



SPECIAL LEARNERS

Christine Lapka, Chairperson



And His Father Galloped, Too

Just imagine a young man getting up during a concert and galloping to the music. Instead of stopping the child, the father galloped with him. While many might be shocked by the behavior, the action is typical of some students with disabilities such as autism. We all respond differently to music, however, until recently persons with different concert behaviors were not accepted in concert settings. There is a need for “noisemaker” or “wiggle” friendly concerts.

A Brief History

Music for Autism, interactive concerts specifically for individuals with autism and their families began in the United Kingdom in 2002. The developers, John Lubbock and Christine Cairns, are musicians and parents of a child with autism. Under the direction of Robert Accordino, Music for Autism began to operate in the United States in 2007 (this year’s concerts in New York, New Jersey and Texas <http://www.musicforautism.org/usconcertcalendar.php>).

The Utah Symphony & Opera with Anne Ewers as their CEO “set national benchmarks in outreach to under-served audiences with her development of shadow-interpreted operatic productions for the hearing-impaired, audience aides for the visually-impaired and performances for children with autism and their families” (2003). Inspired by the Utah concerts, a “group of friends” in the Chicago area contacted Larry Van Oyen of North Central College who agreed to have his Concert Winds play for the special concerts. Instead of limiting the audience to autism, their collaborative group offers, “Chords for Kids,” concerts for students with special needs. These concerts are documented in *The Instrumentalist* and

were a part of the 2010, IMEA All-State Conference clinic.

How They Work

The concerts are held in halls that appeal to people with autism; there is always open space for the audience to react to the music through spontaneous dance and movement (Music for Autism). Van Oyen takes great care in programming pieces of a certain length and type (not too loud or startling). In addition, Chords for Kids has a large crew of concert organizers that educate ushers and members of the ensemble about persons with disabilities, prepare an after concert snack (yes, they are ready for gluten and nut allergies), work on publicity, and return the auditorium to its original state. Sometimes concert-goers sing/hum, dance/move, or have to step out and take a break because they are overwhelmed. Because of the need for mobility during the concert, lights are left on over the audience. To meet the needs of the audience, it is important that you collaborate with special education professionals and parents when planning and implementing a concert for persons with disabilities.

Why They Work

But, in this setting, student behavior is not judged—they are accepted. During the IMEA presentation, parent letters echoed the theme—we need a public setting that accepts our children. They talk about how difficult it is to go to a movie or eat at a restaurant. These concerts provide a bit of typical behavior, a family outing. But more importantly, the students respond to music. Remember the young man so moved by the music that he galloped around the auditorium. For

many students with disabilities (or typical abilities), **Music Makes the Difference.**

Addendum

When music events are integral to the community, we hope the community will in turn support the music. Could our performing groups offer concerts for persons with disabilities and will these concerts ensure us a place in the schools? We have often heard that ensembles that support other programs, like pep bands, have a better chance of withstanding budget cuts. If providing a musical event for students with disabilities solidifies our place in the schools, then I say, play on.

Anne Ewers. <http://www.organictheater.com/Organic/company/advisor/index.shtml>

Chords for Kids. <http://www.chordsforkids.org/>

Music for Autism. <http://www.musicforautism.org/history.php>

Music for Autism Concert Schedule. <http://www.musicforautism.org/usconcertcalendar.php>

Van Oyen, L. (2008). Autism in the audience. *The Instrumentalist*. 62, 53-54.

Van Oyen, L. (2010). Performing a Concert for Children with Autism. Illinois Music Educators All-State Conference. January 30, 2010.

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