Integration of people with special needs – a key issue for our societies, and an inspiring challenge for opera and dance!

Creativity and artistic inspiration thrive upon diversity, and people with special needs are an important part of this diversity.
But how do we facilitate the access of people with different special needs to opera and dance?
What possibilities exist for working with people presenting specific needs? What education approaches and formats are there?
How can the world of arts make the most of this creative potential?

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for and with people with special needs
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WINDOWS ON THE MUSICAL MIND

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Adam Ockelford's musical life has led him to work as a composer, performer, teacher, and researcher. He has a particular interest in music for children with special needs, and in exploring how we all make intuitive sense of music. He is the author of 'In the Key of Genius: The Extraordinary Life of Derek Paravicini' (Hutchinson, 2007), and 'Music for Children and Young People with Complex Needs' (OUP, 2008).

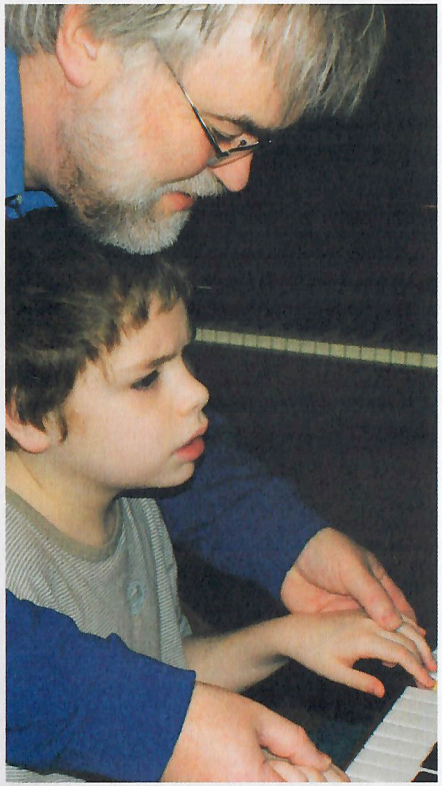
'Autism' is not one thing, but a spectrum of what are known as 'pervasive developmental disorders' that, from an early age, affect the way that people think, feel, and interact with the environment and others. Some people with autism function independently and engage freely in their choice of musical activities, whether as listeners, performers or composers. Others find the world a very confusing place: they may be unable to express themselves in words and find anything outside a familiar routine problematic. Relationships may be a particular source of anxiety. The capacity of people with autism to participate in musical activities may be unaffected, though, or even enhanced. This article considers some possible explanations for this, and their consequences.

Most young children engage with sound in three different ways: as speech, as music and as a feature of the environment. Some people with autism, though, seem to process many sounds, whatever their function, as music. This is because of the way the 'autistic mind' works, the prevalence of music in the environment, and the way that music is structured.

In terms of cognitive functioning, people with severe autism frequently show advanced auditory discrimination, including, in about 5% of cases, universal absolute pitch (around the same proportion as professional musicians). 'Absolute pitch' – sometimes called 'perfect pitch' – is the ability to recognise or reproduce notes in isolation from others. 'Universal absolute pitch' means that this ability applies not only in the context of music, but to everyday sounds as well. Hence, to a child with autism, a vacuum cleaner may suck up dirt in F sharp, for example, or a car travelling at 30 miles per hour may be in E flat. If the engine rises to E, then the driver will be breaking the speed limit! Very often, children with autism are captivated by pattern (repetition and regularity), but they find the way that verbal language works – through semantics and symbolism, whereby one thing (a burst of sound that forms a word) is associated with another (an object, a person, an action or a feeling) – very challenging.

'When playing the piano, Romy's eyes sparkle and she fizzes with musical energy and fun'. Romy's father

With regard to music, my own research shows that pieces of all styles are around 80% repetitive, and not just in relation to the well-known recurrence of motifs and themes. Every aspect of music – pitch, duration, dynamic and timbre – is infused with repetition. Unlike verbal language, whose words point beyond themselves to things in the 'real world', musical notes refer only to each other, and they do so time and time again: the meaning of music is in the repetitive, abstract patterns of the relationships that exist between them.



'Often, Freddie will just pretend to play the notes on the keyboard. He doesn't need to press them down, since he already knows exactly what each pitch sounds like in his head.' Adam Ockelford

Lastly, the environment. Music-psychological research shows that young children are exposed to music or sounds organised in a musical way about 80% of the time, whose source may be toys, computers, ring-tones, the television, radio or even (from time to time) other human-beings! It should be no surprise, then, that the pattern-loving autistic mind, striving to make sense of the world, attracted to sound, confused by language and surrounded by music, latches on to this irresistible source of order and predictability.

As well as through their enjoyment of music, the musicality of people with autism may be apparent reactively, through the qualities of sounds being more important than their function (for instance, the musical 'ting' of a glass vase that is flicked may be more important than its capacity to hold flowers), or an obsession with listening to certain patterns of sound over and over again (for example, by playing a fragment of recorded noise, speech or music repeatedly – in effect making sounds into musical patterns through repetition, or reinforcing pre-existing musical

structures). Or the musicality of a person with autism may be evident through their proactive reproduction of sounds as though they were music: using everyday objects to make musical notes and perhaps organising them by the sound they make (for instance, lining up a series of wine glasses according to their pitch). Severely autistic people may repeat vocal patterns insistently and even organise words using the principles of musical syntax – by repeating them, through so-called 'echolalia'. They may sing precisely in tune, maybe copying the qualities of other people's voices rather literally, and often repetitively (perhaps on account of 'ear-worms' – tunes that circle round and round in the head). And they may try to reproduce musical (and non-musical) sounds on any instruments that are at hand, sometimes learning to play by ear.

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Although often regarded as the province of music therapy, there is no reason why a wide range of musicians should not work successfully with severely autistic people. Being empathetic and interactive is the key.

- First, open your ears to the possibility that all sound can be heard as music; listen out for patterns and learn to relish repetition!
- Second, interact through music as though it were language: imitate what the person with autism does, exactly at first, and then make changes; give him or her the sense that they are influencing you; offer fascinating musical fragments to copy; enter into dialogues in sound; improvise simultaneously.
- Third, support people in developing the technique they need to produce whatever they can hear in their heads on instruments or through singing: model the necessary movements for them; encourage them to attend to what you do by looking, listening and feeling; offer physical guidance.