

# 11

## CHAPTER

# PREPARATORY SKILLS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Students need preparatory skills in listening, moving and singing/vocalizing to form a foundation for future skill and conceptual development. These three are the specific aspects of the Sample Skills Curriculum denoted with asterisks. Teachers also need preparatory skills. Because most elementary music lessons involve singing, teachers' preparatory skills begin with singing-related skills, several of which will transfer to other music performance situations.

In this chapter, your **focus** will be on:

- Strategies through which students build listening skills by concentrating to identify familiar sounds;
- Strategies through which students learn to start, stop and respond quickly, aurally discriminating between sounds to make a sound-and-movement connection while gaining body awareness and developing coordination;
- Strategies through which students learn to manipulate their voices and produce a singing tone supported by a lifted body posture;
- Guidelines for leading familiar songs;
- Principles for conducting other student performances;
- Methods for teaching songs to add to the children's repertoire.

In order to learn, you will:

- Participate in sound identification games;
- Search online to find sites with categories of familiar sounds;
- Participate in movement control games in a simple-to-complex order;
- Sit in a lifted body posture essential for breath-supported singing, purposely including each factor involved;
- Participate in vocal control and manipulation games;
- Produce a singing tone by singing the universal child song;
- Apply eight steps to effectively lead a known song;
- Apply central song-leading principles to conducting other performances;
- Explore six methods of teaching a song, each providing an opportunity for the students to hear the song several times as a musical entity but with a different form of student participation.

After completing this chapter, you will be prepared to teach songs to your students and to lead them in singing songs they know. Because the song-leading skills are transferable, you'll also be ready to lead them when they speak as a group and/or play instruments. You will be able to lead your class in game-like activities for building a foundation of listening, moving and singing/vocalizing skills. Through their participation in activities for the set of preparatory skills, they will learn to concentrate and listen attentively and to control their movement and voices to start and stop on cue. Concentration, focused attention and control are major gains beneficial not only in music class. With the foundation in place, they will be ready for conceptual development activities and for the introduction of further skill development

including playing instruments and exploring/creating. Regardless of your designated music-teaching role, the skills and strategies you gain in this chapter will prepare you to begin your students' musical participation.

## PREPARATORY SKILLS FOR STUDENTS

The school year in music should begin with the preparatory skills. Through fun game-like activities in listening, moving and singing/vocalizing, the children will gain skills essential for success in future music making. As soon as they begin to use a singing voice on your cue, you should teach a few songs. Song-teaching methods are described in the "Preparatory Skills for Teachers" portion of this chapter.

### LISTENING

Children are surrounded, even bombarded, with sounds around them in everyday life. However, how often do they concentrate and listen to purposefully identify the sounds around them? Because music experiences require careful listening, children need to learn to focus on sound and to make some fundamental aural discriminations before being introduced to any aspect of the conceptual curriculum. In terminology of the Skills Curriculum, they will participate in activities for aural recognition of familiar sounds. Through the games presented here, the children learn to control their listening attention in order to identify specific sounds.

Tell the children that they are going to be listening to the sounds around them. Direct them to close their eyes and to be silent. Tell them to "listen." In that way, you are helping them differentiate between "hearing" and "listening." With this simple activity, they will begin to understand that listening includes attention and purpose. After about 15 seconds, instruct them to open their eyes and tell you what familiar sounds they heard. Do it again. Did they hear the same sounds or different ones? The activity can be repeated at different times of day across several days.

When the children are successful at recognizing sounds in their school, including the voices of their classmates, expand their experiences to natural sounds like those made by animals and insects and/or to environmental sounds such as those made by tools and vehicles. Go to the internet to locate the sounds. You could search for "animal sounds," "environmental sounds," or "environmental sounds for kids." Perhaps a search for "sound effects" will lead to the sounds you want. Be sure to check the related search list for alternative key words.



At the beginning of the sound differentiation process, questions posed in the form of a choice will bring student success: "Is that the sound of a car, a motorcycle or a train?" If that's very easy, just ask them to identify the sound, possibly by pointing to pictures or drawing them. As the children listen, regularly ask if the new sound is the same as or different from ones they heard previously. In that way, they will be using and building aural memory skills. If you would like some additional strategies for sound identification, an "auditory discrimination games" search might help. After the children have played some games in school, they could have "homework" to listen to sounds they hear outside of school at different times of day. Often, they are surprised at all the sounds they hear and can identify when they take time to concentrate and listen.



The game can be extended by your going to the back or side of the room and purposely making a body percussion sound or manipulating something in the room, like opening and closing a door or dropping a pencil. Again, the class is to sit with eyes closed to listen and determine the familiar sound. After you've made several sounds, either on the same day or as a follow-up another day, select some children to make the sounds.

Recognizing familiar voices is a variation of the game. Have each child say "hello" as the rest of the class listens to the difference in the sounds. Then select about four children to go the side or back of the room. The children in their seats close their eyes and listen. You point to one of the small group who is to say "hello." The other children are to identify the child who spoke. They are not to guess, but to listen.

To vary just a bit, you might select a few children to go to different places in the room either to make a sound or to say "hello." In this case, the class members are not only to identify the sound but to point to the direction from which it came.

to your thumb with a slight bounce. Touch, do not hold it there. If you hold the position, the students will “gulp” the final sound.

8. Last, give feedback. Praise them if they did well, noting specific aspects of their performance that were particularly well done. For instance, “Good clean cut-off.” On the contrary, do not say “good” if their performance could be improved. In that case, provide specific guidelines for improvement then lead them again, giving appropriate feedback on that performance.

Remember too that they will sing only as well as you lead! If the class has difficulty the majority of the time, practice your song leading techniques. Do your part so that they can do theirs. The final performance should be the best they can attain. They should have a feeling of accomplishment, of having done their best with their teacher acknowledging their efforts. Their satisfaction combined with the emotion of music creates a rewarding experience for all.

The following checklist will help you practice and also can be used as a grading sheet if your instructor wants you to lead the class in singing a known song. Yes, this might be a scary experience, but your success will bring you a great feeling of satisfaction. The key to success is practice, particularly practice using a mirror. You need not be concerned that the class will not sing. They want you to sing for them, so they will sing for you. Guaranteed!

### Song Leading Checklist

1. Look pleasant, relaxed but enthusiastic. Check the students’ posture and eye contact.
2. Sing a short portion of the song as an introduction to establish the pitch, tempo and dynamic level of the song; be aware of stylistic requirements.
3. Return to starting pitch for the preparatory count.
4. Breathe and lift your arms or body to be ready to signal their entrance.
5. Signal their start; be decisive.
6. Either keep the beat and/or use other gestures to indicate melodic rhythm and/or melodic pitches; convey the mood of the song.
7. Cut off the last tone with or without holding it depending on the style of the song.
8. Provide honest feedback. Compliment them for a job well done or specify the problem, rehearse it and then repeat the performance.

You will find that with a little practice, song leading will become comfortable and natural. Your confidence and ability will inspire the children to sing better and better. Although children enjoy singing familiar songs, eventually they will tire of the repetition. So, in order to increase their repertoire, the children will need to learn songs. If they are to learn new songs, you must teach them. You’ll learn how to do that very soon, but first let’s see how easy it is to transfer the general principles of song leading to conducting other performances.

## LEADING OTHER PERFORMANCES

The central principles and gestures appropriate for leading songs are appropriate for leading other student performances. The performances could be playing instruments or speaking together as you did in the “Dynamics” and “Pitch” chapters of “The Bare Necessities.” Imitating animal and environmental sounds are performances. Even internalizing is an aspect of performance. In all these performance situations, you need a means of getting the students “ready” and “set.” You need to communicate the instant they are to “go.” Throughout the performance, you must keep them together and you must signal the point to “stop.”

Let’s look at the eight steps for song leading to see which apply to other performances. Step 1 is important to all. For all performances, every student should be looking at you in anticipation of the gesture to begin. You will not sing, so skip Step 2. In most cases, you’ll need a variation of Step 3 for the count in. You’ll speak, not sing, and can substitute the name of the performance: “1 – 2 – ready – play,” “1 – ready – speak,” or “read – y think.” Of course, you can use the word “go.” After the students have had a lot of performance experience, you will be able to skip Step

3, but don't rush to remove it. Use it until they are confident in their performances. Steps 4 and 5 are equally important to all performances, vocal or otherwise. Be clear and decisive always.

Step 6 is crucial but the gesture should be appropriate for the performance. Keeping the beat is fine for most instrumental performances, sometimes using the gesture the students are using to play. For pitch placement exercises, you'll move your arms through the vocal placement areas. For imitations, move higher/lower, longer/shorter, louder/quieter according to the sounds they are to make. Use descriptive movements from Section I. If the dynamics change, you still could keep the beat but should express the dynamic changes with your gesture. However, if they are to read dynamic markings independently, give them a "go" gesture and put your arms at your sides. The same is true for internalizing. Consider the Level of Development in all cases.

As to Step 7, there will be times when you must cut them off and there will be other times when the performance ends of its own accord. Imitations end when the sound is over. Instrumental performances need a cut-off and the last tone sung after the students have internalized the rest of the song should be cut off, too. Use common sense. If the end is shaggy, cut them off.

Step 8 always is important. It's important in all performances. It's important in many aspects of school work. Children need honesty about their work and guidance to improve. Make this an integral aspect of your teaching.

## TEACHING A SONG

In Chapter 10, you learned about sources for locating songs and factors to consider when selecting them. So, for now, let's pretend that you have found a song that (1) is appropriate for classroom use, (2) children will be able to sing, (3) you like and (4) is appealing to children. If it fills those criteria, you're ready to plan to teach it. A note before you get worried and nervous about teaching a song: Do not worry about your own singing voice. Do not think that you must avoid singing with children because you "can't sing." Very, very, very few people "can't sing." Chances are you are much more concerned than you need to be. You don't need to have a professional quality voice. Open your mouth and let it out. If you let go and enjoy the experience, the children will, too. This is about enjoying music, not becoming a perfectionist. Like the children, you'll improve with experience. So, focus on the joy of adding a new song to their repertoire and just have fun!

There are many ways to teach songs, and although there is no specific "right" or "wrong" way to teach a particular song, you will have success if you find a way that involves the students early in the learning process and keeps their attention focused. The following list of possible methods is presented so that you will be aware of some of the many ways of involving the students and focusing their attention. You may of course develop procedures of your own, or you may want to combine several methods.

Regardless of the specific song-teaching method you use, it is crucial that the students hear the song as an entity several times prior to singing. They need to hear the whole song so that they can comprehend it as a totality, a whole piece of music. The repetition will provide familiarity making the learning flow smoothly. Frequently, the students will try to sing as they hear the song the first time. Stop them! Repeat the directions, remind them not to sing yet, and start over. Why? Because if they are singing, they cannot hear. They can't hear either the tune or the words. They must hear the song in order to learn it.

The following methods all provide opportunities for the students to hear the entire song several times before singing without sitting passively. These methods can be used with students who have had no instruction in music. If the objective is to have the students learn a song, these methods will be straight-forward and effective.

**Method 1:** The students imitate motions or actions being performed by the teacher. The actions are related to the words of the song, and they become cues to remembering the words. They do the motions while hearing the song several times. This method is particularly appropriate for students in early childhood classes or primary grades.

**Method 2:** The students do a dance or play a game as the teacher sings the song. With a little focusing from the teacher, the students will be able to sing the song after the dance or game has been performed several times because they've had several opportunities to hear both the words and the tune.