



Strengthening the Mother-Child Relationship Through Music

Interview with Andrea Apostoli: President of AIGAM (Italian Gordon Association for Music Learning)

Edited by Angela Barker, *Perspectives* Editor

Andrea, thank you for granting us this interview to talk about your prenatal music program in Italy. If you would, tell us about your musical background and the Italian Gordon Association for Music Learning (AIGAM).

My musical background began with classical training in flute at the Roma Conservatory, where I received what is comparable to a master's degree in your system. I took a second degree, comparable to a Ph.D., at the Italian Flute Academy with Raymond Guyot, the principal flautist for the Opera de Paris Orchestra. Also, I really enjoyed jazz and improvisation, so I studied with Fred Sturm, Director of Jazz and Improvisational Music at the Lawrence University Conservatory of Music in Appleton, Wisconsin. I attended his workshop, "All Ears," several times and eventually invited him to teach the workshops in Italy for AIGAM.

I consider Edwin E. Gordon to be the most important and inspiring person in my musical growth. Since meeting him in 1998, Dr. Gordon's Music Learning Theory and his incomparable role as a teacher and mentor has contributed more to my musical life than what I had before. In short, I could say that he helped me develop the most important musical instrument: the internal one called audiation.

In 2000, after completing the GIML Master-ship certifications in early childhood and elementary general music, I was encouraged by Dr. Gordon to establish the *Associazione Italiana Gordon per l'Apprendimento Musicale* (AIGAM). Today, AIGAM is well known in Italy for its work in promoting the musical development of children, parents, and teachers. Since 2004, AIGAM has collaborated on projects with Santa Cecilia National Academy in Rome, with La Scala Theater in Milan, and several other music conservatories and universities in Italy and abroad.



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What inspired you to begin offering music and movement activities to expectant women and their unborn children?

I had just returned to Italy after spending my second summer in the United States attending the GIML Masterships and was approached by Dr. Ketty Leonardi, a gynecologist and homeopath in Rome. She was a strong believer in the importance and effectiveness of the early childhood music courses I was teaching in Rome, and asked if I might be willing to offer some type of music experience to the pregnant women attending her prenatal course. My answer was an enthusiastic "yes!" I started working with pregnant women in 1999, guiding them in group singing and movement

Andrea Apostoli is President of AIGAM: the Italian Gordon Association for Music Learning. He maintains an active schedule as author, educator, and musician for AIGAM and offers courses and seminars for music teachers at Valle d'Aosta University, Pescara Conservatory of Music, and Perugia Conservatory of Music. He collaborates intensively with Santa Cecilia National Academy as a musician and as leader of concerts for pregnant women, children, and adults. Mr. Apostoli is founder of AIGAM and the Gordon Ensemble. He has recently published *What Great Music! For ages 0 to 6 - Classical selections to hear and see: Based on the Music Learning Theory of Edwin E. Gordon*. The CD and book (available from GIA Publications, Inc.) are designed for prenatal and early childhood listening experiences.

activities in courses that prepared them for childbirth. That simple beginning was a rich opportunity for first-hand observation, and led to a seven-year process of study. My work in that course became something wider when in 2003, the Ministry of Family and Children of Rome financed the AIGAM project: "Music, Sound and Voice in the Mother-Child Relationship" and then when in 2004, in collaboration with Santa Cecilia National Academy, we began to hold special concerts for expectant parents.

Could you tell us more about the concerts that you hold for expectant parents?

In 2004 I proposed to Gregorio Mazzaresse, director of the Educational Department of the Santa Cecilia National Academy in Rome, to realize special concerts for expecting couples and for children 0 – 24 months, 24 -36 months, and 3 - 6 years; all based on Gordon's MLT. Since that year, under my conducting and in collaboration with AIGAM, the Santa Cecilia National Academy offers the concerts at the Roma Parco della Musica Auditorium and at other theaters or musical institutions in Italy and abroad.

The concerts for expecting couples take place in a concert hall without chairs and with a big carpet where the couples sit or lie down. Around them, are placed musicians playing: piano, violin, cello, flute, drums, solo voice and a voice quartet called Gordon Ensemble made up of AIGAM

Associated teachers. I play the flute, sing in the Gordon Ensemble, and conduct the singing, moving and rhythmic activities that involve the expecting couples. You would expect me to say I am tired after a concert like that, but, instead, I have to say that I feel really regenerated as any time I work with pregnant women.

I choose the music with a lot of care to offer a kind of journey through the emotional issues that the expectant parents typically feel during the nine months of pregnancy. I talk briefly to the parents at the beginning of the concert, explaining how their children can perceive what we will play and sing, asking for no clapping and for being just comfortable in listening what we will play for them and inviting them to participate in a few activities I will propose to them during the concerts.

We play music from different composers such as Bach, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, Mozart, Schubert, Shostakovich, Arvo Pärt, etc. and we sing melodies without words (these are usually sung during the early childhood AIGAM courses) arranged for four voices. In 2004, Dr. Gordon and I published a book with the Italian publisher Curci that contained a wide collection of melodies without words, and we often use some of those.

I am very glad and proud of these concerts. In fact, since we started, we've received a lot of attention from the media through newspapers, articles, and television programs.

[Editor's Note: A video of one of these concerts for expectant couples can be viewed on the online version of this article at www.ecmma.org.]

In your opinion, why is prenatal musical stimulation important? When should it begin?

I think that we should look at childbirth as a bridge. We tend to split the life of a human being into different parts. We talk about infants, toddlers, children, teens, and so on. We often say "the child," instead I think we should say, "the person in her early years." We should remember that life is a continuum and consider, as research shows us, that during the last months of pregnancy, the fetus' behavior is very similar to behavior during the first months of life.

Three-dimensional ultrasound images show that a child plays in the womb, take her finger to the mouth, and reacts to the sounds. Studies have shown that, in the last months of pregnancy, twins already exhibit differences in their behavior, where one is more exploratory and active in movement than the other. Researchers have discovered that children, only a few hours old, are able to recognize the sound of their language by reacting to it in a stronger way than when they listen to someone speak another language.

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This evidence leads us to believe that language absorption starts before childbirth.

The Gordon Music Learning Theory is based on the assumption that music learning proceeds the same way as the language learning. However, the use of language learning as an analogy for music learning is not meant to suggest that music is a language. Rather, the relationship between the two relates only to the fact that the processes for learning music and language have much in common.

In addition, we can say that musical acculturation starts *in utero*. The fetus' first awareness of sound occurs through receptors in the skin as amniotic fluid begins to vibrate. Research shows that Pacini's receptors (those cells that alert us when something has touched us) react in the same way, whether stimulated by sound waves or by actual physical pressure on the skin. While the ear is not anatomically mature until the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy, the fetus begins to perceive sounds with its ears as early as the twentieth week. Through research and direct observations, the newborn babies have been known to recognize musical phrases that were heard as early as the seventh month of prenatal life.

All of this, taken together with what we know about the synaptic connections made in the fetal brain during the last months of pregnancy, makes it extremely plausible to talk of music acculturation beginning at this stage of fetal development. While leading classes for pregnant women, I have been able to observe how pre-born babies often behave very similarly to newborns and older infants when hearing songs and chants without words. The stillness of the body during the singing of a song or a chant is frequently followed by movements of the fetus, after the music stops. The new mothers express cries of surprise as they feel small kicks and sometimes even good solid leaps or punches, some of which are visible from the outside of their stomachs.

Tell us more about your prenatal music program: the goals of the classes and types of activities that you do in the classes.

The program is called *Music, Sound and Voice in the Prenatal Relationship*. Primarily we work with pregnant women in the ambit of childbirth preparation courses, where women usually get breathing and movement exercises and

prenatal music classes from midwives and psychologists. The women come once a week, usually around the fifth month of pregnancy, and stay until childbirth.

I would like to make it clear that I do not look at our prenatal music classes as exclusively addressing the (un-born) children to acculturate them musically, or exclusively for mothers to help them understand the importance of music through their relationship with their children.

Psychologists refer to the mother-child relationship during pregnancy and first months of life as a dyad: the mother and child are in a symbiotic relationship and we cannot consider one apart from the other.

The prenatal classes have different goals, which we accomplish through different activities. We start with an early form of music acculturation for the child. We want to make the music an important instrument of communication and relationship for the mother and child. We want to help the mother be in touch with her child throughout its prenatal

life. Finally, we work on the mothers' breathing and body awareness through singing activities.

To establish an early form of music acculturation for the child, we ask the women to sing brief songs and chants without words, the same technique we use for our early childhood courses. Acculturation, the first type of preparatory audiation, is fundamental to the other two types: imitation and assimilation.

The women sing as a group with simple accompaniments. According to the principles of Gordon's Music Learning Theory, we sing songs and chants that are brief, varied, complex, and repeated. We give the most importance to silences, asking the women not to talk after we sing a song. During the last months of pregnancy, it is interesting to notice how the children *in utero* react and respond to the music sung by their mothers; often, they are still during singing then engage in active motor responses during periods of silence.

To make the music an important instrument of communication and relationship with the child, we explain to mothers the value of giving their children early exposure to musical syntax. We let them imagine how they will sing to their children after childbirth, and we teach them lullabies and brief songs to sing.

To give pregnant women the opportunity to be in touch with their children during prenatal life, we emphasize



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to them that the children are listening to us while we sing. Using special techniques with the diapason, we demonstrate to them how their body is a resonant instrument and how the bones transmit the sound vibrations within their bodies. We also guide them in singing and moving activities that encourage them to identify with their child through empathy feelings. We do all of this singing and moving in the room.

It is very important to work on breathing and body awareness through singing activities. Some years ago, childbirth preparation courses used autogenic training techniques or other relaxations exercises. Lately it is understood that childbirth is an active experience and that training the woman to gain deep relaxation statuses was not at all a good idea.

Obstetricians observed that women who have a good relationship with their body—those who were doing Yoga, Feldenkrais, or other body awareness activities—on average, seemed to face the childbirth experience in a better way. In this sense, our singing activities and continuous flow movement offer a perfect opportunity to work on breathing, body weight, grounding, etc. Overall, we teach the women a dirge to sing during the labor. It is proven that the action of singing frees endorphins in the body and has an analgesic effect, sustained also by the continuous breathing activity that occurs during singing. Furthermore, the act of singing is close symbolically to the act giving birth to a child: the woman is releasing something very important and intimate. In both cases, neither tension nor

deep relaxation helps at all, but the right muscular tone does.

Who teaches the prenatal classes and what kind of training do they receive?

The Italian Gordon Association for Music Learning, being the only Italian association officially recognized by Dr. Gordon to teach Music Learning Theory, trains music teachers who become AIGAM-Associated Teachers. Ninety-four Associated Teachers teach a variety of courses in 81 cities throughout Italy. To be part of this group, a music teacher has to attend our 200-hour national training course on early childhood music. The course requires that teachers successfully complete practical training, pass a selective test, and then participate in two specialization workshops and two group supervisions every year, where a supervisor looks at their work through videos. After completing the early childhood training, AIGAM offers Associated Teachers opportunities to train in other areas, which include: *Elementary General Music*, *Music Moves for Piano*, *Jump Right-In Instrumental*, and *Music, Sound and Voice in the Prenatal Relationship*. Each course lasts 46 hours and includes both theoretical and practical applications.

What suggestions do you have for expectant parents who want to provide appropriate musical stimulation for their unborn child but don't have access to prenatal music classes? What can they do to help foster their child's musical development before birth?

You can read many articles that suggest parents should listen to the music of Mozart or some other composer during pregnancy. I never believed in this kind of suggestion and I think studies claiming to prove that listening to a specific music can have particular benefits to child intelligence and so on are not so reliable.

We know that the process of learning takes place within an affective relationship. A particular experience or stimulus given only because "experts" suggest it, apart from the pleasure and the meaning that listening to music should generate, is something not to suggest. I want to say that if a mother feels Mozart's music is boring then that feeling will become relevant in her relationship with the child before and after birth, more than the music itself.

My suggestion is to listen to music during pregnancy and sing. The music should be chosen based on what music learning research has shown us. It is important to listen to a variety of music, possibly with complex music syntax. If the mother does not have the access to classical, jazz, popular, or ethnic music with a certain grade of complexity and richness, she can ask friends who love that kind of music. 🌸



As a busy music therapist, I was playing guitar and singing 20-plus hours a week during my pregnancy. From the seventh month, my son was very active during music sessions. By the eighth month, he was kicking the guitar from one side of my tummy to the other and creating quite a visual component to the music therapy sessions. After he was born, these same songs, his built in personal soundtrack, were soothing to him because of their familiarity in comparison to other songs. —Laura Pope, North Carolina

I was teaching *Kindermusik* classes when I was pregnant with my second child. I noticed that while I was teaching, he was very still; but in times of stillness, when I would allow the children to respond, he would respond as well with movement activity! —Jennifer S. McDonel, Buffalo, NY