

NORTH LONDON COLOURSTRINGS

Classes for Babies and Children Under Three

“Never too young to start!”

by Deborah Sacks

It could be any mother and baby group except that the teacher has a singing voice you really want to listen to - not surprising as all the Colourstrings classes are taught by trained musicians. And it's not just mothers and nannies either - the Saturday classes in particular are popular with dads. "It's a wonderful opportunity for men to get more involved in the early stages instead of not quite knowing how to entertain their baby," says Deborah Harris, director of Colourstrings. Indeed the idea is that singing at home becomes a part of everyday life.

I've been to music classes for babies elsewhere that are extremely noisy with the group leaders struggling to make themselves heard over the racket of percussion, or library groups where the group leader might be singing completely out of tune. The Colourstrings baby classes, by contrast, are calm environments but that doesn't mean boring! You might be going round the mulberry bush, chasing incy wincy spiders or singing 'Andy Pandy sugar and candy' (that's a new one to me!) but you can be sure you are also laying the foundations of your child's musical education.

In the class for babies (from 6 - 16 months), soft toys abound. The class is pitched perfectly for the age group, so that babies are given opportunities to identify their knees and toes and to point to the animals and birds in the pictures. Familiar nursery rhymes feature alongside special Colourstrings songs. If the children progress to the kindergarten classes, these Colourstrings songs ('Look Lamb Look', 'Hey Beetle', 'Molly Dolly', 'Elsie the Elephant') will eventually be used to teach the children about solfa (do, re, mi, fa, so ...). If the children go on to learn instruments with Colourstrings, these songs will also be among the first tunes they learn to play.

There is plenty of variety and action even for the youngest age group - dancing in a circle, stamping rhythms, waving elephant trunks and shaking maracas and bells. Being held upside down also seems universally popular! Many of the babies listen and watch with rapt attention and there are lots of smiles.

The younger under-threes (18 months to 2 years) had flags to wave for 'Hurry Little Puffer Train' (with choice of flag colour of course *de rigueur*). Dynamics (singing softly or loudly) are also introduced for this age group. They are invited to use their loud or soft voices, their singing voices and their whispering voices. "But," commented the teacher, "I don't mind at all if the children sing loudly when I've asked them to sing quietly - sometimes if the rest of the group is singing more quietly, it's an opportunity for them to hear their own voice_" This is the sort of reflection that is typical of a Colourstrings teacher.

Every class features some listening time. A Mozart_Piano Concerto is the current piece of choice. The young audience is free to listen lying on the floor, on their carer's lap or wandering around the group. The older toddlers in particular seemed to appreciate the quiet moment in their day.

There is a clear progression between the classes for the different age groups. In the class for the 2-3 year-olds (older under-threes), the toddlers even sing solos - very tunefully.

In a song about Daddy, Mummy and Baby Bear, they are introduced (unawares!) to quavers, crotchets and minims (in Colourstrings/Kodály language that's 'TI's, 'TA's' and 'TA-A's'. The toddlers are asked to identify which bear is walking - in other words which note-value they are hearing. The idea of a round or canon is also introduced. The class sings a song whilst the teacher sings in canon. Or the teacher divides the class so that one half repeats a simple rhythm (*ostinato*) whilst the other half sings the melody. Toddlers in this group were also able to identify a song when the teacher sang the melody but not the words. A pair of claves were brought out for a song about a pea-pod and each child was offered a chance to strike them at just the moment when the pod went POP!

In all the classes, parents and carers join in - in fact, according to the teacher, babies like their mother's voice best of all - but there's no need to worry if you are shy about singing, as so many parents report that they learn to sing in tune through coming to Colourstrings classes. It's a chance to continue the journey of your own musical education!

The last word should go to the end-users themselves. A mother of twin baby boys said, “I asked them this morning, shall we go to Colourstrings and they said, ‘Yes!’ - they really like coming!”

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