

The Heart of Singing (Plenary Address)

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At your next opportunity, watch as a child initiates singing a song. What do you see? So often, I see children singing with abandon, and sometimes with glee. Because *singing with heart* may be most visible in children, I began to wonder: As grown-ups, are we still able to sing *with heart* as children do? If not, how did we lose it, and where did it go?

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for teachers of music is to build and preserve the heart of singing in the children we teach. In this address, I will be sharing with you the qualities that I believe are key to the heart of singing in children. Those of you who work with adults will make your own transfers of information. I'll be speaking of children, but I am certain you will be hearing and reacting to obvious parallels in your own work.

To present some lenses for considering the *heartfulness of singing*, three headings will be our vantage points: the quality of playfulness, the quality of connecting, and the quality of living.

The Quality of Playfulness

What if we each had a habit of mind that included playfulness in our attitudes toward our teaching, in our attitudes toward our students' learning and in our attitudes toward music-making and music study?

*Little red wagon painted blue, Little red wagon painted blue,
Little red wagon painted blue, Skip to my Lou, my darling.*

[After repetitions of the song, intersperse playful questions and offer follow-up comments based on children's responses.] We are so glad to finally get that wagon painted! Why did we think that was so important? Why did we choose blue paint? Where did we get the paint? To where are we skipping?

Playfulness can give singing heart. Imagine how teaching and learning would change in our classes, if we:

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- 1) Presented information with a twinkle in our eye?
- 2) Set up non-threatening ways for students to tell us and show us what they know and think?
- 3) Allowed speculation and imagination in students' responses?
- 4) Behaved in ways that showed students that we are co-learners with them in the classroom environment?

Playfulness implies an openness to possibility, and when we exude this attitude, our sense of being changes within a group and within a learning situation. We are less concerned with controlling, less concerned with sticking to the plan and less concerned with doing it right. Instead, through planned playfulness, we are open to the twists and turns in our teaching and our students' responses that give vitality and meaning to our lessons.

Use of the term "playfulness" to describe this quality of the heart of singing is intentional. The intent of play and the attitude of play can undergird much of what we teach and we need not be formally playing a game in order to be playful about what we are learning and teaching. Rather than steering students toward right answers and right behaviours, we instead carefully structure the freedom for playful openness to ideas and ways of demonstrating understandings (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, p. 175).

A few years ago, I attended a presentation on the importance of play by Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist and play expert who has founded the Institute for Play in California. Brown's commitment to play began in 1966 when he was a member of a team of psychiatrists charged with studying the young man who hid in the clock tower at the University of Texas and shot students as they walked across campus. What he found was a noticeable absence of play in the lives of that young man and the violent criminals he subsequently studied. Brown believes that play is as important as vitamins and sleep; that play is what keeps us healthy and that we are not planning enough play for our lives these days.

As pressure mounts to achieve standardized scores in educational settings, playfulness appears to have become a casualty: pressure and playfulness may be mutually repellent. Cancellation of nap time for kindergarteners, recess for elementary children and lunch times of over 30 minutes for secondary students have been reported in schools across the nation; all this to devote more time to prepare for academic testing. As Brown believes, "Work is not the opposite of play, depression is (<http://www.instituteforplay.com>)." At its base, playfulness begets healthiness, and play is worth preserving in our classrooms and in our lives.

Playfulness helps us learn, focus, and feel rejuvenated, as it creates a community of learners.

*Bluebird, bluebird through my window,
Bluebird, bluebird through my window,
Bluebird, bluebird through my window, to buy a piece of candy.*

[Intersperse these questions with repetitions of the song and encourage ideas from children who may not be volunteering.] This bluebird is so happy that we leave the window open so he or she can buy a favourite candy! What is the bluebird's favourite candy? What does the bluebird plan to do with the candy? Does the bluebird have a name? Who gave him/her the name?

Have you ever seen the delight on a child's face when the teacher gets a turn, loses a chase, or makes a mistake? Playfulness in a classroom creates a setting where *we are all in this together*; a collaborative effort, a community of learner-singers. In classroom playfulness, we become one of the players, partners, and co-learners with our students. We learn to let go, to be free, even if momentarily, to see where an idea will take the class or the lesson or the activity. Playfulness structures freedom.

Playfulness gives voice to many learners, not just those who habitually raise their hands with an answer. Playful teachers seek out responses from all students, because the answer to such questions as, "What do you think?" and "What could it be?" is always correct. Learners try out ideas in a spirit of "Will this work?" or "I wonder what will happen if..." rather than under the threat of "I will be rejected" or "I won't measure up." A playful attitude teases out "what do you think?" answers rather than looking *only* for the *right* answer. (Bartholomew, 1994)

Playfulness nurtures choice-making for the students: "How could we do that?" "Would you prefer this or that?" "How many turns between three and five should we have?" Being invited to make choices and seeing those choices in action is very powerful to young children and, I would say, also pretty powerful to us grown-ups too. Our jobs as teachers is to make wise and efficient choices *about* what choices our children make in the classroom.

Serendipitous opportunities for surprise, humour and mistakes come with playfulness. How open are we to moments of fun; of unexpected outcomes? Our occasional "lightening up" or "chilling out," to use the vernacular of our youth, may be just what is needed for students to stay hooked to learning. Our intent in modeling

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these light-hearted moments for students may help pave the way for a lifetime of responsiveness (for us and them), so that heaviness and seriousness do not rob us of moments of playfulness.

The humour to which I refer is not the humour of joke-telling; it is the delight in an idea or response that surprises us.

*Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John, went to bed with his trousers on.
One shoe off, and one shoe on. Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John.*

[Model surprise and humour at each child's suggestion.] The preschool children offered suggestions for what John forgot to take off before he went to bed, and then we spoke their ideas and performed simple movements to "Diddle Diddle Dumpling." Not until four-year-old Max came up with the idea of underpants, did the children collapse in giggles. You can imagine what the favourite idea was from that moment on! Each iteration of "underpants" was met with glee and laughter, as if it was a suggestion not heard before.

Problem-making and problem-solving become playful habits of mind. And, "I wonder" slants responses toward propositional thinking rather than the one-right-answer formats that are so prevalent in our schooling (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, p. 170; Brooks, 1984, p. 24; Elkind, 1976). In a class I took a few years ago, Mary Kurcinka, author of *Raising Your Spirited Child* (1991), used a phrase throughout the course that stuck with me. Mary would say "We are problem-solvers!" What a powerful image for how we see ourselves: We are problem-solvers! Playfulness helps us learn to be problem-solvers.

Through playfulness, imaginations are cultivated. Compare the terms *might, could, imagine, think* to the terms *know, does, will, can*. How might our engagement in learning and singing change if we were asked questions such as: "What could it be?" "How might she do that?" "What could her name be?" The ways in which we ask the questions, as well as the ways in which we respond, can either nurture or stunt the growth of our students' imaginations.

*Roll that brown jug down to town, Roll that brown jug down to town,
Roll that brown jug down to town, So early in the morning.*

[Intersperse questions with repetitions of the song and accept all ideas as possibilities. Neutral, yet encouraging feedback can greet children's ideas: Now there's an idea! Oh my goodness, what imaginations you have!] Why are we rolling this jug instead of carrying it? Is there a reason that the jug is brown? What might be in this jug? Why are we heading to town? Why so early in the morning?

With a playful habit of mind, *teacher talk* focuses on observational commentary, observational feedback: we say what we see and hear, rather than deliver our relative approval of what we see and hear. Beware that over-criticizing and over-complimenting can inhibit playfulness. Few of us would even pause to contemplate if we were asked what toll criticism has taken on our singing and learning. Yet, many of us may not have considered that exuberant praise can produce similar consequences. When I wrote an article on "The Perils and Profits of Praise" in 1988, I was prepared to hear uproar from music educators: "How could you challenge the act of being 'nice' to students, to building their self-esteem? (Bennett, 1992)." The issue, of course, was not that of niceness and, as we have learned from several perspectives, self-esteem can actually suffer at the hands of praise. So, the uproar never came. Instead, teachers reported that they began paying closer attention to their language with students, aiming toward more observational feedback and less empty praise.

When we neutralize our judgments of students' ideas, we help them continue to grow, and we are, more than anything else, in the business of growing children. Delivered with a tone and look of interest and thoughtfulness, neutral, observational responses to a student's effort might sound like this:

- 1) Is that what you thought?
- 2) There's an idea I have not heard before.
- 3) You gave us a new way of thinking about that.
- 4) You sang the whole song for us; I heard every word.
- 5) Your voice is sounding like this is a new place for it to sing. Is it?
- 6) Oh, I think I know why you said that. That is one of the terms we talked about last week.

An important context for sharing these ideas and songs seems important to divulge here. I am unapologetically fond of folksongs. Since every school with which I am familiar uses English as the primary language, I rely heavily on folksongs based in the

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English language as study songs for teaching music and as playful songs that offer social bindings.

Folksongs are especially resilient to repetition, because they were born in the oral tradition of being handed down through the ages. Their *lives* depended on their resiliency to repetition and the simplicity of words, rhythms, and melodies required for aural recall and oral performance. Folksongs give us a context for interacting with others, for connecting with others. When we sing and play together, we

learn to respond to each other, give and receive attention, focus listening, make and acknowledge invitations, describe ideas and actions, and imagine meanings and solutions. Purposefully nurturing and non-threatening, the song context structures freedom and builds confidence for singing, playing, interacting, and studying, (Bennett, 1999, p. 3).

The following four statements draw conclusions about the importance of playfulness to the heart of singing:

- 1) Playfulness helps us stay open to humour, delight, and unplanned ideas that can happen in our classes.
- 2) In the context of playfulness, children learn to be confident, to focus, to listen, to make choices, to take turns, to give turns, to acknowledge, and be acknowledged by others, to accept others' ideas, to lead and follow, and to communicate within a group.
- 3) We may need to model playfulness and to teach children *how* to be playful by helping them know when we are thinking versus knowing, when we are being propositional rather than being accurate and when we are imagining rather than recalling. Non-judgmental, observational feedback from us can be key to achieving an ambiance of playfulness.
- 4) An attitude of playfulness affects how we sing; it helps us to sing with heart.

The Quality of Connecting

Singing connects us; it *hooks us up* in much the same way as the gears of a clock pull and push along the connecting gears. It is nearly impossible *not* to connect when we sing.

Singing is fundamentally a social experience (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, p. 6). When we sing, we connect, either in intrapersonal or interpersonal (introvertish or extrovertish) ways. Both avenues for personal-social growth are important and, some would say critical, to a balanced life.

You likely know many very touching stories about the solace and comfort we can gain from singing alone, the release that can come through the act of singing and the connecting (and sometimes healing) that can occur when we sing with others. The playfulness discussed earlier grounds the social experience, the connecting experience of singing. *Singing gives us kinship.*

Singers become meaning-makers. Repetitions of songs help students make meaning of them, and meaning connects us to both familiar and unfamiliar facets of our thinking. Story-making leads children to meaning. To help children connect with the songs they are singing, we can sing songs as if we are telling a story, making songs come alive for children, showing excitement for the song and adding drama to singing through gestures and facial expression. Sing "A-Hunting We Will Go" with a sterile demeanour and no expression. Now, sing it again with a story-telling posture through expressive face, gestures and pace of singing. The difference between these two deliveries of a song can make the difference between connecting and disconnecting, between meaninglessness and meaning-making and between mechanical and musical singing.

Another way to create fertile venues for meaning-making is to plan for students to make contributions to songs and activities. Such involvement in shaping a song activity brands the song with students' own personal imprints; the uniqueness of the story and idea contributions makes the song indigenously *theirs*.

*Oh, do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man?
Oh, do you know the muffin man, who lives on Drury Lane?*

I was teaching a group of four-year-olds in Seattle as a conference of teachers observed. As we sang "The Muffin Man", the line of children moved around the outside of a sitting circle. At the cadence of the song, we stopped and invited the closest child to join the line. Then, I immersed the children in story-making: "Do you know anything about the Muffin Man? I was told he lives on Drury Lane, but I can't find him. Do you know anything that might help us find him so we can get some muffins?" After one child said he didn't know anything and another said she heard that he had a pet, a third child joined the line. "Have you heard anything, Chad?" I asked. Quietly, Chad said, "No." "Oh, I thought maybe you

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knew something that could help us locate him," I encouraged. "No," Chad again answered, shyly. Then, just as I was about to begin singing, I heard Chad say something in a very quiet voice. "What?" I asked as I froze. "I just know he lives in a cave," Chad whispered, with all the seriousness of helping solve a mystery. The 70 teachers watching and I stifled gasps and giggles at this surprise reply, then I continued, "Oh, that is such an important clue for us! What helpful information: he lives in a cave. *Oh, do you know....*"

Why is interactive education so important? My suspicion is that we are more apt to remember what we said, asked, or thought than what a teacher told us at any given point of our learning. Being given voice, as in story-making for songs, is a powerful learning tool. Story-making, especially when we engage children in creating the story, changes the song for all of us, and therefore, it changes the way we sing the song.

Singing *is* communication. And, just as in speaking, singing connects us through both expressive and receptive pathways. We use the same muscles for speech and song, the same biological ontogeny (Welch, 2005). Yet, singing can cause us to breathe more deeply and more purposefully, and it can provide a context for playful experimentation with emotions: fear, anger, joy, sadness, surprise, and disgust. Not only are all the emotions expressed vocally (Titze, 1994), they are accompanied with strong acoustic variation (Scherer, 1995).

Well-modulated speaking of nursery rhymes, then, combined with dramatizing the variety of emotions embedded within them, provides fertile contexts for vocal communication. Through nursery rhymes (which happen to be my favourite chant activities!), children can safely and acceptably *pretend emotions* and practice the vocal ranges of expression in pitch, pace, and volume that accompany them.

*Little Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet, eating her curds and whey.
Along came a spider and sat down beside her and frightened Miss Muffet away!*

If you speak this rhyme in the way that groups tend to chant, it may sound like a drone with heavy, low voices, and little inflection. If, however, you speak the poem with vocal variety (in pitch, pace, and volume), the expressiveness matches the emotion of the story. Now, speak the poem as if you are telling an amazing story, with the purpose of engaging the listeners.

Song frames speech. Singing frames motivates and emphasizes the sounds and meanings of language. Singing gives flow, shape, and nuance to a series of individual sounds, individual notes. With the many options for languages and with the many children in schools for whom English is not their native tongue, facility with language, practiced through repetition, experienced with context (story and movement) and learned in a playful atmosphere helps these children connect with their environment.

*Polly put the kettle on, Polly put the kettle on,
Polly put the kettle on, we'll all have tea!*

Rosalinde, a three-year-old girl from Germany, holds the record for the longest time of not taking a turn in my music classes. Rosalinde, shy and knowing no English, spent 22 weeks not taking a turn, not interacting with other children, not making eye contact, and not sitting in the circle with other children. Yet, Rosalinde insisted that her mother bring her to MusicPlay class each week. Because I do not *require* children to participate physically in music activities, Rosalinde was *allowed* to take her own time deciding when she would join us. Then, suddenly in the 23rd week, Rosalinde began speaking in English phrases; her mother was stunned! Not only did this little girl suddenly begin speaking English (with no accent), using phrases from our games, songs, and nursery rhymes, but she suddenly joined in our activities, smiling and singing as if she had been participating this way all along! Language and music were *connecting* Rosalinde to her classmates.

Just as speech and singing have the same physical ontogeny, they also have the same acoustical roots. In particular, the grouping of sounds into phrase patterns of speech is clearly evident in folksongs, because folksongs often capture the natural rhythms and inflections of the language on which they are based. Speak "the farmer in the dell," then sing that phrase in the song. The speech chunks are nearly identical in rhythm and inflection to the song chunks. Language can inform musical responsiveness, just as musical responsiveness can inform language. In-depth discussions of this figural interconnectedness of language and song can be found in *SongWorks* (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1999; Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997) and in "So, Why Sol-Mi? (Bennett, 2005)."

Nursery rhymes are a constant activity for the young children I teach, and I marvel at the connections the children make to the language as we play with the sounds and

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the stories in many ways. Research by Welch (1979), Davidson (1994) and Hargreaves (1996) indicates several important implications for the role that speaking can play in singing. According to their findings, melodic contour (pitch contour) is generally easier for children to match than the exact pitches of a song, yet less easy to recall than words to a song. So, by having children speak nursery rhymes, poems, and other oral selections, we are helping them use and coordinate the physical properties also necessary for singing.

Singing prompts listening. Imagine the *hooking up* of listening elicited by these statements:

- Now, sing and listen for the voices around you.
- Ears here.
- What words do you hear as I sing a song on “loo?”
- Listen for Janet’s voice; she’ll start our song.
- Our voices are ready to sing with Isaac’s voice. Let’s listen.

One way to encourage listening and develop inner hearing is to present a familiar song as a secret to be discovered by the student-listeners. Introducing familiar songs as secret songs, presenting songs as puzzles to figure out through aural, visual, or motor clues is a powerful enticement for listening:

- What words come into your mind when you see these motions? [show motions to a song or chant]
- What music comes into your mind when you hear these sounds? [tapping word rhythms]
- What song do you hear when you see these hand signs?[show solfege hand signs to a familiar song]

As we lead singing, do we listen? For some of us, it is not so easy to sing in *support* of children’s singing. Singing *with* your children, not *for* them or *to* them, helps them gain confidence in their own singing. When we listen for children’s voices as we sing, we gain valuable information about their singing behaviours. And, we sing differently when we listen; we become singing partners with our children.

Is *everyone* a singer? I once wrote an article titled “I Can Sing!” and the first sentence of the article was “I can’t sing! (Bennett, 1991).” Most of us know an adult who says “I can’t sing,” who has been robbed of the pleasure of singing, sometimes for decades. I am an untrained singer. In fact, at a party recently in Oberlin, a colleague was asking

about this conference. I said that I was asked to speak at the Phenomenon of Singing Symposium, then added in my favourite Texas accent, "An, I ain't eem a sanger!"

If your wishes came true, would you want everyone to see himself or herself as a singer, as a music maker? For some, this is not an easy question to answer, because we want to reserve the term "singer" for a person who attains certain levels of skill for singing. Yet, who gets to determine what those levels are? And, what is the consequent cost to those singers who do not or cannot attain them?

At a conference session, I once heard Pete Seeger say, "There is no such thing as a wrong note, as long as someone is singing it." What would we lose and what would we gain if we all adopted that attitude?

During a conversation one day, a professional golfer friend revealed that he cannot play a round of golf just for fun anymore. He said that he has been at it too long, has been in too many tournaments and has taught too many lessons to just *enjoy* a round of golf. This golfer's critical skills and standards of excellence are such habits of mind that they prevent him from just *playing* with golf.

So, I wondered, could the same be true for us? What if we have trained and conditioned ourselves out of the ability to appreciate less than excellent singers? Are we intolerant of listening to unskilled singers? Are we unwilling to sing in a group that does not know or cannot perform with vocal expertise? Are we too conditioned and too critical to have fun with singing, to sing with heart? And if so, are we passing these values on to our students?

A side note, but a very important one to mention here: I have long believed that the conditions under which we sing the best contrast to the conditions under which we *expect* the best singing from our students. Juries and auditions in schools of music are many times hostile environments with weeks and weeks of anxiety building up to them, sometimes with that anxiety intentionally fueled by the voice teacher judges. If we want and expect to hear students' voices at their best, what would need to change so that the conditions allow singers to sing their best?

The quality of connecting is key to singing with heart, yet the discussion elicits both statements and questions:

1. Singing and singing activities provide foundations and avenues for connecting people to people and to ideas, foundations and avenues for communicating.
2. Our students have value, whether or not they measure up to our musical expectations of them; there are ways to show and practice this principle as we teach them (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, 31-35).

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3. How do we maintain our own connections to and acceptance of the myriad of levels and styles of singing, the various faces of the heart of singing, knowing as we do, that the perception of quality in singing is culturally biased?

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Singing at the drop of a hat. That is a vision I have had for a long time; singing at the drop of a hat. What would change for us if everyone we encountered felt free enough to break into song whenever a situation arose that prompted it?

When my husband, Harley, and I travel, I so often break into song when anything I am seeing reminds me of song lyrics. We both do that; and then, we laugh with great hilarity about the cleverness of our impromptu incidental music. In many of our travel videos, you can hear me in the background singing such descriptive songs as "Little White Duck," "Red Sails in the Sunset," and "Over the Rainbow." One video from Australia features Harley filming one black and one white bird in a tree, accompanied by his singing of Paul McCartney's "Ebony and Ivory!"

An aspect of singing that may get lost in this commercial, bling-bling world of ours is that singing requires no equipment or materials; singing is organic and primal. Do we demonstrate this natural, embodied notion of singing and music in our classrooms? Or, do our students believe they are dependent on others or on instruments to sing?

Stories abound that show us the power of singing, when no equipment is around, stories that show how singing can connect and heal and contribute to the quality of living. Most recently, volunteers have travelled to tsunami-ravaged areas of Southeast Asia and to war-torn Bosnia to lead orphans and traumatized children in singing games and folksongs. Scenes of these simple gifts to the quality of living touch me.

To be alluringly portable, songs we sing with children must be ones that children *want* to sing outside our classrooms. Are those the songs we *are* singing? Or, do we limit our singing with children to those songs that specifically fit our (sometimes fairly rigid) pedagogical sequence?

In 1990, Charles Elliott raised a provocative notion: when singing for pedagogical purposes replaced singing for enjoyment in our schools, we began losing our singing heritage (Elliott, 1990). In some classrooms, expectations for accuracy of singing and accuracy of reading music notation encroach on any semblance of pleasurable singing, and these ideals need not be mutually exclusive.

Singing puts music in us. We are the sound source. As Graham Welch writes in his chapter, "Singing as Communication," "Vocal sound is one of the defining features of

humanity (Welch, 2005).” Accepting that simple, yet profound idea would mean that when we sing, we become more human.

Principle 7 from “Principles for Teaching and Learning” in *SongWorks 1: Singing in the Education of Children* states that “Quality of life is enriched through music and singing (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997).” To act on this principle, two years ago in Oberlin, Ohio, I founded the PlayParty Project for area families. Each month, we offer 45 minutes of singing and playing together: no fee, no instruction, no musical expectations. Children from ages 2 to 10 bring their parents and grandparents for playful, intergenerational connecting through singing. According to the feedback from parents, the simple, unadorned PlayParty activities make an important contribution to their quality of living, especially to the quality of their family living.

The qualities of playfulness, connecting, and living give a boost to heartfelt singing, and when we sing with heart, we make the music our own:

- When we sing, we have the song in us; it becomes ours.
- When we sing, we can be playful about how we behave during a song and what we imagine as we sing.
- When we sing, we can sing with emotion, and sometimes with glee, as we connect with others and ourselves.

And, because we are the sound source for the music, when we sing, we become the music.

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