

Letters On Music Learning

By Mary Ellen Pinzino

From the Come Children Sing Institute

Issue 12

Winter, 1994

Audiation—Another Way of Knowing

Once upon a time there was a phenomenon that propelled music learning. Musicians experienced it, but music educators knew very little about it. They struggled to teach music reading, singing, and sight singing, not knowing that the phenomenon would unlock all of music learning. What is this magic key? How could it be so powerful?

The phenomenon is "audiation," a way of knowing in melody and rhythm. It is a unique human capacity outside the realm of words. To audiate is to "think" music, but in melody and rhythm rather than in words. Audiation is another way of knowing.

Audiation is the musical imagination. It is the man-made music of the mind. It is the sound fantasy that provides the framework for understanding the music we listen to, the music we perform, and the music we read and write.

Audiation is a process. It is the construction of meaning in music. It is the process of making musical sense of the music we hear, perform, read, and write. Just as thinking is essential to speaking, listening, reading, and writing language, audiation is essential to tuneful and rhythmic performance, music listening, reading, and writing. Audiation is the whole of music literacy.

Music teachers for years have intuitively tried to develop audiation in their students, most often treating the symptoms of a lack of audiation rather than teaching audiation itself. They developed techniques to improve intonation, rhythmic performance, and sight reading, without knowing that the development of audiation would cure the problems. They alluded to the phenomenon with terms such as "ear training," "aural perception," "inner hearing," "aural imagery," and "musical memory," but based their teaching on the acquisition of music skills through thinking rather than through audiation.

What makes sense to the thinking mind doesn't necessarily make sense to the musical mind. Audiation IS A SENSE. It is a sense of music. It MAKES SENSE out of the music it hears by relating it to what it knows, what it has heard before, and what it expects to hear. It makes rhythm and tonal sense. It MAKES A SENSE of meter and a sense of tonality. As it matures, audiation makes sense of more complex melodies and rhythms, and makes a sense of harmony, form, timbre, and style.

Audiation functions like a mass of glue. It provides for each new musical experience, something to stick to, and the mass expands. Without such a growing mass, each new musical experience adds only a single grain of sand that does not fuse with the others.

Some music students have a bucket full of individual grains of sand that do not connect in audiation. They sometimes learn to compensate with math skills and music theory, but their intellectual prowess only masks their audiological shortcomings and makes it more difficult for them to develop audiation. A few students, both trained and untrained, have a mass of glue so formed at birth that every musical experience sticks, and the mass expands.

Audiation must be taught. There are very few Mozarts in the world. Because audiation is another way of knowing, it demands another way of teaching.

The extensive research of Edwin Gordon paved the way for a new paradigm in music education—one based on the phenomenon itself. His music learning theory introduced a framework for studying the phenomenon in the music classroom. Simultaneously, whole language proponents were studying the processes of reading, writing, and language acquisition in the language classroom. The sameness in the making of meaning in language and in music is striking, as are the differences between the two ways of knowing. Study of both music learning and language learning has guided classroom research at the Come Children Sing Institute, where observation of children and adults engaged in a program for the development of audiation continues to uncover the nature of the phenomenon.

Tonality and meter capture the musical imagination as powerfully as any good story captures "the other imagination." Infants are compelled by tonality and meter; grade schoolers, spellbound, adults, entranced. All become "lost" in the galaxy of sound, brought back to reality only by the intrusion of words.

Movement speaks to audiation. It is one with audiation in sensitivity to every nuance. Movement provides a magic carpet upon which to explore the far reaches of one's own musical imagination. Movement gives flight to audiation.

Rhythm captures the musical imagination as much as rhythm with melody. Tonality, particularly the modes, as well as meters awaken the musical imagination. Any given tonality or meter can compel audiation. The less common are the most compelling. The longer a given experience with any given tonality or meter, the more focused audiation becomes. The greater the exposure to a variety of tonalities and meters, the more audiation is activated.

Audiation needs to be saturated aurally with these vast galaxies of sound. It then needs to interact with them orally in order to develop a sense of tonality and meter, which yields tuneful and rhythmic performance. Once the musical imagination has command of tonality and meter, it can move to higher levels of music learning. Audiation generates music reading and sight reading. Audiation feeds improvisation. But audiation marches to the beat of its own drummer. It learns from a sound environment only what it is ready to learn. If the soundscape is too simplistic, audiation cannot grow. If it is too complex, audiation cannot make more sense.

[Lev Vygotsky](#), the Russian psychologist, suggests that learning takes place spontaneously and that when we become conscious of what we have learned, we have reached a higher level of learning—gained greater control over our knowing. As audiation matures, it reflects on itself. It uses signs to represent itself, indicating its own consciousness of audiation, a higher level of music learning, a deeper level of musical understanding. Audiation develops consciousness of its own knowing most efficiently through the use of tonal and rhythm syllables—a mirror that reflects audiation, a tangible model that functions as audiation.

These signs are in the realm of audiation, but speak to both audiation and language. The syllables provide a bridge from audiation to thinking, a common language for communication between the two ways of knowing. Audiation flirts with the intellectual mind through syllables, but demands that syllables grow out of its own unique way of knowing rather than be imposed by the intellectual way of knowing.

As audiation matures in self-consciousness, tonal and rhythm syllables become the mediator to the next plateau of music learning—music reading and writing. Syllables serve as the link between the intangible audiation and the concrete notation until such a mediator is no longer needed.

The musical mind and the intellectual mind become more intimately entwined in music reading. The thinking mind becomes the more aggressive suitor, engaging in a set of strategies for scanning print, finding cues that arouse audiation, and comparing cues with each other. Yet audiation dominates the encounter. They give and take, engaging together in a complex process of problem solving, through which they construct meaning.

Audiation continues to grow in self-awareness, developing greater strength in its own way of knowing. In the process, it finds greater compatibility with the thinking mind in the realm of music theory.

The multi-faceted phenomenon of audiation tacitly serves music reading, listening, and composing, but finds its own voice in performance. Audiation generates tuneful and rhythmic performance, in-tune singing and playing, steady tempo, stylistic interpretation, and musical expression. Audiation delivers the life and breath, and breadth of music.

Audiation is the essence of music learning. It emerges as a sense of meter and a sense of tonality, and develops into a sense of rhythm, melody, harmony, form, timbre, and style. It makes sense of the music it hears, both by constructing tonal and rhythm meaning, and by constructing the musical sense itself. It makes sense to teach audiation. It is a musician's way of knowing.

Yours truly,



© 2007, *Mary Ellen Pinzino*

Contact
Mary Ellen Pinzino

More by
Mary Ellen Pinzino