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RESPONSE TO READINGS ABOUT PIAGET'S STAGES OF LEARNING

This response will refer to the areas of teaching that I have done: Kindergarten through twelfth grade, and adult choirs.

The stages of development for children from birth to adulthood, as Piaget describes them, are most important when deciding *how* to teach children. However, believing in the children as being capable of doing wonderful things in music or any other area is more important in deciding *what* to teach them. In teaching young children, it is important to use their *sensory-motor* approach to learning. This is a happy stage for teachers of Kindergarten to use because there are wonderful tactile objects, such as musical instruments, to let them explore on their own. As each new stage unfolds, *integrating* the previous stages, the teacher has the opportunity to add more to the child's environment for play and discovery. As Spencer and Pulaski have written, "Thoughts, or 'mental operations,' to use (Piaget's) term, arise out of motor actions and sensory experiences which are 'interiorized.'" (Spencer-Pulaski, p. 10)

Older children can be guided by the teacher to a *disturbed equilibrium*, which creates the atmosphere for still more discovery and learning. It is this possibility that keeps teachers constantly searching for exciting ways in which to introduce new material. They want to pique the curiosity of the children so that they can discover, individually or in a group setting, some new concept.

In teaching my first Kindergarten class, I carried with me a glockenspiel with lift-off bars. I would play "up" and "down" and invite them to discover why the "lower" sounds came from the big bars and the "higher" sounds came from the smaller bars. In this way, they could actually see and hold the bars making the sound, but could experience for themselves the concept of "high" and

“low.” They loved playing left to right, and back, hearing the changes and finally letting their voices follow as the sound went “up” and “down.” This tactile approach was consistent with the need of the young child to learn from his environment. I was guiding the lesson, but not teaching an abstract concept of acoustical properties of sound.

In my initial experience in a first grade classroom I wanted to introduce notation. I found an old book on music instruction which had a picture of a rope with a series of knots in an arrangement with spaces on the rope between the groups of knots. I drew a picture of it on a poster, showed it to the children, and told them a story of a boy who had brought a message to be played on the drum. The children got it immediately. One after the other, they wanted to play the message on a drum I had brought. I then wrote notes on the board, arranged like the knots, and the children made the connection. Later I added rests where there were spaces. I had no idea then about Piaget and the learning stages, but I realize now that the lesson was consistent with the way children of that age experience the world, with animism and fantasy. Drawing them in with a story made use of their make-believe play world, a characteristic of this stage, and the rope became a symbol to represent something else, as they do in their play. The latter is another characteristic described by Piaget in this stage of development. (Crain, p.120)

On the subject of “bright” vs. “dull” children, I agree with Piaget that though the bright child may move more quickly from stage to stage, the average or not-so-bright child will also progress through the stages, albeit not so quickly. I remember being surprised to learn that one of my best classes was a fifth grade class which had a homogeneous grouping of “slow” students in it. It seemed to me that they learned even more quickly than the class of bright children because they were calm and focused on the lesson. I believe this was because they had a superior classroom teacher

who empowered them for learning. They had no need to “act out” as a substitute for learning.

While I believe that we absolutely must take into account the learning stage of our students, we should never “dumb down” *what* we teach them. What they can learn is limited only by what *we* can know and understand and can then structure for them. One has only to hear the Tapiola Choir from Finland to know that children are capable of producing the most difficult music imaginable. The children sing, play instruments, and the level of music they perform is beyond what many adult choirs can do. In teaching my inner city children, I sought only to share with them my own joys in music. The music I chose for them took into account their vocal needs but was of the highest quality and the most challenging level. The students loved the music, and, when they realized at choral festivals that they were more advanced than the other groups (*I never told them*), they loved it. They had renewed energy for learning still more.

In teaching to the stage of the child, then, I reject the idea that we must tailor *what* we teach, only *how* we teach the subject matter. I do believe children can learn anything we are prepared to teach.

With adult choirs, time and again I encounter church choirs who have been treated with disdain by the directors, even being told that they were “stupid.” I love the volunteer singers because they are so highly motivated. I take delight in leading them through music which is either more difficult than they are used to doing and/or in a style alien to them. Invariably they are thrilled with themselves. This, I think, bears out the statement above: students and choirs (or performing ensembles of any type) are capable of learning extremely sophisticated material from a teacher who is prepared to teach it. As long as the material chosen can be taught using techniques that are appealing to the students at whatever learning stage they are in, the “sky is the limit.”