
Music Together: The Joy of Family Music

An Interview with Kenneth K. Guilmartin and Lili M. Levinowitz

conducted by Pam Donkin

In 2002, I went to a Music Together class at the urging of a CMN friend. I was amazed and enthralled with the way the class flowed and how much fun both adults and children were having. Later that year, I took the Music Together training and started interning in a Music Together class. I began teaching classes at a center in Burlingame, California. Soon after, I opened my own licensed center. I love it. I've been so impressed with the method and the organization's extensive research into how very young children learn music that I want to share it with the CMN membership.

Music Together, first offered to the public in 1987, pioneered a program built around the concept of a research-based, developmentally appropriate early childhood music curriculum that strongly emphasizes and facilitates adult involvement. It is taught in nearly all of the fifty states and many foreign countries, reaching thousands of families. Music Together LLC trains the teachers and also licenses trained individuals to open their own centers. I have found it to be a rich and flexible program, applicable to parent-child, preschool, and intergenerational classes, as well as music therapy.

In the parent-child program, a minimum of six and maximum of twelve children and their parents or caregivers (nanny, babysitter, grandparent) meet weekly for forty-five minutes to experience new songs, chants, movement activities, and instrumental jam sessions. In preschools, classroom teachers are in the primary caregiver role, with parents or other grown-ups participating when available. Both

children and adults participate in the circle, led by the Music Together teacher, who helps adults understand how to participate—regardless of musical ability—and to realize that the most important thing is to relax and enjoy the activities with their children. The musical fun and growth continue at home with the CDs, songbooks, and parent education materials provided to each family.

In June 2005, I had an opportunity to interview Music Together Director Ken Guilmartin, its founder, and Lili Levinowitz, PhD, Director of Research. They are also the co-authors of the Music Together curriculum.

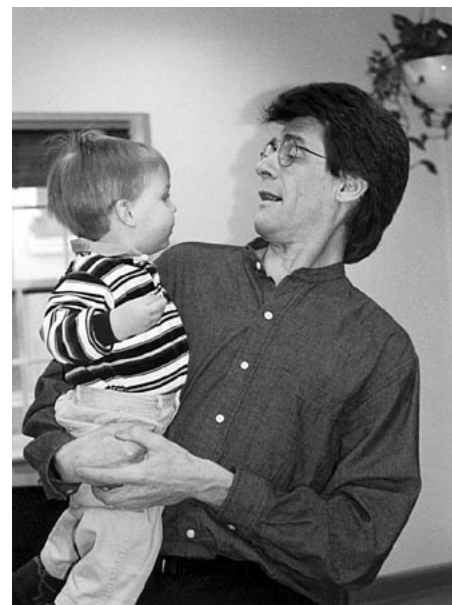
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PIO!: *Knowing how important Music Together considers the modeling parents provide for children, I'd like to start by asking who did music with you when you were a child?*

Lili: My grandmother. My paternal grandmother and then my father did a lot of singing. My mother was, according to my father, officially tone deaf, but singing was just something we did at home at family birthday parties. My Aunt Jenny, who is my grandmother's sister, would sit down at the piano and the whole family would gather around the piano. We'd sing old World War I and World War II songs. That was just what we did for leisure stuff when we were growing up.

PIO!: *Ken, who did music with you?*

Ken: A good question, because what I learned in creating Music Together really helped me understand what had happened back then and what hadn't. My mother was pretty much a non-singer; in fact, she



Ken (right) and a Music Together member

used to say, "I hate singing." This was because when my mother was little, her mother—my grandmother—used to go around singing in an operatic voice, especially when she was nervous or tense or when she was trying to make everybody happy. She thought the solution was to sing to everybody, so she would sing, "Oh yes, and now we're having a wonderful time." My mother didn't like that, and I'm not sure I liked it, either, but she liked to dance and she liked jazz. What I got was a very strong model of rhythm development—a good support for my rhythm development and not very good support for my tonal development. On the other hand, my grandmother, with whom I spent a lot of time, was very related to classical music, played piano very well, read music very well. So I had a model from her piano playing. I used to be amazed at how her fingers ran over the keyboard.

It's not that surprising that by the time I was a twelve-year-old I was

playing piano and was fascinated with jazz, and was a good dancer, but couldn't sing a note. It all fits right in with my upbringing. And that's the way I think it is for most kids: what is modeled is what you get. I think I was born with a higher natural rhythm aptitude. I'm a kinesthetic type, so that probably was my stronger side, anyway; but in addition to having a lower tonal aptitude, I had some very poor tonal modeling. I had some health issues, too, including a traumatic tonsillectomy, and by the time I was in kindergarten I was the one given the palm tree role at the school pageant—you know, "Just hold the palm tree and mouth the words."

PIO!: *Somebody said that to you?*

Ken: Oh yes, I experienced that firsthand. At the time it didn't bother me, particularly, but I remember later on when I was about eight or so wanting to learn guitar. My stepfather tried to teach his vocal mnemonic for tuning the ukulele. "My dog has fleas." So he sang it, but I couldn't do it, and he said "Was-samatter—you tone deaf?" That hurt. I really wanted to play the guitar and the ukulele, but for the first time I felt like something was wrong with me.

PIO!: *It's amazing how much power those words can have.*

Ken: I certainly decided that I hated singing after that, too! But I loved listening to Elvis Presley or Bill Haley and the Comets or all those people that I listened to on the radio. My favorite music turned out to be jazz, until the Beatles came along, and blues. By the time I was in college I was in a blues band like everybody else in the late sixties.

PIO!: *Were you singing at that point?*

Ken: No!

PIO!: *Oh, you still weren't?*

Ken: No. It was frustrating. I wished I could. No, I was a keyboard player.



Lili (right) with Music Together families

PIO!: *But do you feel comfortable singing now?*

Ken: I do. It was a long path. After I graduated from college in English literature and was working in theater, I got promoted to my level of incompetence very quickly and was a musical director off-Broadway. I was orchestrating and having to teach famous actors how to sing, and I felt like I didn't know what I was doing. I started going to the Manhattan School of Music to get more of a conservatory background, and I found myself flunking sight-singing. I couldn't do it. So they sent me to a voice teacher. That's when the reclamation of my singing began. I was in my mid- to late twenties.

And it's still going on. That's something Lili and I have enjoyed collaborating about because I've had a history of feeling inept, tonally, that I've had to remediate and overcome, and she's felt the same way about rhythm. She's strong on the tonal side and not so strong on the rhythm side. We not only complemented each other, but we can understand how people feel on both sides of that issue.

PIO!: *How did you two meet?*

Lili: I met Ken when I was a PhD student at Temple. He was, at the time, working for the Birch Tree Group. He was hired to develop programs and services that would serve families and very young children and that would perhaps complement or be an alternative to the Suzuki Method, which Birch Tree published for the world outside Japan. So he was basically finding out who was doing early childhood music stuff. At the time there really wasn't a lot going on. Kindermusik only had programs for four- through seven-year-olds; and at Temple, I was directing the first program, at least on the East Coast, for children under the age of three. So that was how he met me. There were a number of things that he and I saw eye-to-eye on that I didn't with my professor, who was actually the head of this program I was running. We just had some great opportunities to talk, and the rest is history.

When the university position came up for me, I really thought it was suitable for the both of us, and his business, to have the university associated. If there was the

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possibility to get research grants we could do it that way, because I leave something to be desired as a businesswoman.

PIO!: *So it's nice to collaborate with someone who's good at that! The university position you refer to: I understand you are a professor of music education at Rowan University of New Jersey. How long have you been there?*

Lili: I just finished my sixteenth year.

PIO!: *Ken, since Lili mentioned that you met while you were working for the Birch Tree group, and I know that's related to the fact that your family has a history with the very well-known song "Happy Birthday," can you tell us about that and then about Birch Tree?*

Ken: Well, the wonderful thing about that story is that "Happy Birthday" was created by early childhood people.

PIO!: *Isn't that neat!*

Ken: Yes, because it's come full circle. It was composed by two sisters from Kentucky: Mildred Hill, who was a piano player and an early childhood teacher, and Patty Smith Hill, who became, I think, the first woman PhD at Columbia Teachers College and entered early childhood music. The song was originally called "Good Morning to All."

Good Morning to All.

Good Morning to All.

Good Morning, dear children,

Good Morning to All.

And then like any good preschool/nursery school teacher, of course you adapt it. So this became "Happy Birthday." She taught all of her students to go and use it. And they did. The sisters took their song to the Clayton F. Summy Company in Chicago to be published. My grandfather, who was an accountant in the publishing field and who also played the violin, bought the company, which eventually became

Summy-Birchard and then Birch Tree Group. My uncle took over that company in the fifties. He signed Frances Clark and Suzuki, so that's how they got into early childhood—and that's why he and I started talking a lot about young children and music. By then I had become certified in Dalcroze.

That's my music education background—I worked with Robert Abramson at Manhattan School of Music for a number of years and became certified in Dalroze. So I became a consultant for my uncle in early childhood and also movement education. It was very much a part-time thing for a while, but we began to have a dialogue about young children and music. He was really very interested. I was like their R & D department and was able to go to conferences like the International Society of Music Education in Portland back in the eighties and see what they were saying about young children and music. According to my uncle, this was paid for by royalties from "Happy Birthday." I just think it's neat that it circles right back to early childhood.

PIO!: *I think it's important to explain what Music Together is to those who might not know.*

Ken: Well, it's right in the name—the most important thing is that it's child and grown-up *together*. It's based on knowing how children develop and learn the most important things in their lives, such as language and social behavior. They learn from their primary caregivers—parents and anyone else in the extended family who provides regular, substantial care, including professional child care workers and teachers birth through kindergarten. If you want your child to be a reader, well, read. Everybody understands that. Likewise, if you want your son to be musical, you've got to be musical—and that thought actually scares people. Increasingly, in our culture, people

don't feel like they're musical unless they're experts. Certainly the members of CMN do, but by and large most of the families out there don't. With the incredible presence of recorded media, we don't have to *make* music in order to have it anymore, we can just turn it on.

PIO!: *It's easier to just be music consumers, rather than music makers.*

Ken: That's right. That could be OK for us if we already know how to sing or play a little piano. But it's an educational tragedy, really, an educational disaster, musically speaking, for one's children, if you just sit on the couch and consume music. They need the model of your musical *doing* in order to get the disposition to be a music maker. And then they'll work it out on their own—they'll teach themselves just like they do their language. So the program and its structure all comes from the "Together." The classroom materials—the recording and the songbook—go home with the families because we want to support their music making in a nonformal way in their daily lives.

Lili: What we mean by nonformal is that we're just coming together to sing and we have a method behind our madness. That is, we know from the research base that children should be singing songs in multiple tonalities and meters.

Ken: If children grow up hearing only major tonality, it's like hearing their language in only the present tense.

Lili: The benefit is that children have the opportunity to develop the competence when the window for learning is fully open. It should probably be somewhere between birth and three that they break the code for the music from their culture. They also benefit from having a large number of songs to sing because they can use those just about any time during their day.

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Rhythmic exploration

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There is some crossover to some other things besides music—pre-literacy, those kinds of things.

Parents are definitely benefiting. The average North American family (this is not our research: it is out of the University of Toronto, done by Sandra Trehub) knows three to five songs to sing to their children. You come to Music Together once, you learn five times the number of songs that most persons would know, and if you continue, you are learning a lot of songs. It's like the literacy base for books. The more books you read, oftentimes, the deeper and the better reader you become. Similarly, the benefit here is that the more songs and movement activities you do, the better the voice and the body are able to sing in tune and move in rhythm.

PIO!: *Lili, you mentioned the code of music of the culture. What do you mean by that?*

Lili: Well, we are not born being able to sing in tune or move in

rhythm, just like we are not born speaking our language. But we are born with the qualitative processes in our brain to do that. In order to figure out the language or to figure out music, you have to be exposed to it, and it's through a spiral of exposure and opportunities to experiment that we figure out how to talk or we figure out how to sing in tune or move in rhythm. We teach ourselves. This is something that can't be taught by a teacher. I think that's the magic of Music Together. We try, in a way that's developmentally appropriate both to the child and to the adult, to bring out the kinds of activities that will foster this basic organic growth, and help develop this ability to break the code for the music of the culture. So that's what I mean—it's simply an organic process. Just like you have to figure out English: nobody really teaches you. You are just exposed and then it develops.

Ken: And, once a week in class is not enough. So we try to generate informal music activities at home.

We have CDs that people like listening to and can sing along with. Then they find themselves singing on their own.

PIO!: *So they do that at home, and then when they come into the Music Together class, they're singing it and participating.*

Ken: Right. The class is like the download point. That's the catalyst for what goes on at home that is supported by the material.

PIO!: *You both mentioned basic music competence. What exactly is that?*

Ken: Being able to sing in tune and with accurate rhythm. In more technical terms it means that you can audiate—hear in your mind—tonality, and you can audiate and perform meter: physically keep the beat at the right tempo and vocalize patterns correctly. If you have basic music competence, you are speaking the language of music in a way that makes sense to other people both tonally and rhythmically. If you don't, then you're not communicating the sense of the "language"—you're still in the babble stage.

PIO!: *When I came into my first Music Together class, I had spent twenty-plus years in schools as a children's musician presenting assemblies, teacher workshops, and artist residencies, and directing elementary and preschool children's choruses. Even with this experience, I was blown away by the class because of the way the songs were presented and the tonal and rhythm patterns that were part of the class. Can you tell us the reasons behind tonal and rhythm development using tonal and rhythm patterns?*

Lili: Let me give you the microchip version: that tonal development, as well as rhythm development, has sort of a linear look to it so that, just like physical development, there's the combination of things that grow based on maturation and based on exposure and experimentation, so that you could almost track it. Just like you could track the steps in learning to walk. I think the important thing about that is recognizing what tonal development or rhythm

development is: then we have a better opportunity to make choices for our children without pushing them into some place where they may not be successful.

Ken: Edwin Gordon had a whole taxonomy or structured way of teaching tonal patterns to elementary school children. The taxonomy is actually a classification of easy, moderate, and difficult ones and different ways to use them in order to develop rhythm and tonal audiation. For younger children, Gordon was just offering the patterns as another experience rather than in an organized way. We thought that sounded like a good idea, but we wanted to make sure the children were interested, and we thought a lot about how the patterns would be presented. We found out that whether they are rhythmically or tonally oriented, they are often one of the first things that children perform or do. We experimented with actually putting them on the recordings and found that many children really liked them. They would zero in on them and it was one of the first things they would imitate. And having them on the recordings gets parents doing them.

PIO!: And they are the basis of some of the music education that the children are getting in the class. They are like the building blocks.

Ken: They are the building blocks of music. You've got rhythm and pitch. Put them together and you've got melodies and harmony.

PIO!: Just having those broken down...

Ken: By separating them, you can focus on one element at a time. If you are stronger tonally, it's something you enjoy doing; then the rhythm patterns, which maybe you're not so strong on, give you a chance to focus on just the rhythm without the added element of the tonality. It's a way of focusing in, but it's done informally. The grown-ups sing them back in class but the children don't have to. It's an

element of music education, but the basis of the music education is still the modeling of the grown-ups. That's the key idea that is so hard for people, especially if you have any kind of typical music education background where you're basically thinking about a music lesson. This education happens just by modeling and the immersion in the experience.

PIO!: The immersion is the key.

Ken: Children really teach themselves how to do it through their play.

PIO!: Some of the Music Together songs use vocables instead of words—sounds like doo and doodle. What is the purpose in using songs without words?

Lili: What my research, and other people's as well, has shown is that children will sing the melody—the melodic aspects of the song—more nearly in tune or more accurately if they have no words to sing. However, one of the problems with songs without words is that they're less readily accessible—that is, children can't mentally retrieve them as quickly. So in our curriculum about two-thirds of the material is songs or chants with words and about one-third is without. What we are trying to do is simply create a buffet of nutrient "ear foods" rather than necessarily trying to monopolize or make the environment perfect.

PIO!: In the training to be a registered Music Together teacher I noticed a difference in how songs were presented in Music Together versus usual classroom music methods where we might sing a line and have the class sing it back, or we might talk about what we're going to do with the song before we start. In a Music Together class the music flows from one song to the next with little or no talking, and the teacher has a different method of presenting the songs.

Ken: That came from really understanding how young children learn and understanding what developmentally appropriate practice is, in order to help them learn.

Music Together looks and feels so different because it's really not out of the music education tradition, which in our culture is completely commandeered—taken over—by the idea of the music lesson. When people think of learning music, they think of the lesson. In learning to talk they don't think of lessons: they think of little kids not making intelligible sounds and then one day they do. Somehow they learn it, somehow they pick it up.

PIO!: Another difference between Music Together and other programs is that classes are, primarily, mixed-age for children ages birth to five, rather than breaking them up into different classes, say, birth to one, age 2 and 3, and so on.

Lili: That is, for me, the most powerful model, because what we are trying to do is present it in an organic family manner. In a family, everybody would be doing things together, most likely, until they get a little older, and then they start separating out. What happens in that situation where we have mixed ages is that the older children have a chance to actually model for the younger children; and the younger children, then, of course, not only have their adult models, but they have the older children as models, so that the learning is more powerful overall.

The other reason we do it this way is because it tends to bring down parents' expectations of what a child should do. When parents have expectations, they tend to be sort of comparative: "Oh look at that little girl across the room—she's doing that." And when you're full of mixed ages, and not the same linear age group, there's less of a chance for that type of comparative behavior by the parents.

Occasionally what ends up happening is that parents get frustrated when it seems that their children aren't participating; and usually

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the first thing you say is, “Well, watch for something at home.” Because I had one of those kids. I’d take him to Music Together class with another teacher and he wouldn’t do anything. It really is very annoying. I know exactly how these mothers feel: you have this real urge to strangle them. Then you put them in the car and out comes all of these bits and pieces of songs, or you hear bits and pieces of the class while they’re in the bathtub, and you’re thinking, “Well, how did this happen, because you weren’t participating, you weren’t paying attention!” But heck, they absorb it, anyway.

PIO!: *It’s wonderful to see not only the children but the parents having fun!*

Ken: Exactly. Well, you have to make sure the parents have fun because remember, they’re the model. They’re going to start your class not sure that they even want to be there. “You want me to sing? I can’t sing. You do that.” So you’d better find a way to help them have fun making music: otherwise, you won’t be utilizing the power of modeling that they provide you. They are your best ally—they’re the child’s true teacher. I once wrote an article called “The Parent Is the Real Student.” We know from the research that it’s only from primary caregivers that children get the disposition to have a certain life habit or tendency.

PIO!: *What do you see as the main objective of Music Together?*

Lili: To support the growth of basic music competence in young children, and to return the singing to the community. Doing this supports the basic needs of competence through the singing and the community.

PIO!: *Interesting; one of CMN’s goals is community building.*

Lili: I think we’re building com-

munity a lot, because we’re working with a lot of people all over the world, and we’re all singing the same songs pretty much at the same time. It isn’t uncommon for you to walk somewhere or go to a different city and hear your song—I know it’s happened to me a couple of times. It’s been neat. So that’s one of the ways.

Building community means we’re doing that in small ways in each class, but then many of the centers build community in a larger way by offering events, maybe once every ten weeks or twice a year or something like that, where many of the Music Together families are coming together in a larger group. And we’ve even had a couple of alumni parties. My son, who’s eighteen, came to one as part of the first Music Together crew. I think singing actually breaks down a lot of barriers—it’s not a very safe thing to do if you’re in front of a bunch of people you don’t know. But once we start singing together, we get to know each other better just because of the risk we’re taking to sing.

Ken: As I understand the Children’s Music Network, it’s in the folk tradition “Let’s all sing together,” has Pied Pipers of that tradition, and many members are catalysts—they start things up. That can really help, to have a live performance people can come and watch. And if there’s participation, it’s even better. But what we try to do is have a download point, a catalyst time, which is the class. It’s not a performance because your job is to get everyone *else* to participate. Your job is to sing less. You have to make sure that if they feel that they’re not going to be able to sing as well or do the moves as well as you, they’re not going to feel bad about that. You inspire them to try, to do the best they can and enjoy it. It takes a few semesters for many parents to get there. One of the ways we get that result, of drawing adults in, is to have a really good mix of styles and genres—unique

arrangements of traditional songs as well as original ones—that is very rich in tonalities and meters. Our great strength is that we don’t do kiddie music: we do music.

PIO!: *I notice that there is at least one song in a minor key.*

Ken: There are usually six to eight nonmajor tonalities in each collection.

PIO!: *There are songs in unusual meters. All of that is very interesting to present and also to participate in, in a class.*

Ken: The goal is basic music competence for children. Once they have that, then they can make choices. They can take lessons if they want, or they can participate and be able to sing along in third grade school music.

Every child can achieve basic music competence, just like every child learns to talk. Then there are all these wonderful other things that happen because music is good for you in lots of ways. One of the wonderful things it does is build community. It’s not much of a jump from there to World Peace, as we all know [laughs]—but let’s get some basic music competence out there first. You and I know how powerful that can be. 