**Music is a Quivering of a String Stretched between Heaven and Earth**

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*Music is an art that comes to life in sounds and silence. Its essence is a note of a certain pitch, duration, volume and colour. When a number of successive notes are connected (horizontally), we create a melody in which sounds are related to each other in terms of distance, tempo, dynamics, timbre and agogics. When notes resonate simultaneously intervals, chords and clusters emerge, and when chords are connected harmonies arise.*

*Music is an organised succession of notes and/or harmonies.*

*How do we perceive music? How does it affect us?**What can music teach us?**How can it improve our quality of life**and enhance**our perception of the world and people around us? Does it have the power to help us understand ourselves and others, and make us susceptible to the transcendental?*

**Music is the bond between the corporal …**

It is impossible to hold music still even for a moment, to distance yourself from it and continue with it afterwards. It is impossible to create, sing or experience it in the same way more than once. Its being is ceaselessly connected with time, as neither the artist nor the experiencer can feel and be quite the same at the moment of the performance as at any other given moment in time. Since its beginnings music has always been an acoustic matter transmitted orally from one to another. It had to be kept in constant motion so as not to die. In order to survive music needed a medium to keep it alive and so used man.

Many objects and architectural remains from a distant past have been preserved to this day without anyone’s help. Music, however, could not be preserved in any other way than orally until it was discovered how to write it down for the first time.

**A person’s first contact with the outside world begins already in the womb – with sound.**

Safe in the shelter of its mother’s body, an unborn child cannot see, smell or taste, but it can hear muted sounds of the outside world, make out a difference between a man’s and a woman’s voice, and even remember a melody heard more than once. When a child is born it recognizes the voices of its mother and father. Even though physical contact between a baby and its mother is of utmost importance, a baby’s voice is its most important means of expression as it uses it to communicate with its environment in the first days of its life. A baby uses crying to tell the world that something is not as it should be, that it needs something. It responds to sounds coming from the surrounding environment from the outset. Sometimes it is enough for a mother to address it from afar for it to calm as it knows its mother’s voice from when it was still in the womb. A child reacts to loud sounds from the environment by crying and being restless. It gradually learns to recognize different sounds and ascribe different meanings to them. From the first day onwards, a new-born starts learning how to differentiate between different shades of emotions in the voices of its parents. A baby develops an increased sensitivity to different meanings of the melody of sound, articulation and changes in dynamics. It knows very well when its mother is happy, sad or angry. In this way it does not only shape its world of meanings, but also its world of emotions and senses.

By the time persons reach adulthood, they more or less lose all the spontaneity of a small child but retain their sense for recognizing moods and emotions in other people’s voices. Luckily, they have not yet 'learnt' to conceal the subconscious expression of emotions through the tone and colour of their voice.

**We perceive sound with our sense of hearing.**

Sound has always been important for humans since we are beings of relationships and community. Interpersonal communication is one of our most basic needs and it has always been based on sound. Even nature and humans use sounds to communicate; humans learnt to receive messages from nature e.g. in the shape of the burbling of a river, birdsongs and thunder. Hearing is one of the five basic human senses used to perceive the world around us and to communicate with others. It is the first sense to come alive and the last one to die. It is active even when a person is asleep and serves as a kind of sensor warning us about the goings-on outside our field of vision. An average person can hear sounds between 16 and 20,000 Hz. Some animals can hear sounds above 20,000 Hz (we call it ultrasound). A dog can hear sounds up to the frequency of 30,000 Hz, while a dolphin and a bat can even hear sounds up to the frequency of 120,000 Hz. Some animals use ultrasound even to communicate with each other. Ultrasound can also be used in medicine - in diagnostics and therapy.
Humans cannot hear sounds below the frequency of 16 Hz, but we *can* feel them. This is called infrasound and it is produced during thunderstorms, earthquakes and by extremely noisy machines. If exposed to infrasound for too long it can harm us since extremely low frequencies strongly affect our well-being.

Regardless of the frequency, a sound must be louder than the audibility threshold if we are to hear it. A healthy person hears sounds that are louder than 0 dB, but when a sound reaches around 120-140 dB we only perceive it as pain and pressure. A person does not perceive sound only with the help of hearing. Since sound is vibration, oscillation and energy, one perceives it in the same way as all other living beings do, with the whole body. That is why it is impossible for us to avoid sound. We can close our eyes and block our nose, but sound reaches into us no matter how hard we plug our ears. And even if we were able to mute all external sounds, our inner and intimate sounds such as breathing and the beating of our heart would still reach our brain.

**Of all the human senses, hearing has a special role as it makes speech possible.**

If persons are deaf from birth, they cannot speak even if their speech organs are completely healthy. Our acoustic world is formed on the basis of what we hear and if one does not receive that information, one doesn’t have any acoustic samples to imitate. Sounds heard from the environment are a prerequisite for the development of speech. Even specific properties of speech e.g. phonetic particularities of languages develop in children depending on the kind of sounds they receive from the environment. Even the physiology of a specific voice is shaped on the basis of the properties of sounds and voices reaching the brain through ears. Speakers of German, for example, have trouble pronouncing the Slovenian sound for R. Similarly Slovenians have trouble pronouncing the German R sound. It is perfectly clear that providing a child of a Slovenian mother was surrounded by speakers of German, it would have no problems pronouncing the German R sound.

**The voice is an instrument.**

We carry our voices in our bodies. Systematic production of sounds using vocal cords can only be done by someone skilled in using them. This is also the case with a violin, for example, which is not a part of our body. Different musicians could play one violin, not only its owner, but it is impossible for us to lend our voice to someone else. Only its owner can use it and control it.

If we were to take our vocal chords out of our throats and vibrate them, only a purring sound would be heard. Only when they are inside a body, which plays the role of a sound-box, do they become a useable instrument. Even piano strings are not an instrument on their own. They become an instrument only when they are fastened into a sound-box together with which they form an instrument we call a piano.

Is the voice an instrument? It is really our whole body that is an instrument, more precisely, our body is a house for the instrument we call voice.

**The Effect of Music on a Human**

**How music was understood in the past.**

It is hard to say how old the idea of music as an art is. When did the transformation from simple sounds used for communication to melodies and rhythms that pleased people take place? When did it fascinate humans to such an extent that they went from spontaneous music-making to the conscious creation of music and searching for its laws?

Early ancient civilisations were already acquainted with music. It is considered to be the first amongst the arts. For millennia there have been old Indian Vedic texts talking about it and claiming that all that exists in the universe is a manifestation of vibrations through which spiritual energy is converted into material substance. They also talk about how certain vibrations produced as mantras can affect the human organism and the natural environment that surrounds it. They explain the effects of sound on human emotions and consider music’s most important role to be its raising of man’s consciousness.

The ancient Greeks were even more systematic in studying music as they approached it from a philosophic and a scientific point of view. The Pythagoreans (5th and 4th century BC) declared it one of the 'septem artes liberales' – seven free arts with which they educated and trained free Greek boys. Music was considered to be a mathematical science together with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy.

Tone series – scales were divided into two groups depending on their nature: the ones that inspired in people all that is good (Apollonian) and were suitable for education; and the ones that aroused in them unrest, passions and primal instincts that were associated with the god Dionysos. They were thorough in their research of the educational power of music and were aware of its direct effect on the human soul. They maintained that, more than any other form of art, music can make human spirit even more sensitive as well as purify and enrich it. They claimed, too, that it plays an important role in shaping a person’s aesthetic awareness and nourishing the soul.

In *The* *Republic* Plato explains his concept of a perfect state; he suggests that a state is only as good as the music on which its education is based: "...Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful ..."[[1]](#footnote-1) Music moulds a person’s character and spirit. If it is good, it helps develop a love for the beautiful, promotes mental and moral discipline and leads towards truth. With the help of certain melodies they even managed to stabilise some undesirable mental states.

Around that historical period Confucius, an Eastern philosopher, also had similar ideas. He taught that music enriches the soul and promotes virtue. He compared the harmonic order of music with the order of the universe, as well as the order of the society and the state. He was also aware of the importance of music in a good state and its government: "If one should desire to know whether a kingdom is well governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music will furnish the answer." [[2]](#footnote-2)

Music has also always been present in more primitive cultures. Even in the ancient times witchdoctors and shamans associated music with the mysterious, invisible world and believed it had a healing power. They sought contact with the transcendental using different sounds produced by voices, various objects and instruments. Group dances and rituals were also based on music. Sounds and music were used in meditation and prayer. It presented an indispensable part of ceremonies, made people’s daily work more bearable, enriched social life and at the same time passed on cultural heritage.

In the Christian world music has also been present since the very beginning. At first it was unison and vocal and later on also instrumental and vocal with instrumental accompaniment. It also intrigued Christian thinkers to such an extent that they wanted to find out where it had come from and why it had such a strong effect on them.

St. Augustine even reprimanded himself for sinning "...when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys...", although he was aware that "...when they are sung these sacred words stir my mind to greater religious fervour and kindle in me a more ardent form of piety than they would if they were not sung; and I also know that there are particular modes in song and the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of some mysterious relationship between the two..."[[3]](#footnote-3)

In contemporary world we are again discovering the importance of music for humans. Alternative medicine, for example, uses sound therapy using gongs and sound massage with bowls. These approaches make use of vibrations, i.e. the physical component of music. Even orthodox medicine is making use of various methods of treatment using music. Therapy using music is becoming increasingly popular as music and bio-resonance therapies are gaining more and more ground.

This is nothing unusual or spiritistic. If we have doubts about Plato and the ancient philosophers who spoke about the effect of music on humans millennia ago, then contemporary science has shown us in various ways that invisible and intangible sound nevertheless does present a real energy that has an effect on persons and can change them.

**Music affects human emotions and moods and is reflected in the body in various ways.**

Has it ever happened to you that a sound (e.g. blackboard scraping) caused a shuddering sensation so intense it made you get goose bumps? Have you ever felt warmth wash over you while listening to pleasant music? Have you ever been moved to tears by music? Lively melodies make you want to get up and dance, while a school bell makes your heart beat faster. Do you ever shiver at the sound of a dentist’s drill or feel hungry when you hear music from a food commercial?

You don’t have to see something that reminds you of a certain melody or sound; you don’t even have to hear the melody. Sometimes it is enough to simply think of a particular sound or music and something changes within you.

A French otolaryngologist and inventor, Alfred A. Tomatis[[4]](#footnote-4) (1920–2001), studied the effect of classical music on human health and learning. Through research he discovered that sounds affect our cells, tissues and organs. The oscillation of sounds creates patterns, energy fields and resonances that are absorbed by our bodies and cause subtle changes to our breathing, heartbeat, blood pressure, muscle tension and skin temperature, and in this way affect our health and learning ability.

Our brains link sounds to particular emotions and feelings. They have the ability to remember these connections and recall them time and again. Music and its vibrations trigger certain chemical processes in our bodies. When we listen to pleasant music the pituitary gland releases endorphins that function as endogenous opioids. These improve a person’s psychic state as they create a feeling of happiness and satisfaction. Scientists have discovered that nervous stimuli that result from sound waves bypass brain centres connected with conscious decision-making and travel directly to the unconscious part connected with experience. Music is perceived by the part of the brain that is responsible for direct perception, experience and feeling. Sound travels to the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes our emotions and keeps them in our memory. That is why we find some sounds pleasant, while others give us goose bumps or make us break out in a sweat. Pleasant music is easy to remember, while other music may disturb or upset us, or even make us aggressive.

**Anything we hear leaves a mark on us.**

Although music is purely physical in nature, it reaches into the very centre of our being. It has the most direct influence on a human of all the arts as it does not affect them only in a physical or physiological sense, but also in an emotional and spiritual one. Not only individual noises and sounds, but also combinations of sounds, silence, rhythms and harmonies arranged into music have an incredible effect on a human being. It can uplift persons, make them see new paths into the unknown worlds of their spirit and show them new and exciting depths of their senses and feelings.

Every sound, word and piece of music that reaches our ears marks and shapes us. Nothing remains purely on a rational level, but it is consciously or unconsciously processed and reflected on a physical, emotional or spiritual level. As Alenka Rebula writes in her article *We are of the Same Material as the Voice*: "Listening means that we let sound mould us like soft clay ... and then we are no longer what we were. We should be careful what we listen to, because that is what we are becoming ... and be careful how we speak because our voice travels directly into a person’s heart. After hearing something we are never the same as we were before."[[5]](#footnote-5)

With its emotional and spiritual dimension and its substance, what we hear constantly changes us. We should therefore be even more sensitive and vigilant about what kind of sounds, voices and music our children are exposed to at their gentlest stage, when they cannot run away from an unpleasant sound environment on their own. That is the period when the outline of their emotional world is being formed. And this outline is the basis for the formation of their identity and for all their subsequent connections, reactions and relationships with people and the world.

**Music and Education**

When I ruminate about the importance of music in the education of our children, or rather about what kind of role it could have, I keep returning to the thought about how young people today are supposed to make out the sounds that are important for them out of all the noises of the modern world surrounding them. And how can they make out their inner or God’s voice in all this noise? Wasn’t it easier for my generation or the generation of my parents? We have grown accustomed to noise being commonplace. Technological development and an increased pace of life have made us insensitive to ever-present noise. Our tolerance for sound has increased drastically. It would be interesting to measure how much the volume of sounds has increased in the past 500 years. Perhaps we needn’t go that far back at all. It would be enough to look back 100 or 50 years into the past. I am not talking about the sounds that are a result of natural phenomena, nor about the volume of an orchestra that is larger due to the development of instruments and the increased size of an orchestra. I am thinking of the world of artificial sounds resulting from technology, economy and transportation. And I am appalled. How can a child cope in such a world where it is constantly bombarded with sound?

A baby that is used to the gentle, muted sounds that it experienced in its mother’s body winces at every sudden loud sound, or is frightened and begins to cry. But it gradually becomes used to constantly receiving sound stimuli. A child’s resistance to noise increases quite incredibly as it grows up. However, being exposed to too many loud sounds on a daily basis leaves consequences*.* A child becomes less sensitive to sounds and requires stronger and stronger impulses to take notice. A key role is also played by the modern technological accessories which our children and teenagers are very familiar with.

Let’s take cartoons into consideration. In the ones intended for the youngest children, pictures and scenes should change slowly, the pictures should be nice, the voices pleasant and the music happy. Unfortunately, even cartoons have changed: scenes change rapidly, the volume is high and the sound effects are unusual etc. All this provokes unrest, confusion and tension in a child as it cannot process information so quickly, not even on a rational level, let alone on an emotional and experiential level. Besides, a child’s perception is superficial and without a real sense for detail and nuance diversity. A deeper experience and evaluation of what is perceived is not possible. This results in passive, emotionally and spiritually lethargic young people who need extreme stimuli to be aroused.

**Musical education is an opportunity for children to retain their primal spontaneity and sensitivity.**

In constant daily rush, a child has very few opportunities to stop and calm down without being haunted by the thought that it must do something, learn something, or prove itself to someone. Musical education could be a place where children calm down and concentrate on only one thing at once; where they can learn to focus on themselves and their own perceptions, learn how to be still in silence; where they can hear, feel, evaluate, express.

Unfortunately, because of the necessity for a numerical evaluation of knowledge, so many undisciplined children and poorly trained teachers, music in primary schools has become just another primary school subject and is not educational in nature anymore. Pupils must learn a great deal about history, morphology and music theory so there is often not enough time for even a small amount of musical creativity. And yet, some music teachers have enough enthusiasm and ingenuity to succeed in making room for creative music-making alongside all the other curriculum material.

When was teaching music at Gimnazija Litja (Litija Secondary Grammar School), I talked with pupils about the meaning of music in their lives. We discovered that 99 % of young people listen to music for at least a few hours every day. We saw how music affected them in the way they dressed, thought, spoke and behaved. Most of them admitted that music played an important role in their lives and that it accompanied them everywhere they went, mainly just as an acoustic background, but also as a friend in difficult moments, as a means for making contact with others, as an aid in finding their identity and as a means of expression. They discovered that they cannot imagine life without it and that it is possible to use the power of music in various ways including the negative manipulation of individuals and masses.

If society and those responsible for education were truly aware of this, they would not turn music as a school subject into a science about music but they would develop a programme in which children would sing, play and dance. Instead, we are faced with a situation where there is very little music in the curriculum and even that small amount is often cancelled in favour of 'more important' subjects, while teachers often lack the knowledge and capabilities to properly teach the children how to sing.

Art addresses a person directly. But it is easier to burden a child with an enormous amount of data than teach them how to see the beauty inside them, in people around them and in the world itself.

**An Example of Good Practice at the St. Stanislav’s Diocesan Classical Secondary School in Ljubljana**

At the school where I have been teaching choral singing for the past 20 years, music, and especially choral singing, is held as a true value. The Diocesan Classical Secondary School is a private secondary school with a four-year programme based on the general secondary school module. A special feature of the curriculum is the subject 'Religion and Culture' that is not offered at public schools. In addition to learning two modern foreign languages, pupils also learn Latin (in one department per generation Ancient Greek is offered as a subject as well). The school is attended by pupils aged between 15 and 19 who have successfully completed nine years of primary school education.

After having been closed for 50 years due to the communist regime, the school was reopened in 1993. It was the wish of the school’s founder, Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar, that music should have a special place in the institution.

The first music professor, composer and conductor Damjan Močnik, envisaged a variety of musical activities that eventually grew to become an astonishingly lively body of choirs that is considered to be exceptional on the Slovenian as well as European levels. Special attention is paid to providing musical activities of high quality to include as many pupils as possible: from choral singing, a string orchestra, a wind orchestra, class choirs that perform at the school singing festival every year, to smaller vocal and instrumental ensembles consisting of self-motivated pupils. In the Music School of the St. Stanislav’s Institution pupils have the possibility to learn to play eleven different instruments, classical and jazz singing, and music theory.

Almost all pupils are involved in various musical activities. About half of all the 600 pupils participate in the musical activities more actively by singing in school choirs and playing in the orchestra.

**Music as part of the school curriculum**

Music as a school subject has in the past few years been carried out in the shape of a project. In the first four months of a school year, pupils have an average of four hours of music lessons per week. This method proves to be very successful since pupils become involved in activities that are generally also carried out in the subsequent years more effectively and quickly. Due to more concentrated work, the amount of acquired knowledge is also substantially greater. Music as a regular subject is therefore completed in the first year, but it is furthermore continued in the shape of interdisciplinary activities up until the 3rd year.

In the 2nd year of their studies, pupils are taken to see an opera at the Vienna State Opera as a part of a field trip to Vienna. Occasional visits to symphonic and jazz matinees at Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana are accompanied by concerts of the school’s vocal and instrumental groups. There is also a broad range of high quality concerts carried out at our school hall. Performers include promising young musicians as well as distinguished Slovenian and foreign musicians. In this way, pupils gain an insight into various musical genres and experience music at both school and highest professional levels.

**How choral singing is organised.**

There are five active choirs at the Diocesan Classical Secondary School, which differ in the age of participating pupils, the maturity and capability of their voices, as well as in style and the difficulty of the musical repertoire.

At the beginning of the school year, all first year pupils are tested for singing ability and those that pass the test then join either the boys’ or the girls’ first year choirs. In the two choirs studying a suitable repertoire helps them develop a love for choral singing. They learn vocal technique basics and the fundamental skills necessary for good and healthy choral singing, and thereby prepare themselves for more demanding repertoires that are to be sung in the more advanced choirs.

At the end of the school year all pupils who have sung in the first year choirs audition for one of two chamber choirs: the St. Stanislav’s Girls’ Choir or the Mixed Choir of the Diocesan Classical Secondary School. The two choirs consist of 2nd to 4th year pupils singing a more demanding choral repertoire. Each of the singers also has a 10-minute individual vocal technique lesson per week. The choirs carry out performances in Slovenia as well as abroad and constantly achieve top results in competitions. They also present an important factor in the shaping of Slovenian and European youth choir scenes.

The fifth and most recent of the school’s choirs is another mixed choir that came about as a result of a proposal made by boys and girls who did not want to or could not join one of the two chamber choirs, but nevertheless wanted to continue singing after the first year. This choir has most members and its repertoire includes mainly Slovenian and foreign rhythmical spiritual music and vocal pop music.

Encouraged by the School Class Choir Singing Festival, pupils who sing in one of the five school choirs also organise themselves into class choirs. At last year’s festival, twenty choirs competed for the title of best class choir. Pupils prepare for their performances on their own. They are the ones who choose the programme in accordance with the theme of the festival. Those with more musical talent compose their own arrangements and create and perform their musical accompaniment. At the festival one can hear a variety of high quality inventive polyphonic choral performances.

Additionally, pupils also form smaller vocal and instrumental groups (bands) of their own accord, and some of them continue to exist and become an active part of the Slovenian music scene after the pupils leave the school.

After completing their education at the Diocesan Secondary School, former pupils can join one of the alumni choirs: Megaron Chamber Choir or Women’s Choir Mens Sonora. Both choirs cooperate with professional musical institutions and have left an important mark on the Slovenian and broader choral world with their high quality concerts and achievements in competitions.

The Alojzij Šuštar Primary School that opened its doors within the St. Stanislav’s Institution seven years ago is introducing a similar form of organisation. In the first three years, all pupils sing in class choirs. Choral singing lessons are carried out twice a week by a singing teacher (and conductor) and are a part of regular curriculum. In years 4–9 pupils can join either a children’s choir or a youth choir depending on their interests and abilities.

St. Stanislav’s Institution has become quite a 'choral school' in the last two decades. Its organisation is based on the research of other similar models throughout Europe and was adapted for the Slovenian circumstances and surpassed foreign models in many aspects.

Our former pupils – singers – later join adult choirs or even lead choirs themselves, while some go on to study music. This is how aspirations of our institution come to life and help influence the development of Slovenian choral singing, which is with its 64,000 singers the most widespread amateur cultural activity in Slovenia and according to recent studies one of the most eminent ones in the world.

You can find out more about musical activities at the St. Stanislav’s Institution at: [www.stanislav.si](http://www.stanislav.si) or [www.zbori.stanislav.si](http://www.zbori.stanislav.si).

**The Positive Effects of Singing in a Choir**

I’ve been noticing that young ones are less and less willing to work hard towards a long-term goal. Accustomed to the greed of today’s world they want quick results. That is why long-term fidelity to a group or activity is usually an exception rather than a rule. Young people go where they feel best in a particular moment or when they have time and where they will be able to achieve a quick result and enjoy it immediately. Singing in a choir does not work like that. Conductors want reliable singers who are sometimes willing to sacrifice their other responsibilities for the sake of the choir. Our task is to teach them to persevere and work hard for the 'common cause'.

The young ones are quick to understand when a certain matter is a joke, and when things get serious. Since they generally join choirs voluntarily they are more prepared to invest into the activity than they would be if they were forced to participate in it. When they are thrilled, they like working hard. They are critical and wish to know when they are doing something right as well as when they are doing something wrong, and how to achieve better results. They desire exquisiteness and when they trust their leader, they dare to explore the unknown.

Their perception and experience of aesthetics is inescapably connected with the perception of their own being, with the realisation of their own value and beauty, and with allowing oneself to essentially be wholesome and sincere. Unfortunately, external life and contemporary idols too often demand different feelings. It is the duty of us teachers to offer them something better. We must be convinced and convincing. The young ones want to see and feel that their teachers like and respect them, that they love their work and that they are sincere in doing it. If they know they are working towards a goal, they put all their effort into it. That is when they can be ‘moulded’ and become ready to make sacrifices. They need a strong leader to motivate, challenge and inspire them. This is how mutual trust is formed that lays an excellent foundation for creative work where each and every one is capable of giving their best at exactly the right moment.

**Singing makes free.**

Whenever we listen to a concert, we want the singers on stage to be happy and smiling as this makes the audience feel safe and relaxed. Such a performance makes singing look easy and singers look as if their sole purpose were to enjoy themselves. Anyone who has ever sung in a choir, and especially us, the conductors, know just how much practice is needed for such a performance. How many skills must one master and coalesce in order for the choir to breathe as one harmonious and serene musical instrument!

It is of course wonderful if a piece of music is sung perfectly in tune, rhythmically correctly, with a beautiful sound and stylistically appropriately. Nevertheless, this should not be the goal of a performance, but merely the method. More important than vocal skills is what happens within a singer during a performance. The steps they are making when opening up, when they are leaving a room and freeing themselves of physical and mental frustrations, when they are being liberated from their fears about the thoughts of others about them; when they once again learn about the lost authenticity and spontaneity of expression, experience as well as perception of their own bodies. When they learn to perform in public and wish to show the best they can do technically and musically while remaining at ease and genuine. All this enables a singer to grow.

**Singing affects our health.**

During rehearsals, after a certain time, a singer relaxes and leaves behind his/her worries. Physical activity during singing (from diaphragmatic breathing and the usage of voice onwards) affects the singers’ general well-being and with it their health. Deep diaphragmatic breathing calms one’s heartbeat, improves circulation and 'massages' inner organs and therefore rejuvenates the whole body. All this reduces stress, strengthens the immune system and helps the brain function better.

**Singing improves learning capabilities.**

In addition to having regular schools, the Swedish public educational system also consists of so-called 'singing schools'. These are schools with a general curriculum plus an addition of pupils’ attending classes in choral singing on a daily basis at the expense of some of the general subjects. Research shows pupils attending 'singing schools' are more successful at other general subjects (e.g. mathematics, English) than their peers attending 'regular' lessons despite attending less of such lectures.

Being musically active enhances cognitive abilities and improves studying capabilities. Eric Jensen claims in his work *Music with the Brain in Mind*[[6]](#footnote-6) that being actively involved in music helps improve learning proficiency as it stimulates a person’s perceptive, cognitive, emotional, motoric, and other neurobiological systems that are fundamental for learning. While making music, neurone connections between the left and right sides of the brain are stimulated. The same thing happens, but to a lesser extent, when one listens to music. The level of creativity increases, memory improves as do spatial and mathematical capabilities.

A singer’s capacity for concentration improves and grows if the singer is regularly involved in music. While singing we have to think of many different things at once: correct intonation, rhythm, words, sharp pronunciation, aesthetic production of notes, phrasing, facial expressions and posture, harmony with the others, attentiveness to other singers and the conductor, and much more. This improves our attention span, as well as the capability of focusing on more than one thing at once and the harmonic synchronised functioning of different physical, mental, and emotional processes.

All this does not only have a positive effect in the field of music but in many other fields as well.

**Personal Discipline and Responsibility**

Choral singing is like long-distance running. There is no quick personal, let alone group progress. If singers want to be equal members of a group, they must attend rehearsals regularly and on time. They must take care of their health and treat their voice responsibly not only when singing, but also during other activities. They must often defeat tiredness, laziness and absence of mind. During rehearsals they must precisely follow the conductor’s instructions, limit their verbal communication with other singers and abstain from using communication devices. They often have to neglect their personal wants and needs for the sake of the group.

Long-term perseverance in such an activity teaches singers loyalty and shows them that success requires much self-restraint and persistence.

**Social Skills and Emotional Intelligence**

Choral singers are constantly dependent on someone, be it themselves, other singers or the conductor. This results in intense interactions that enable the development of social skills. Communication between singers takes place on different levels. A sense of empathy enables members of a choir to help each other in a technical, musical and emotional sense. For example, a singer learns to be considerate towards other singers to such an extent that they are able to feel when their neighbour will run out of breath so they will be able to carry on with the phrase when their neighbour fails to do so.

Mutual tolerance, patience in relationships, accepting differences, accepting better and worse singers, experiencing success and failures, mutual trust, and performing in public are only some of the challenges encountered by choral singers. At the same time they must face their own feelings which arise as a reaction to the community they are a part of, understand them, evaluate them, know how to control them and essentially also express them. Singers hone their skills alongside each other and strengthen their positive self-image while asserting themselves within the group.

They enter a choir with different dispositions, expectations and reasons. Some are drawn by their love of singing, others because of company, and others again to spend quality free time. What they all have in common is the positive feeling about being within a group.

The sense of teamwork is a singer’s key virtue that can only develop as a consequence of understanding oneself as an individual as well as a part of a group. Individuals are very important within a choir, but only as much as they are capable of being an integral part of a group, adjust to it and nonetheless keep their own integrity.

**...and the Spiritual**

Every artist is a seeker. The ability to create a work of art is a gift an artist earns with hard work, but one cannot create a true masterpiece unless one allows oneself to be inspired. Music that speaks on its own and is its own artist is divine and God-sent.

Even though an artist may transform a piece of music into writing and save it from eternal oblivion, the creation is yet dead to the world. It is like a concealed talent just waiting to be shared so it can proliferate and grow in all its grandeur. For a piece of art to come alive you need a vulnerable artist to find in it something more than mere technical perfection. You need an artist who can wholeheartedly dive into it and at the moment of artistic creation touch upon eternity. Only then a piece of art rises above beautiful words and harmony of sounds – it becomes transcendental.

Singers, musicians with all their being focused on substance and matter forget about themselves. They become what they sing, they become one with the song, with other singers and the conductor. When they expand above technique they let their soul sing through the beauty of their face and serenity of their bodies. In that moment purely focused bodily and spiritual being makes way for an essence no earthly force is able to explain.

**"Where two or three are gathered in my name…"**

Such perfect harmony most often occurs in concerts or during liturgical singing when the public is also present in the same blessed time and space. When singers 'break the silence' and pour the serene spirit of community onto God their hearts beat and sound the same with the audience. They become one body and one spirit united in God from whom a piece of art springs and to whom it rightfully returns. It is only then that a work of art is realised in the fullness of its luminance and the essence of its voice is achieved. It is in this way that God communicates with humans through the language of music.

**Music is creative testimony.**

"Backstage we are getting in line for Bruckner’s *Te Deum*, our great and grand hope. Out of all the effort and love put into it, the best possible outcome must emerge! As Prof. Fojkar said during our joint rehearsals 1+1 is not 2, it is 10! We’re on! Before I realise it, I am standing in front of a packed hall and am trembling, but only for a moment. When the conductor Prof. Močnik raises his hand and the orchestra plays its first note, there is no one there any more, only Prof. Močnik, his hands, actually his whole body, and face. There are only beginnings, notes, articulation, dynamics. This is the present, the past and the future, as though we have always only been waiting for this moment! We did not take our eyes off the conductor’s hand or our scores, our attention was undivided. The energy that held us together and guided us is indescribably great, it must be experienced! It is something infinite, amazing, mighty and beautiful that touches you, cradles you and completely overcomes you ... The force of life! Music, singing, being one! It is hard to put all this into words but my experience was completely unforgettable! You are hit by a wave and you are no longer you, you are a note, a melody, a part of this infinite whole and perfection. So small and yet it is precisely your place, and the gratitude you feel for having found yourself is boundless. Everything flows so beautifully and all of a sudden you find yourself singing the last bar and you are as happy as can be, filled with an unknown grace and a little sorry that it is over. But you are happy that it happened and that there is all this energy in this final chord into which you place the last morsels of your soul and your strength. The final flourish of the conductor’s hand, silence in the hall and the tingling of the whole body and soul! Then Prof. Močnik raises his hands and thanks us. I feel like I could burst from so many wonderful feelings that words cannot describe! 1+1 is more than could ever be counted, measured or put into words! It is simply infinite. What can I say? Thank you? The applause broke out."[[7]](#footnote-7) (Blažka Bogataj, former pupil at the Diocesan Classical Secondary School in Ljubljana)

**Singing in a choir is a school for life.**

Music is the universal language of creation. It does not need an explanation or a translation since it speaks directly to us. Persons understand it no matter what religious, cultural or social background they come from, no matter how old they are, or how well read they are. Music affects a person on a physical level and at the same time directs thoughts and creates new connections in the brain. It sharpens one’s perception of oneself, another, and the surrounding world. It promotes acceptance and evaluation of one’s own feelings and emotions, and with it the loving attitude towards oneself and one another. It reaches into the depths of the soul and prepares it for the transcendental.

Being musically active improves work habits, teaches discipline and creative coexistence. It stimulates our zest for life and enables us to fully experience personal growth within a community. It allows the youngsters and the children to gain "... skills and knowledge that will be of help in various everyday situations ..." within a safe interest group and forms those "...attitudes and habits that are required for the responsible assumption of duties in life ..."[[8]](#footnote-8).

Musical education helps a child and a young person achieve a comprehensive emotional, cognitive, psychomotor, social and spiritual development. I dare say that systematic musical and singing education contributes substantially to the ethical and spiritual, and indirectly also the social and economic progress of a society. Can we make use of this realisation in Slovenia and elsewhere?

Translated from Slovenian by Marko **Petrovič** and Urban **Orehek**

1. Platon: *The Republic,* Book III [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tame, David (1984): *The secret power of Music*. New York: Destiny Books, p. 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Augustine: *Confessions* X, Kap. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tomatis, Alfred A. (2005): *The Ear and The Voice*. Scarecrow Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The article is available as a whole on [www.alenkarebula.com](http://www.alenkarebula.com). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jensen, Eric P. (2000): *Music with the Brain in Mind; The Brain store.* San Diego: Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Report for the 20th Anniversary of the Diocesan Classical Grammar School. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Čebulc, Mirjam (2009): *Glasbeno udejstvovanje ter koncentracija in dosežki učencev* (doctoral thesis), Ljubljana. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)