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THE J.W. PEPPER BLOG

DIRECTORS' TOOLBOX

TEACHING MUSIC TO DEAF STUDENTS

JANUARY 22, 2013

As a musician and a person who deals with both the music business and the deaf world, I assumed as many do that students with hearing loss would never hear, understand or appreciate music.

Fortunately, as I began talking with fellow interpreters in schools, I learned that many deaf children (both with and without hearing aids and cochlear implants) were in music classes. This was enlightening and encouraged me to investigate instrumental music classes for deaf students and the incorporation of sign language into choral programs.

One of the first schools to teach music to deaf students was the Illinois School for the Deaf. They allowed the resident boys the opportunity to participate in a brass band. The band was supported by state and private funds throughout its nearly twenty-year existence. It gave students a musical outlet, provided functional music and entertainment for the other resident students as well as community members, and became a symbol of strength and ability among members of the deaf community. Fred Fancher, a deaf bandmaster from Tennessee, conducted the band. The band ensemble presented concerts in many towns and cities throughout the United States. [NAfME](#) reported that the quality of the music produced by the boys was very good. The band received a fair amount of criticism along with a vast amount of praise and was a most successful and meaningful endeavor. Even though the band has been defunct for more than fifty years, some music classes and activities at the Illinois School for the Deaf are still offered to students.

As more and more hearing-impaired children participated in the instrumental music program, it was discovered that, like hearing children, the ability to play an instrument helped the deaf children alleviate their frustration. Tim Lautzenhauser states in his book, [The Art of Successful Teaching](#), "Music offers a chance to let go and express the rainbow of emotions we all feel, and through this experience expand our own realm of emotional expressions."

The children were taught by developing a strong sense of rhythm, followed by breathing exercises, hand clapping, marching and body swaying to standard repertoire such as [Old Mac Donald Had a Farm](#). Some children were able to play by reading the score. Just like with hearing children, music notations represents two things; a hand position on an instrument, and a time frame. However, the deaf child cannot "improvise" and must depend totally on sight-reading the music. Many deaf children remove their shoes for band or orchestra practice to be able to feel the rhythm from the other instruments.

According to the research done by Alice-Ann Darrow in 1989, schools offering music to deaf students start most students with understanding about how to keep a steady beat. Once that concept is understood, the next step is rhythmic training, and from there they advance to notation, tempo markings, and dynamic structure. Sound is not as much an issue as understanding the *structure* of music: how the notes blend and the individual attributes of the notes, which finger positions produce a note, and how long to hold whole notes, half notes and quarter notes.

Band and orchestra instructors require support when teaching deaf students. Parents, special education teachers, and audiologists can all offer help working with deaf students in the music classroom. The expense of this individual support is costly and oftentimes the interpreter has no music knowledge, making the job more difficult. As with most tasks, simply asking the deaf students what works is the best way to proceed. Let them lead in this area of their development.

Both digital hearing aids and cochlear implants have difficulty transmitting the fine tones of musical structure to the listener. It will be interesting to see how improvements in these aids will allow children to experience the joy of music in the future.

As the incorporation of sign language becomes more popular for both hearing and deaf children, many composers have added

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January 5, 2018, [School Band & Orchestra Magazine](#)

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Information about sign language (along with the actual signs) to their music.

Please view these [musical selections](#) which will help you bring signing and singing into your musical programs.

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LUANA MARLER

Luana is VP of the Dallas/Fort Worth location and has worked for Pepper for 26 years. She is a Texas State Board Certified Interpreter and often works with teachers regarding signing or using sign language in their programs. She has been married for 42 years and has two daughters and one grandson.

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2 COMMENTS

MENA PHILIP
May 8, 2016 at 10:18 pm

Reply

I have some thing can help the deaf person to learn music notes

VICKY STOCKTON
July 17, 2017 at 1:41 am

Reply

I have been teaching, and learning about, music at the NY State School for the Deaf in Rome, NY, since 1977. Music here is taught for the sake of Music. Our deaf and hard-of-hearing students, ages 3 through 21, have many opportunities to explore and enjoy the multiple facets of our full music program:

- general music (pre-K through 6th grade)
- middle school and high school elective courses (music theory, intro to music, music/movies/theater, et al.)
- instrumental music (all band instruments)
- ensembles (Orff/mallet, rhythm, classroom, et al.)
- music therapy
- handbell choir
- sign choir
- band

By making their own music, our students make music their own!

If anyone has any questions/thoughts/ideas about working with deaf children and music, it would be great to hear from you!

Yours in music ~

Vicky

16 July 2017

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