

Exploring Children's Artistry: A Second Conversation with Mary Ellen Pinzino

(Series of conversations conducted by Dr. Rick Townsend, Managing Director, Early Childhood Music and Movement Association, for ECMMA, 2012)

Rick: Intro to Series: We are thankful to [Mary Ellen Pinzino](#) for agreeing to share with us in this forum. What follows is the beginning of a series of interviews covering a range of topics with one of the original minds in the field of early childhood music and movement. We begin by discussing several of the key issues driving the conversation about online music teacher education.

Rick: Intro to Article: My previous conversation with Mary Ellen moved into the compelling topic of children's artistry as well as online professional development. We have decided to continue both topics in separate threads, with this one focusing on children's artistry.

Rick: You mention leading teachers to children's artistry. This is a tall order. What does it look like from the teacher's point of view?

Mary Ellen: Young children's artistry is a wonder to behold! It is beyond the cute, beyond the charm, beyond the delight that is little children. It offers another dimension that is more akin to spirituality than it is to happy clappy music activity. It is the beauty of the child entwined with the beauty of the art. It is the child's resonance with musical nuance in full bloom.

Most music teaching engages the thinking mind more than the musical mind. Words speak to the thinking mind. Rhythm and melody speak to the musical mind. We have to get words out of the way to capture the musical mind. Well-meaning instructions and explanations, compelling words to songs, and words or storylines that direct movement all speak to the thinking mind. Rhythm, melody, and accompanying movement, all without words, make up the native language of the musical mind, and offer a window to children's artistry. The combination of non-verbal instruction, non-verbal songs and chants appropriate for music learning, and non-verbal accompanying movement can take the early childhood music classroom to a level of artistry far beyond what we have assumed to be within the capabilities of little children.

Young children's artistry is compelled by far more musically sophisticated songs than we have traditionally provided. Children who have engaged with non-verbal songs, chants, and movement appropriate for music learning are ready for Art Songs written for tender ages. Words then become an artistic element intertwining with rhythm and melody into one artistic whole.

Common responses of delight, joy, engagement, spontaneous movement, and requests for more are accompanied by focused attention, increased "concentration," serious faces, deer-in-the-headlights stares, and sheer musicality in movement. Children are so compelled by musicality that their highly musical response is often pensive, reflective enchantment.

Rick: Are you saying that most children you work with are innately artistic, and that many early childhood music activities do not begin to reach this innate artistry?

Yes. The young child is innately musical—an artist in waiting. Yet we as a field have not begun to tap the young child's artistry. There is a difference between using music for learning and music learning. Music may wire the brain for learning, but interestingly, the kind of learning that is most neglected in so many delightful music activities with little children is music learning. It may be easier to learn letters, numbers, and concepts when

words are set to music, but it is not easier to learn music. Words speak to the thinking mind. If we want to propel music learning, we have to get the thinking mind out of the way and speak to the musical mind through pure rhythm, melody, and movement.

Rick: What ages are you referencing? I teach from infancy through four, and some of your comments seem to be more reflective of late "1s" and above. What does this look like with infants?

The musical mind of infants is particularly potent, as their lives are not yet dominated by language, so the musical mind more easily hold its own without the interference of the thinking mind. Even newborns demonstrate focused attention, seeming "concentration," deer-in-the-headlights stares, and growing attention to pure rhythm, melody, and accompanying movement. Parents never cease to be amazed by the "holding power" of naked rhythm and melody with their infants.

Rick: What do you consider to be the place of movement in the "artistry" conversation?

Movement is essential for learning. Music learning, however, requires that we get rid of the words and storylines that speak to the thinking mind. A child moving like a butterfly is interacting with the word and image of a butterfly, with or without music, with the thinking mind in charge. A child moving in response to a non-verbal song or chant is interacting with the movement of the line of music, with the musical mind in charge. The movement in both cases might even resemble a butterfly, but it is only when the musical mind is dominant that the activity serves music learning. It is a bit like the vase/face illusion. The word, "butterfly," or storyline about a butterfly puts the thinking mind in the forefront, whereas the movement of a musical line without words puts the musical mind in the forefront. The thinking mind is dominant in our culture. It is only when we get it out of the way that we can captivate the musical mind and reach the young child's artistry.

Rick: ... so it sounds like you would avoid using stories and images as prompts for specific types of expressive movement most of the time. Would you ask for such image responses from the children, after they interact naturally with the music, or do you prefer to keep verbal references separate from the musical conversation at all times?

Avoiding stories and images altogether keeps the thinking mind at bay, freeing the musical mind to interact with the music. We know that we can capture a child's imagination with words. Music learning requires that we capture the child's *musical imagination*—which is not captured by words. Its native language is rhythm, melody, and accompanying movement—all without words. The musical imagination receives songs and chants appropriate for music learning as rhythm and tonal "narratives." Every musical nuance of these wordless, musical "narratives" compel the musical imagination as much as any story compels the imagination of the thinking mind. We can take the musical imagination on one adventure after another if we can trust our own musicality and that of the children enough to let go of our dependence on words, stories, and images.

Rick: Does this diminish the value of finger plays, playparties, and children's folk songs in our early childhood music classes, all of which engage children in words?

Our rich heritage of children's songs and nursery rhymes nurtures the very essence of childhood and should always be part of growing with music. However, the beloved songs and rhymes that charm children, carry the culture, and engage children and parents in delightful music activity do more for language development than they do for music development. The focus is on the words, which speak to the thinking mind. The many

delightful music activities that have dominated our early childhood music classes serve many kinds of learning, but they do not begin to tap the artistry of the young child.

The difference between using music to charm, entertain, and facilitate learning, and using music for music learning and engaging children's artistry is in knowing that there is a difference. We have to balance the two to maximize music learning. We can use our rich heritage of children's folk songs and games for the sheer joy that they bring, but the wonder of children's artistry deserves so much more. Music activities that serve children's artistry can be as charming, creative, and filled with joy as any beloved music activity, while adding the dimension of artistry to the early childhood music classroom.

Many daycare and preschool teachers use music to serve learning. It is imperative that music teachers serve music learning. The beauty of children's artistry will convince early childhood music teachers of the power of non-verbal songs and chants appropriate for music learning, accompanying movement without words or story lines, and Art Songs for tender ages. We must give voice to children's artistry and let it speak for itself!

Rick: Thank you for your thoughts, Mary Ellen.

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Contact
Mary Ellen Pinzino

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Mary Ellen Pinzino