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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the simplification of music as a way to introduce all beginners to making music. Creative play is emphasized to encourage students to feel ownership of the music they create. Suggestions are given for improvisation to known songs with small guitars, ukuleles and dulcimers. The paper advocates a return to the roots of music where everyone was involved and where it became a process of spiritually connecting with all things in the present. (EH)

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SIMPLIFYING MUSIC, NURTURING CREATIVITY and CALMING THINGS DOWN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dick Bozung, currently most often referred to as "Singing Frog" or just "frog" has had a varied background including work as an environmental engineer, a professor of engineering management, a brief stint as a city councilman in California, his home state, and as a co-founder of The Institute for Earth Education. Since 1980 he has devoted much of his time to simplifying music through his writings (he has published 10 books on various aspects of simplifying music), workshops, residencies in schools and design of new musical instruments (he holds three musical instrument patents). He also is part of an organic farming co-operative in Utah and has remained active in "deep ecology" circles.

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SIMPLIFYING MUSIC, NURTURING CREATIVITY and CALMING THINGS DOWN

INTRODUCTION

My first exposure to playing a musical instrument (besides the usual rhythm sticks and fluteophone elementary experiences) was with the flute in the 6th grade junior high pre-band program. I was taught to read notes, wear a uniform and march down a street while playing my instrument. I loved sitting with my peers on certain days when we would all get into a really nice relaxing piece of music and play it for our own enjoyment. I dropped out in the 7th grade - too many pieces of marching music, marching in the Thanksgiving parade with my fingers nearly freezing to my instrument, and the very thought of moving on to the high school band, marching on the gridiron in support of violence towards my friends from across town - I just couldn't get into it. I never remember being given the opportunity to "creatively play" with musical instruments (including my own voice). Everything we did always seemed to be part of getting ready for some performance - I guess there just wasn't any time to really "play".

When I turned about 30 I felt like there was a large hole in my heart, emanating from my lack of musical understanding and my inability to join with others at any time I wished and make beautiful music together. I looked around me and saw these elite little groups of ~~groups~~ ^{MUSICIANS} making all the music - they had no interest in including me or the rest of my friends who felt exactly the way I did. And I thought to myself, something as beautiful and spiritual as music-making needs to be shared and expressed by everyone. I am not going to go down to the local music store and sign up for cello lessons (more note reading), nor am I going to try again to memorize and practice a bunch of difficult fingering

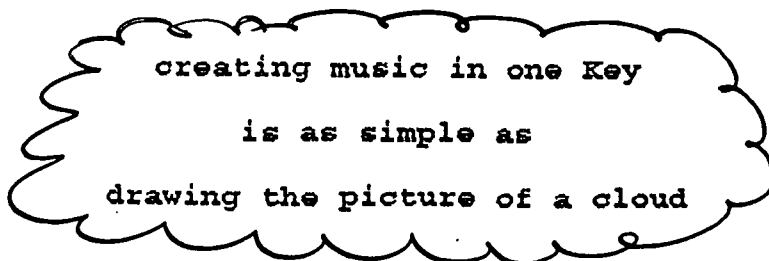
positions (calluses included) on the guitar. Instead, I am going to devote the next major phase of my life to simplifying the understanding and playing of music so that I and my friends can make music together, at any time we wish, on a wide variety of instruments, for the rest of our lives. And I would now like to share with you some of the things that I have learned along the way.

music simplified, from an outsiders point of view

I would like to "start at the very beginning, the very best place to start" (from The Sound of Music). What I will describe is the way I feel all beginners should be introduced to making music, no matter what their age. I will be placing a lot of emphasis on the "creative process".

UNDERSTANDING

Music is played in what are called "Keys". A musical Key uses sounds from a particular set of 7 families of sounds (there are a total of 12 sound families in music). When music is being played in a particular Key, if you know what sound families fit that Key and how to produce only those notes on the instrument(s) you are playing, you can make up whatever you like along with others playing in the same Key, and the harmony produced will sound beautiful. In other words, beautiful music can be produced by any group, "randomly", as long as everyone is playing in the same Key. (For pictorial insights into the simplicity of music theory, see The Magical Musical Spiraled Seashell and Friends.)



creating music in one Key
is as simple as
drawing the picture of a cloud

YOU DON'T NEED FORMALIZED MUSIC TRAINING TO FACILITATE THE CREATIVE MUSICAL PLAY OF OTHERS

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INSTRUMENTAL DIVERSITY

In every home, elementary school classroom, and church, there should be the following musical instruments (all playable by everyone): keyboard, guitar, dulcimer, baritone ukulele; Key of C xylophones (wood and metal bars), C harmonicas, C pennywhistles, chimes, lap harp and resonator bars; and the following rhythm instruments - large upright drum, hand drums, soft bells, soft shakers and soft scrapers. The stringed instruments can be tuned with simple to use electronic tuners to special Key of C "open" tunings. In this tuning they can be strummed "open" (meaning no fretting the strings with the fingers is necessary). With the keyboard, play just the white keys, which fit the Key of C. All these instruments can be simply played improvisationally by everyone. (You will find examples of each of these instruments, with tuning details, in The Music Simplified Guide for all Teachers and Parents of Young Children and companion Video.)

CREATIVE PLAY

When I was very, very young, I just verbalized my own little sounds. I listened to the humans and non-humans around me and joined in on the music of language in my own way (ever notice how musical a foreign language we don't understand seems, probably because we listen to the sounds and not for the meaning in the words). And so it should be with "playing" musical instruments. The way to begin is by being yourself, playing "freestyle" with any of the instruments mentioned above, alone or with others, in one Key. Some suggestions are that you play gently, and if with others, in balance, not overpowering anyone else. *Creative, improvisational music-making is one of the simplest ways to facilitate an appreciation for and realization that we are all naturally creative persons (the self-esteem building benefits are amazing)!*

A Beginning Musical Form - "EARTH-BEAT"

(making music with the earth)

The natural music of the earth, the wind, the rain, the birds, the frogs the insects, etc. is beautiful to listen to. It is random, a-rhythmic (meaning it has no steady beat), generally soft, but changing in volume and character. The easiest way to begin making music is to join in on the greatest concert of all - the natural music of the earth. If you are going to be using rhythm instruments along with the melodic instruments, play them softly, and you don't have to try and keep a steady beat. You can do this outside in a quite natural setting, or inside along with a recording of the natural sounds of the earth, or any place any time.

BUILDING COMMUNITY and GIVING through MUSIC

Try starting and ending very gently, slowing down, making it last a long time, not thinking and not trying to pre-determine the next note you are going to play (in the beginning, it might be best for each person to play just one note at a time). This is a beautiful, relaxing, calming and meditative experience that can be shared by as many people as you like, of all ages. If there are very young children or others who have a tendency to bang away very hard on instruments, try to be selective about which instrument they play and how it is played. For example, switching over to a soft rubber mallet, if they are playing on a xylophone, may soften their music enough to fit in with everyone else.

A small group can play for others while they are engaged in some other activity, for instance, prayer, meditation, coloring, preparing a meal, washing dishes, reading a story, resting - a beautiful gift to share. Over time, everyone can create their own musical offerings for others. We are all beautiful, creative musicians and music therapists by nature!

Another simple improvisational musical form - "HEART-STRINGS"

A simple variation on the beginning "EARTH-BEAT" form is to add a steady drone harmony chord rhythmic foundation to your music-making. This is usually most easily accomplished by having all the open tuned fretted stringed instruments strummed "open" (meaning no fingerings are required - 4 yr. olds can handle this), gently, and in time with each other, and having the rest of the instrumentalists trying to play along with the beat if they can (not absolutely necessary). The "EARTH-BEAT" and "HEART-STRINGS" forms are very interchangeable, that is, you can start with one, move into the other, and go back and forth as many times as you like. You can also make up your own words to go along with the music if you like.

CHILDREN AND ADULTS "CREATING" THEIR OWN MUSIC TOGETHER IN THE KEY OF C USING VARIOUS SIZED GUITARS, UKULELES and DULCIMERS

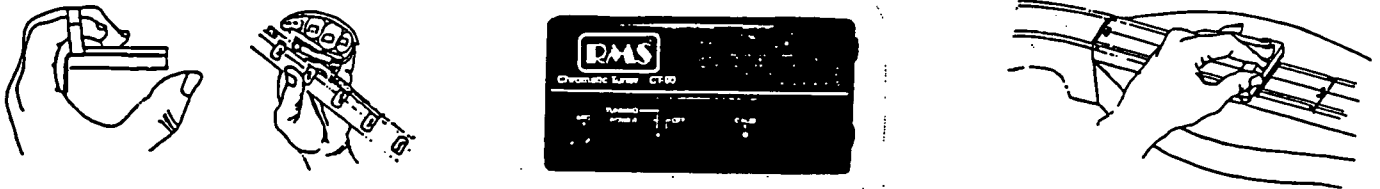


ACTUAL
PHOTOS
AVAILABLE
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REQUEST

SIMPLE WAYS TO PLAY
and
IMPROVISATIONALLY ACCOMPANY KNOWN SONGS

New Tools Make Tuning & Chording Guitars, Ukuleles and Dulcimers a Snap

With new "open" tunings and simple no fingering chording devices like those illustrated below, any adult and children as young as 7 or 8 can easily play the chords to their favorite songs within minutes of picking up their instrument. With beginners labels along the fretboard to identify which chord is barred at which fret, there is nothing to memorize and there are no complicated fingering positions to learn or callused fingers to develop. And the new chromatic electronic tuners are really easy for beginners to use on any stringed instrument.



"the Guitar BARRE" chromatic electronic tuner the "Dulcimer BARRE"

(For details on how to tune and "barre chord" these instruments, refer to the GUITAR and DULCIMER SIMPLIFIED BEGINNERS GUIDES respectively.)

To play a simple two chord song like "This Old Man" on the next page, you simply strum across the strings of your guitar "open" to play the beginning C Chord (chords are the letters written above the music - you do not have to read any notes to sing and play your favorite songs), and then "barre" the G Chord (no fingering required), as illustrated above, when you get to those sections in the song calling for a G Chord.

IN CONCLUSION

We are all meant to express ourselves in a variety of ways - through the use of language, color, clothing, movement, play, music, etc. - it is an extensive list for a wholly developed personality. Although it is perfectly acceptable to try and reproduce what someone/something else has done (reading music, for example), there at least needs to be a balance between being ourselves and being someone else. In music, we need to begin the experience by being ourselves and creating our own music - we are all in fact natural composers. The best time to begin is now, no matter what your age (forget any negative feedback you may have been given along the way), and for children, they should be given the opportunity to creatively explore a wide variety of instruments from as early a age as is possible (we start 3 year olds out on all the instruments mentioned previously).

We now have at our disposal new tools and information which makes it extremely easy for all of us to make music alone and with others, be it something we totally make up, or a familiar piece we want to play and improvise along with. And we don't have to have any special musical "gift" or background to facilitate the making of music in our homes, classrooms and churches. We are all music teachers, therapists and composers. (By the way, for a simplified introduction to playing keyboard instruments, refer to The Keyboard Simplified Beginners Guide.)

INTEGRATING HARMONYMAKING INTO OUR EVERYDAY LIVES and ROUTINES

In my humble opinion, there is too much ego invested in most contemporary music-making and much too much of an emphasis on performance. Music-making needs to return to its roots, where everyone was involved and where it became a process of spiritually connecting with all things in

the present. We all need to re-integrate harmonymaking into our everyday lives and routines - at home, at school and in our churches. With a variety of instruments sitting around all in one Key, we can do this alone and with others at any time we choose - be it making music with the earth as we watch the sun set, or playing in the background while others prepare a meal, or quieting friends ready to take a nap, etc..... One of the major purposes of our books on harmonymaking with children and families is to give concrete examples of how we can all integrate the calming powers of improvisational music making into our everyday routines, at home and in our schools and churches.

Editors note: for more information on the ideas discussed in this article, please contact "THE FOUNDATION FOR MUSICAL EMPOWERMENT" at 744 Copperhead Trail, John's Island, SC 29455 or call (803) 559-5662.

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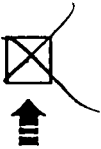
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