

Book Review

By Betty J. Ross

Making Our Own Kind of Music Hits the Right Note

A helpful new book has appeared against the backdrop of increased media attention and public awareness given to the widespread incidence of autism and other disorders. Music is often recommended by physicians and desired by parents. If individual challenges are physical, mental or otherwise, techniques developed by the Foundation for Music and Healing, Inc. are answers to the previously unanswerable dilemmas of how to serve exceptional people in educational, yet entertaining ways previously not available to them. Chris Robinson, Ph.D., in his book, "Making Our Own Kind of Music," shines a new light on some intriguing methods and modalities to accomplish this end. Music, movement and dance can bring joy, hope and a sense of personal accomplishment and self-worth to students who choose to take part in this program.

"Making Our Own Kind of Music" is a 192-page volume that explores techniques designed to bring benefits of music and movement in the lives of students and their families. Dr. Robinson, with his vast background in music, academics and the arts, is able to understand and translate the benefits of this approach to the reader. These benefits are available to ever-expanding neighborhoods and cities and pinpoint exactly what must be done to accomplish similar results. The foreword is by Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President Emeritus, University of Notre Dame and Founding Member of the Board of Directors of the Foundation for Music and Healing, Inc. Experts in music and education have endorsed the book.

In my experience as an author, journalist, and book reviewer, I have learned that the quality and impact of a book generally falls into categories of value from one to five stars, one being of little value and five being the best. I place "Making Our Own Kind of Music" in the five-star category for a number of reasons. Not only is it an easy read, but the information contained therein will be of extreme value to its readers, including families, educators, caretakers and anyone else who is involved in teaching music comprehension to people of any age who have special needs. Lots of practical tips and helpful examples make this a powerful tool for those who work with special populations.

Parents of special needs students will be heartened to read this story of the healing power of music. Dramatic transformations occur every day in the lives of students of the Foundation for Music and Healing, Inc. Participation in the program is "healthful," and it also has healing powers. Although members of the Foundation don't always know how to precisely describe these powers, music coaches and others witness them as they occur and are astounded at the results.

Music is not something that is administered like medicine or expected to be learned at a fast pace. It is more than something that people "do" because it is "good for you." It is something to which people are drawn because it nourishes an essential part of their being. More parents of children with a variety of diagnoses are approaching the Foundation to investigate services offered. They are requesting assistance for students of all ages who have experienced strokes, seizures and other life-threatening episodes and now have physical, cognitive or emotional disorders. Some are hearing or visually impaired; some cannot walk or talk properly and need assistance just sitting at the piano. Others are undiagnosed or misdiagnosed because their physicians don't yet know what's wrong with them.

How does music and movement help? How do you measure the growth and encouragement experienced by a student who, possibly for the first time in his or her life, is able to establish a goal and work progressively toward that goal until the internal light comes on and that student is able to play and recognize certain notes? Suddenly the instruction and repetition, which is part of the learning process, makes sense, and the student hears music forming within his or her own mind and, beyond that, is actually creating the melody that flows from the keys of the piano.

Lesson time is not rigid as it might be with instruction to the general public. Great effort is made to present learning as “fun.” It is a time of happy songs and dance with multi-colored flags as well as other toys and games. These instruments are designed to help the student learn at his or her own pace. At the same time, they are means to the end of helping the student fully enjoy the time spent with the music coach.

Emphasis of the Foundation is not exclusively on piano lessons, however. Lessons are available in dance movement, singing, guitar, dramatic expression and art and even school activities. Students may participate in one or a number of these activities during their weekly lessons. Sessions usually run from 30 to 45 minutes, but the time frame is flexible depending on each situation.

Readers of this book will learn the theory behind the ingenious “RAISE Everyone” system built into the teaching program. The interrelated dynamics of individual aspects work together to bring positive outcomes for the benefit of the students, their music coach and all others involved in the learning process.

As information about the Foundation and its outstanding work with variously challenged students spreads, a growing number of sponsors have become involved in supporting the work. This sponsorship is needed

and appreciated and, as more sponsors come on board, the work continues to expand.

There is also the issue of how a coach should approach and work with a student, both physically and emotionally, and where the guidelines should be set. Some students are extremely reserved and withdrawn while others are just the opposite. Several aspects of this subject and personal illustrations are covered in the book, which should be helpful to prospective music coaches and family members.

Families are always included in decisions about the students, and have a vital part in the program. Often, siblings are taught in home settings. This puts the students in a familiar arena. Many students are in charge of their lessons. What would they like to play? Would they rather engage in movement with recorded music as they dance around waving colored flags? Would they rather play some percussion instrument, such as bongo drums, while the music coach plays accompaniment? The book illustrates many inventive ways to approach a lesson.

Included in "Making Our Own Kind of Music" are many Student Success Stories. These stories cover a wide of conditions and include background and family information, as well as progress reports on students with specific disorders. Each case is different, and is followed from the time of initial contact with the Foundation. Many of the students are still receiving lessons, and these stories are truly amazing.

Five-year-old Jason (not his real name) and his struggles with autism are presented as his music coach gradually draws him out of his quiet corner of the world by showing him a brightly colored rug sparkling with butterflies and flowers. Happy songs on a CD that is customized with his name get further interest. Positive reinforcement and praise for his accomplishments build up his confidence until he can actually play a few notes by himself. He, his family and his coach are elated by his progress.

The Foundation also works with adults who have been through traumatic experiences. Jenny was hit in the head by a volleyball. This resulted in complete blindness. In the book, you will follow her progress as she emerges from the hopeless concept that she would never be able to play piano again, to being able to play simple songs and the classics and finally to be able to laugh and play keyboard duets with her music coach.

I highly recommend "Making Our Own Kind of Music," not only to those people interested in a new slant on music instruction, but also to forward-thinking individuals and groups who want to give the gift of music to a portion of the population who, otherwise, would never have the opportunity to make their own kind of music.

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Betty J. Ross earned a degree in journalism from Southwestern Michigan College and has written for a wide variety of media.