds-- at least for a while.

Perhaps it is time to take more control of the situation and do our own house-cleaning in the music teaching profession before we condemn the property.

I believe that the one critical area where we as music teachers could seize control is in the area synonymous with success in Kindermusik--**the area of total, holistic well-being**. This is the area that nurtures and sustains that sense of joy and wonder.

Why is our society so unaware of this concept of holism? In the span of recorded history, we have only recently viewed our bodies as separate from our minds. Moreover, only recently have we emphasized the use of our minds in an analytical, disaggregated style. This analytical way of thinking has naturally become very popular because of the wonders of modern technology and science which it has spawned. But what good are these wonders, these dazzling parts, if we have shattered the whole?

Holism—viewing all of the parts as a whole greater than the sum of the parts—is a timeless value which the highest civilizations, from ancient China and Greece to Renaissance Italy, have recognized as the key to healthy functioning and joyous living. We are each ecological wholes. The laws of healthy functioning apply to all active entities—people, corporations, governments, countries, our globe. Balance is the first law of good health. If we attempt to separate or fragment our parts for too long, a serious and destructive ecological imbalance results.

The music teaching world is in ecological imbalance. The values of holistic training underlying the Kindermusik experience are not necessarily the values of those of us who open our teaching studios to eager, enthusiastic young musicians for the next stage of learning. I would never suggest that this breakdown or confusion or lack of common values is deliberate. Music teachers are some of the most caring, sensitive people on earth. We do not mean to neglect or damage our students. However, we are often so concerned about the details of the style, the rating in the district competition, the need to satisfy parents, or the urge to teach the way we were taught, that the whole—the emotional, mental and physical well-being of the music student—is inadvertently neglected. As a result, joy in the process of making music is lost, or never found. Perhaps we simply have not taken time to reflect on our values and to agree upon a set of timeless values that will foster the love of music in any teaching situation.

This is where Kindermusik can play a vitally important role because it has already established these timeless values. A requirement of Kindermusik teacher training and certification is the ability to attend to the total well-being of the child. Why then can we non-Kindermusik teachers not integrate this superb model of teaching into a seamless system of music instructional values, applicable to teaching on all levels? Music teachers could then use these values to maintain that sense of wonder and joy in the experience of music. If we concentrated more on fostering and maintaining through music this continuous sense of wonder at life's richness, I believe much of our problem of discouragement and drop-out would disappear. If we could begin to right this imbalance, we might make significant progress in halting the musical exodus of our talented, serious young musicians.

Now I will address an area of imbalance that has grown increasingly larger in music education and where Kindermusik teachers could significantly aid in redressing the imbalance—the **area of physical well-being**.

Physical injury and the experience of music might seem to most Kindermusik teachers an absurd combination. The sight of a romping 4-year-old, flexible, free and energetic, is the norm. But from the viewpoint of one who has taught all levels of piano, from beginners to doctoral students, for twenty-five years, physical injury has become a pervasive, tragic, yet accepted way of life in the professional music world and a big business in the medical profession. **It is utterly unnecessary.** It is also, I believe, one of the main reasons young musicians lose their sense of joy and wonder in the experience of music-making and stop studying music.

Unfortunately, there is a wide-spread assumption that discomfort and injury result from lack of talent or from over-use of muscles. This assumption is erroneous. Injury is largely the result of faulty or inadequate teaching of technique. It does not happen suddenly. It usually results from an accumulation over a number of years of destructive physical patterns, i.e., faulty technique. Injury usually begins with an **increasing sense of physical discomfort related to music activities** in general, and the study of a musical instrument in particular.

Just what is technique? In my experience, most students view technique, i.e., the physical activity of playing an instrument, as playing the right notes at the right time with the right expression—at **any physical cost**.

In music, **technique is the application of the principles of efficient body use and good coordination to the production of sound on any instrument.** In general, it is using our bodies in the most energy-efficient, natural way in any activity, whether it be in playing the piano, singing, dancing, typing, washing our hair, running or driving. Musicians are, in fact, highly skilled athletes who use their athletic skills to communicate the depth and breadth of human experience through music.

How does one learn to teach technique—efficient body use—to our music students so that they remain free of discomfort and injury? Training need not be complicated. However, it absolutely cannot be learned from the written or even spoken word. Since it is the art and science of efficient body use, it must be taught via the body, i.e., through the senses—kinesthetic, aural, and visual. Effective teaching of technique therefore requires an understanding of and ability to teach certain fundamental physical skills and sensations. These include body awareness; free, efficient movement; body alignment and balance; regulation of muscle contraction and release—all as they apply to the activity of playing an instrument, singing, conducting, etc. What is vitally important is that the teacher and, subsequently, the student, understand the importance of mastering these sensations and skills step-by-step, from the very simplest movements (beating a drum or clapping hands) to the most complicated (playing a Liszt etude.) The beauty of this process is that body awareness, good coordination, and free, efficient body use can be applied to everything we do. Our lives will be enhanced and enriched in many other areas besides music-making.

Where does the Kindermusik teacher figure into this process? In the most critical stage—the beginning of learning a musical/physical activity. Even at such an early age, many children have already begun to adopt potentially destructive patterns of movement and body use. I hesitate to list or explain examples of inefficient body use for fear the words will be misunderstood. These skills must be learned and taught, as mentioned earlier, through sensation in a hands-on manner. However, to encourage creative thought, I will list several examples of excess muscle tension and inefficient body use which, if continued, could lead to discomfort and injury.

- Raising of shoulders and tightening of shoulder muscles to support glockenspiel mallets. The shoulders need not be involved in such an active way.
- Holding of the upper arm muscles in a fixed position while using the mallets. Upper arm muscles need not be excessively contracted but should feel as if they are hanging freely from the shoulder sockets. The skeletal frame and its supporting muscles do most of the work.
- Tightening of facial muscles for any activity. The facial muscles remain alert and alive but need not be excessively contracted to a grimace or a contorted state.
- Slumping posture. Posture is a dynamic state of balancing throughout our various states of activity and inactivity. So-called “good posture” does not require anything to be actively held in, out, or up. The body does this naturally when in alignment and balance. Slumping constricts breathing, blood flow and, in general, disconnects the supportive torso from the arms.
- Continuous muscle tension or contraction, especially in the arms, wrist and hands, while repeating a particular movement. A child should be taught to release the muscles between each stroke in order to avoid accumulation of muscle tension. **Remember: Accumulation of muscle tension is probably the most frequent cause of physical injuries and discomfort in music. The ability to use or contract the appropriate muscles at the time they are needed, and then to release or relax them when they are not needed is an essential skill. Above all, flexibility and suppleness need to be maintained.**

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of teaching a child, through example and hands-on demonstration, the principles of efficient, free body use from the first moment of instruction. But where may one acquire this knowledge? One possible source are teachers in music, dance or athletics, who have proven themselves by producing injury-free, well-coordinated students. Another proven and valuable source of knowledge is a certified Alexander Technique instructor.

Once a teacher has understood and acquired these skills, reinforcement of these principles at every step of the is essential, both for her/himself as well as for the child. The emotional and mental bumps invariably encountered by the child in the maturation process will need to be absorbed into the process. And although the critical mode of teaching is via physical sensation, these sensations of free, efficient, effortless movement can eventually be reinforced through verbal explanation.

Through Kindermusik, our children can learn positive patterns of physical activity and the sensation of physical well-being which they can carry with them throughout a lifetime. Through the establishment of positive, injury-preventive patterns of movement and good body use, physical well-being will be maintained. This will better promote ecological, holistic balance as well. Through the attention to this crucial segment of the whole—physical well-being—the total health of the child will be better assured. Our children will then be even more free to grow in joy and wonder.