

## MINING TIN PAN ALLEY

### **The songs of Tin Pan Alley as a social, musical and educational resource in the development of music making, based on a community-focussed social/altruistic philosophy.**

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#### *Introduction*

This paper describes a study into the use of popular music in a music education program for children, focussing particularly on the use of Tin Pan Alley repertoire<sup>1</sup>. The philosophy of the program revolves around the practical use of music as an altruistic activity to benefit the community at large. The program Hand-in-Hand brings together classes of children (aged between 6 and 11) with groups of the elderly, disabled and/or disadvantaged in the community with the aim of altruistically sharing music-making as a means of life enhancement. The songs of Tin Pan Alley are used as a communicative ‘bridge’ between young and old focussing on active participation and shared musical experiences. The aim is not to provide choral groups that sing *for* nursing home residents but to share music one-on-one; to make music *with* the residents. The children engage individually with the residents through singing, movement, conversation and physical contact with a clear intent to encourage their musical participation. They aim to effect a positive change in the resident’s level of physical activity, mental acuity and emotional state.

Hand-in-Hand is built on a philosophical foundation that is given practical application on a daily basis in the school setting. This philosophy is based on the work of Dr. John Diamond, who has spent over 40 years researching the role of music as a life-affirming, therapeutic activity. The philosophy as applied in the Hand-in-Hand program can be summarised in five points:

1. Involvement with music is naturally human.
2. Making music is of more value for the individual than consuming music, particularly in a society where consumption of music is the norm.
3. Making music in order to have a beneficial effect on another is more valuable than simply making music for oneself alone.
4. Making music with another in order to engage the other in music making is more beneficial for both giver and receiver.
5. Making music so as to encourage the receiver to, in turn, make music to have a beneficial effect on another is more beneficial for both and society as a whole.

The music of Tin Pan Alley was the obvious choice of material given that the initial target group for the Hand-in-Hand program was residents of aged-care nursing homes. The Tin Pan Alley era, which influenced the songs heard and written in Australia at the time, is generally considered to span roughly the first half of the twentieth century—1900-1950—

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<sup>1</sup> Hand-in-Hand is part of the Music Education Program (MEP) run by the School of Music, National Institute of the Arts, Australian National University.

ushered in by an article in the New York Times<sup>2</sup> and brought to a close with the first performance of Bill Haley's *Rock Around the Clock*.

The TPA era coincided with a sudden surge in the sheet music industry, brought about largely by a growth in the mass production and sales of pianos. In the days before recorded music, families gathered around the piano and made their own music together. As pianos became more affordable and graced more parlours, it became the norm for every young girl, and many young men, to learn to play to accompany these musical evenings. Sheet music was to the early 1900s what the CD is today. The antecedents of the American popular song, as exemplified by the songs of Tin Pan Alley, are complex and include: ragtime; Negro field chants and the blues; the white version of Negro songs – the so-called 'coon' song; and the often sentimental, story-telling parlour songs of the late nineteenth century (Furia, 1990).

A range of researchers supports the importance of music in aged-cared settings. Olderog-Millard and Smith (1989) cite benefits including decreased anxiety and tension, increased alertness without increased agitation, and even physical benefits, or what is described as the maintaining or increasing of 'vital capacity.' Pollack and Namazi (1992) state that 'research on music with regressed elderly persons demonstrates the positive effects of specialized programs on the participation level, orientation, and social behaviour of patients suffering from memory loss, confusion, and disorientation.' Olderog-Millard and Smith (1989) go so far as to say that "anecdotal evidence indicates that singing and other music activities will not only increase an AD patient's enjoyment but may also assist in slowing the progression of the disease."

It was confidently expected that the Hand-in-Hand program would prove beneficial for the target group. However the program, with its practical intent to benefit others through the particular type of song literature used, has evinced a range of positive and unexpected consequences for children and adults alike in musical, educational and social terms. The positive benefits, now being documented by the ANU, seem to relate to the use of this particular song repertoire in a social and altruistic paradigm, as well as a purely musical one. There are clear signs that some avenues of the ANU's exploration may yield important conclusions for the future of music and education.

Types of observable benefits that flow from the MEP Hand-in-Hand philosophy are summarised below.

1. The Tin Pan Alley song repertoire, when used in a program like Hand-in-Hand, assists in the acquisition of musical skills and concepts, and overturns some of the precepts usually associated with primary-age music education.
2. Approaching music education with a largely non-musical goal enhances the child's enthusiasm, interest and ability to learn *about* music.

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<sup>2</sup> The story, as related in Phillip Furia's book *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* (1990), is that a songwriter, Monroe Rosenfield, coined the name Tin Pan Alley. In 1900 he was commissioned by the New York Herald to write a piece on the sudden growth of the sheet music industry. Most of the publishers had their offices, at the time, in West 28<sup>th</sup> street between Broadway and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Rosenfield apparently came up with the term Tin Pan Alley to describe the sounds of the numerous pianos playing the publisher's wares through open windows, their strings dampened with newspaper to lower the cacophony, which made the sound even more tinny than usual. In time, the location of Tin Pan Alley changed but the name remained.

3. Children develop musical skills and a relationship with music not normally associated with their age group.
4. The program has profound social consequences for each child and appears to have a particular impact on the at-risk or disabled child.
5. The majority of children involved in Hand-in-Hand do not show any signs of stage fright or performance anxiety even in normal performance situations.
6. Teachers in the program have to rethink their traditional approaches to music education and focus on new goals and behaviours.
7. The program can be taught by non-music specialists and still develop strong musical skills in the children.
8. The elderly benefit socially and emotionally from the engagement with the children but also are able to make a contribution *to* the children through their responses.

### ***Observable Benefits***

*1. The Tin Pan Alley song repertoire, when used in a program of this type, assists in the acquisition of musical skills and concepts, and overturns some of the precepts usually associated with primary-age music education.*

It has been generally accepted that young children sing with accurate intonation within a narrow pitch range, usually defined as the major sixth from middle C up to A (Choksy, 1981). It is further suggested that the most suitable songs for children are the children's songs and folk songs of their country of origin, the so-called 'mother tongue' philosophy (Choksy, 1981; Ribière-Raverlat, 1971; Sándor, 1975). Often these songs are pentatonic. The pentatonic nature of these songs is thought to be advantageous in correct pitch development because they contain the notes that children 'naturally' sing (Choksy, 1981; Ribière-Raverlat, 1971). A folk song does not have a known composer but is handed down and altered by the unnamed masses. They are, in one sense, 'designed' to be singable by those who have sung them.

Despite the seemingly more complex nature of TPA songs compared to standard early childhood music literature, the children learn them easily. Teachers have observed that their accuracy with musical features like correct pitch and rhythm seems to develop more quickly and with less intervention by the teacher. This is not generally true of all popular song literature. Various reasons, both musical and non-musical, can be suggested for the success of this particular song repertoire

The songs of Tin Pan Alley share some features with folk music. They have been, in a very real sense, designed for exactly the same purpose. These songs, as a group, have the peculiar quality of being *singable* by anyone individually or in groups, both large and small, because they were written to be singable. They precede the rise of the individualistic recording artist who often writes his or her own material and sings it in his or her own idiosyncratic way. In other words, with the growing dominance of recording media, the purpose of music altered. In one sense, it expanded to allow the public to listen to music more. But, at the same time, the culture of parlour music-making began to die out. The principal means of selling a song shifted from sheet music to audio recordings.

While the preponderance of simple folk and children's songs in music education programs is supported by some educators and researchers, others, like Flowers and Dunne-Sousa (1990), question the idea that simple pentatonic tunes are the best, if not only, starting place for early childhood singing. They quote evidence that suggests that young children do not sing pentatonic patterns more accurately than diatonic ones and, indeed, that the vocal ranges of young children can span two octaves. They say that "there is certainly a discrepancy between pitches that a child is capable of producing and those that are generally sung." Michael Jenne (1986) suggests, too, that the musical receptivity of children is more likely to be under-rated rather than over-rated. If songs of limited range are chosen then is the limited range that the children can sing simply a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Certainly the singing of TPA songs at Ainslie supports the idea that children are capable of singing more than just simple pentatonic songs with accuracy. The nature of the songs may contribute to the ease with which children learn them, and the musical benefits they convey. They are informal and unpretentious with a simple structure, unlike some of the parlour songs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that preceded them. They have the early jazz flavour and a driving rhythm that emphasises the easy, forward movement of the song, and the language is generally colloquial with a directness that both children and the elderly relate to.

While one can give a range of pedagogical and musical reasons for the success of these songs in promoting the acquisition of musical skills there is another more important point to make. The children love singing these songs. They sing them spontaneously both in music classes and other classes (eg. in the middle of maths), as well as in the playground. When asked to choose a song, these are generally the songs they choose. Perhaps they love them because they can sing them so easily. They were designed to be enjoyed *through singing* (as opposed to listening) by the general public. Perhaps, too, the reason for singing the songs plays a part (see below). Either way the love of singing the songs plays a part in the way the songs enhance the children's learning. As Piaget said, "affection is the principal motive power of the process of cognitive development of the child" (De Gainza, 1978).

*2. Approaching music education with a largely non-musical goal enhances the child's enthusiasm, interest and ability to learn ABOUT music.*

Despite the educational advantages these songs seem to impart, it is postulated in the Hand-in-Hand program that one of the primary reasons that the songs work as a music education tool is precisely because they are not being sung for a didactic purpose. The child knows that the purpose of singing these songs is not principally to 'learn' anything about music. David Sell (1988) while discussing Western music in education says, "A separate corpus of music composed for education purposes is a distinctively Western idea, and a curious one stemming from now mostly outmoded beliefs that education was concerned with feeding children with diluted adult material." Even where the material for children is not composed specifically for that purpose, much of the children's and folk song literature used in music education has a pedagogical intent at its heart. This intent

affects what is chosen and how it is offered to children. The educational purpose affects the musical purpose for the teacher and, therefore, the child.

The songs sung in the Hand-in-Hand program are being sung with a very definite purpose but it is with a different purpose, and that purpose is altruistic: the songs are learned in order to sing them *with* others for the *benefit* of the others. The principal method of training children to offer this gift to others is to offer it first to them. A child cannot sing a song in order to encourage another, especially a sick, disabled or depressed other, to sing if he/she is not enthusiastic about singing himself. The teachers, therefore, are not approaching music lessons with the normal music education goals in mind. Considerations of pitch or rhythmic accuracy, musical ‘correctness’ and the development of musical literacy are not the uppermost considerations. These types of goals fit into a paradigm for music education that is principally concerned with technical and musical accuracy; the development of a more precise and every-increasing level of musical skill that leads, eventually, to the virtuoso musician. Even when the individuals involved clearly have no such end goal in mind, a large proportion of music education is predicated around this end. It is based on judgement. Even the singing of simple children’s songs, as discussed earlier, feeds into this paradigm. This methodology is designed to help young children sing more accurately because the development of accurate intonation, to name just one musical skill, is seen as an important feature of early music education.

Some educators may argue that enthusiasm and enjoyment are always the goal of music education: some aspects of musical training may seem tedious, boring or unimportant to the child *now* but they will see the life enhancing value of the training *later*. Unfortunately for many children, there is no later; the child gives up music making before reaching the later. This is true of both class and instrumental music activities but, the research suggests, most particularly the former. Charlotte Mizener (1993) cites American research that suggests “positive attitude toward school music activities has been found to decline with each advancing grade at the elementary level.” The same has been indicated at the secondary level as well (Vispoel, 1998).

This approach does not imply that musical accuracy is entirely unimportant. Rather, the MEP model seems to indicate, ironically, that a focus on social, rather than musical outcomes has a profound effect *on* musical outcomes, precisely because both teacher and child no longer focus on these very musical outcomes. Accurate singing becomes a by-product of an intense focus on singing for an entirely different purpose.

Early research gives a clear indication that children in the MEP do not show a clear decline in positive attitudes towards music, as suggested in the Mizener article (Garber, 2002). Most impressive is the on-going enthusiasm and involvement of boys, particularly as the program continues to revolve around singing in the upper primary grades. The attitude of boys who have spent their entire primary schooling at Ainslie is brought into stark relief when compared to boys who have entered the school later, particularly after Year 3. Late-entering boys often seem disturbed and concerned about the degree of and enthusiasm for singing amongst other boys and seek to either distance themselves from this or disrupt the involved boys’ music making. This has little effect on most of those involved. On the other hand, it appears that involvement in the Hand-in-Hand program can have a positive effect on the negative attitude of some late-entering boys.

*3. Children develop musical skills and an approach to music not normally associated with the age group.*

It appears that children approaching music in this way develop musical skills that are usually not expected in young children. These are the less measurable, empathetic skills associated with ensemble music-making and relating closely to each other as musicians.

When making music in a nursing home, the class of approximately thirty children can be spread over a large space. The space may be filled with the elderly in wheel chairs and beds, with carers and family members present. There is often extraneous noise. A piano is sometimes used but not always. The children maintain musical contact and sing together often with minimal support from music teachers. There is no conductor, no one giving a starting pitch or indicating tempo. At the same time, each child is focussing his/her attention on the residents, making physical contact and using various means to encourage the residents to join in with the singing. In order to ensure that the children will be able to make music in this way, a range of activities is undertaken in the classroom that encourage empathetic musical sharing. The children develop a fine internal sense for the musical persona of each individual in the class, which is valuable in their music making under different conditions, and the music making they share with others. The degree to which the children can 'tune in' to each other means that groups from the very small to the very large can sing together with little direction from the music teacher.

*4. The majority of children involved in Hand-in-Hand do not show any signs of stage fright or performance anxiety even in normal performance situations.*

The Hand-in-Hand approach shows benefits to the children above and beyond their ability to acquire musical concepts and unexpected skills enthusiastically and without stress. One major observable feature of musical life at Ainslie school is startling and has important implications for the future of music education: that is, the lack of stage fright or performance anxiety shown by the majority of children.

The lack of performance anxiety exhibited by the children, which transfers into other performance arenas, both musical and non-musical, may well be the result of approaching performance as though it were not performance at all. As we have said, the Hand-in-Hand approach is not about performing *to* others but about making music *with* others. The usual musical judgements are not passed. It is a simple matter to approach a 'real' performance, where the audience may not be joining in, as though it were the same. The child's mission in the nursing home is to sing so that the resident to whom he is singing automatically starts singing too. The mission in a more formal concert setting is to sing so that the members of the audience *want* to start singing too.

In this model of performance the child is not looking inwards at her own performance and passing judgement or expecting judgement to be passed. She is looking outwards towards the audience and her intent is to make a positive impact in the world at large. Being effective in this paradigm simply means having the altruistic intent to offer music to others for their benefit. As one child put it "the music is a gift to the audience."

*5. The program has strong social consequences for each child and appears to have a particular impact on the at-risk or disabled child.*

Various researchers have looked at the benefits of altruistic behaviour on the individual. Ornstein and Sobel (1989) state that "The great surprise of human evolution may be that the highest form of selfishness is selflessness...when you help others your mood and their mood improves." This is not to suggest that altruistic behaviour should be undertaken for selfish reasons. Such an attitude would seem to go against the whole definition of altruism. An altruistic approach to music focuses on looking outwards towards others. The life enhancement for the other happens on a moment-by-moment basis and the child witnesses the results of his efforts, or at least some of them (for he does not see the ongoing benefit that may continue after he leaves).

Various social consequences have been observed from this type of engagement with music in the world. The children display a heightened sense of maturity or, as one parent put it, "they grow in stature when they enter the nursing home." Particularly noticeable has been the effect on the at-risk or low achieving child. The Hand-in-Hand program asks each child only for willingness to reach out to someone in need. When engaged in an outreach visit, such children are exposed to genuine non-judgemental acceptance, love and gratitude from the nursing home residents, many of whom rarely receive family visits or have insufficient non-medical human contact. Some at-risk children involved in the program show a marked improvement in behaviour and attitude towards learning at school. Alan Luks (1988) suggests that self-esteem improves after volunteer work. At the same time, Alfie Kohn (1988) says that "people who feel in control of what happens in their lives and who have little need for approval from others are the most likely to help others."

Interestingly, from the point of view of all the children involved, it has been noted that behaviour management, the school euphemism for crowd control of children, is unnecessary on these visits. Children are not selected to go on the basis of behaviour but all behave in a mature and respectful manner, while still entering enthusiastically into the singing, dancing and other forms of engagement with the elderly. The children show a lack of both musical and social prejudice and do not demonstrate the more usual negative responses to what might be regarded as 'strange' behaviour in the dementia patients.

*6. Teachers in the program have to rethink their traditional approaches to music education and focus on new goals.*

Clearly the MEP Hand-in-Hand program is working from a different perspective to most music education programs. It requires a re-thinking of the traditional role of the music teacher. The principal role of the teacher in the Hand-in-Hand program is to offer music to the child in the same way that the child is being asked to offer music to others. The teacher, in effect, treats each music lesson as an outreach to each child in the same way that she is asking that the child reaches out to the elderly. The concept of outreach through musical communication proceeds from teacher to child; from child to child in the classroom; from child to resident in the nursing home; and thence from resident to resident. An altruistic model of music education cannot be undertaken to achieve normal music education goals. The teacher cannot subscribe to this view of music making while still secretly looking for and rewarding musical accuracy in preference to music as heartfelt communication. As we have argued, it is demonstrable that the latter will produce the former, but this is not the point. Music as altruistic outreach cannot be undertaken as a means of promoting musical skills or musical accuracy; it immediately ceases to be altruistic and the familiar problems associated with musical judgement arise.

*7. The program can be taught by non-music specialists and still develop strong musical skills in the children.*

Just as the Hand-in-Hand philosophy is posing questions about normal approaches to music education, it is offering new possibilities as well. One important consequence of the approach, which emphasises the social benefits of music-making over skill development, is that it can be taught by any teacher who responds to the philosophical implications, regardless of musical background. All teachers can be taught to sing well enough to teach children to sing for an altruistic purpose. Indeed, it has been found that normal classroom teachers respond in the same way as the children when music is approached with them according to this philosophy. In other words, the teacher of the teachers needs to adopt an altruistic, outreach intent to encourage the music making of the teachers. Non-music specialists have shown themselves particularly enthusiastic in responding to this philosophical paradigm.

*8. The elderly benefit socially and emotionally from the engagement with the children but also are able to make a contribution TO the children through their responses.*

The Hand-in-Hand program seems to provide a range of benefits to the child. At the same time there is another group that benefits: the elderly nursing home residents who make up the largest group receiving the program. Teachers, carers and, indeed, children, have observed the benefits to the elderly quoted at the beginning of this paper in the Hand-in-Hand program. Victims of stroke or the depressed elderly who do not always communicate freely are seen to sing and even sometimes talk with the children. Residents with various forms of dementia remember the songs and join in even though they may not remember their own names. The songs encourage other spoken memories that are shared with the children. Greater movement is observed, through contact with the children even in those that are wheel chair bound (children and dancing wheelchairs!) and ambulatory residents are encouraged to dance as well as sing. More mobile residents are observed

copying the children and acting as part of the outreach group: encouraging fellow residents to sing and dance; holding the hands of those who can't walk and helping them move with the music; and engaging others in conversation. The Tin Pan Alley songs may well be a factor in the amount of engagement observed. The forward motion and jazzy nature of many of the songs encourage movement, and the colloquial and informal nature of the lyrics inspires individuals to sing who might otherwise remain silent.

Interestingly there are very few studies that consider the human vehicle through which music is presented to the elderly. Does it make a difference that the program is offered by children? Clearly, the children do not function as formally trained music therapists but use music as a therapeutic tool. In some ways, this is an advantage. For example, Prickett and Moore (1991) state that "individual participation rates in singing can be impressive, but it is likely that this is related to one-to-one interaction with a proximal singer; further research is necessary to establish how many patients can be served, and at what distance, by a single music therapist before the patients' concentration is lost." Anecdotal evidence from the Hand-in-Hand program shows that the proximity of the singer is indeed important. Small changes in distance from the resident, singing with a more open mouth and clearer visual as well as aural cues, can make a difference in the degree to which an individual resident responds. A group of thirty trained children can, therefore, effect a greater change on thirty nursing home residents than can one music therapist.

But there is something more important perhaps. The children rouse in the residents their role as caregivers themselves. There is a determined effort to reach out to the children, put them at their ease, and to enter into music with them as a sign of support and encouragement. The elderly are motivated to participate not only by the fervour of the children but their desire to show the children that their efforts are appreciated and valued. The elderly feel their value as independent adults supporting and nurturing the young.

### ***A Social And Musical Model For The Future***

The Ainslie school community and the education authorities in Canberra have greeted the success and obvious benefits of the Hand-in-Hand program enthusiastically. The program now involves parent singers, volunteers, and an associated teacher-training program is spreading the program to other schools in the Canberra region. It is suggested that this type of model provides an equitable, cost-effective, sustainable and, most importantly, community focussed approach to music in schools. It may offer a model for the future development of music education in Australia. In such a model the songs of Tin Pan Alley would play a major role.

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