

THE ADVANCED MONTESSORI METHOD.¹

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EVERYTHING that Dr. Maria Montessori writes has an interest for the educationist, whether he agrees with it or not. Perhaps the things with which we do not feel in agreement are the most profitable, because they compel us to ask ourselves why we do not agree, and this again compels us to examine our own psychology and hers, to discover whether our disagreement is founded on mere feeling or on knowledge, and whether her insight is greater or less than our own.

The chief interest (for *Herald* readers) in the Advanced Method is the appearance for the first time of a definite scheme of musical education. The Dottoressa is not a musician. Music does not seem to have any place in her intellectual make-up, so she would not be likely to understand the young child's need of it. At any rate, *song* had no place in the education of the *Children's Houses*, where the method started and the little ones passed the years from three to seven. Perhaps one reason for this was that imitation was never to enter into any of the exercises in a Montessori school—imitation of the teacher being expressly forbidden—and it would be difficult to teach singing without it. Everything must be the spontaneous manifestation of the various activities. The children were under the microscope, and the work of the directress was to observe what the creatures did and how they developed.

The records of some of these developments are very interesting. For instance, the child is not *taught* to write; but through some of the Didactic Material he acquires certain elementary movements necessary to the act of writing. Alongside this manual preparation he is being taught to read, i.e., he

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learns the powers of the letters and how to combine some of these sounds, e.g., *ma-ma*. Having done so much, the directress ceases to direct, and one day the child *explodes* into actual writing. Naturally, the children burst into reading in the same way.

Now all this is good and educational—providing the elements and letting the mind 'put two and two together.' Did it suggest any corresponding process in music? Apparently not.

The Children's House was not altogether musicless, though the little ones did not sing; for they marched to music. The rhythmic sense is appealed to in this way, but although melody must also be a part of all such musical experiences, no explosion into song is recorded. It was in connection with the training of the sense of hearing—contrasting silence and noise and discriminating between mere *noise* and *sound*—that it occurred to Mme. Montessori and her assistant, Miss Maccheroni, that the training they were giving ought to proceed to the discrimination of musical sounds. A system of musical education was at once devised, and Didactic Material invented for it, an apparatus being an indispensable part of all Montessori work.

That was the fundamental mistake; for while much ingenuity was exercised in providing a variety of instruments capable of producing the sounds of the scale, the one essential instrument, through which the whole of the work could be done, and done better—*the child's own little voice*—was never thought of.

An examination of the material, however, is interesting, and we must remember that

whatever mistakes may be made in the use of such supposed aids to musical education, they are made by people who are honestly anxious to help the children and to help music. If we point out the errors, it is to prevent teachers from falling into similar ones, and so wasting time, if not doing positive harm.

The first experiment was made in the *Children's Houses* with a series of thirteen bells, representing an octave of the chromatic scale; and the exercise, or game, consisted in the teacher striking a bell and the child finding the corresponding sound on his own set of bells, *matching* the graduated sounds as he had matched the graduated colours in another part of his work. This was beginning at the wrong end, and was manifestly too difficult for the babes; so the bell apparatus was put aside as 'not entirely satisfactory.' It is curious that Mme. Montessori, who begins the education in colour (the chromatic sense) by strong contrasts—blue, red, and yellow—did not realise that it might be well to begin musical discrimination by strongly contrasted sounds. Beginning with the chromatic scale was [p 336]

analogous to beginning to educate the colour sense with thirteen different shades and expecting children of three and four to recognise the differences and 'pair' the shades.

As the Dottoressa does not herself pretend to any musical knowledge or acumen, the system of music teaching described in the *Advanced Method* must be ascribed to the Signorina Macceheroni [sic], and some of this lady's utterances on the subject are very strange. To start with, she says that 'songs, with their capricious intervals between widely separated notes, songs, calling for pronunciation of words, musical expression, differences of time, etc., are unsuitable for the most elementary exercises in singing.'

Songs, on which we chiefly depend for the sub-conscious absorption of music; songs, that are to be the child's mental stock-in-trade when the time comes for finding out what music is made of; songs, that are the only channel of self-expression during those very early years—these are 'unsuitable material' for the beginning of musical education!

Miss Maccheroni is a pianist, and perhaps does not realise that for the singer the skip of an octave is not more difficult than the skip of a third, provided it does not take him out of his vocal compass. On the keyboard it is different. There one would begin with the smaller intervals and work up.

Speaking about the child's marching to music, she says: 'Little by little he has learned to accompany the music spontaneously with certain movements. This, of course, necessitates *the repetition of the same music*. To acquire the sense of rhythm *the repetition of the same exercise is necessary*, as in all forms of education dealing with spontaneous activity.' This sounds contradictory; and if the sense of rhythm is present at all, as it usually is, the more the music is varied the better we can test the growth of that sense.

Again, we are told (but it is now Dr. Montessori who speaks) that 'for musical education we must *create instruments* as well as music. ... Some very much simplified harp—one of the 'classic instruments of humanity'—would be the most convenient. ... Orpheus, etc.' The piano might be good enough to march to, but 'simple and primitive instruments are the ones best adapted to the awakening of music in the soul of the little child.' In fact, Montessori Material must be *different* from anything in other schools; so we have—

(a) The bell idea revived, but in a modified (and improved) form. There are now only eight bells to a set, giving the major scale from middle C to C1. They rest on a board in which

black and white squares are painted, the black ones in twos and threes
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as on the pianoforte keyboard. They are struck with little mallets (p. 133 and Plate LVIII).

(b) 'Prisms,' or bars of wood, painted black and white, with metal plates inserted which also give the tones of the scale (p. 328 and Plate LIII). These are struck with a hammer, like a xylophone.

(c) Pitch-pipes (p. 332 and Plate LVI). A set of eight.

(d) The Monocord, a long narrow resonant box with one string. It is provided with movable frets and a tuning key, and is played on by a violin bow (p. 332 and Plate LV).

(e) Whistles are also mentioned in the earlier book.

All these are very nice, good, musical toys. The more of such things a child has access to the better. He can teach himself a good deal from them. As instruments for education my only objections to them are—

(a) Their limitation. The scale of C by itself is hardly enough for education.

(b) Their costliness. The complete outfit would make a considerable hole in the school funds.

(c) Their superfluity. The only apparatus necessary for musical education up to six years is very simple and *costs nothing*. It consists of (1) the teacher's voice to pattern songs; (2) the child's ear to hear; (3) the child's voice to reproduce. When we begin to use notation we add a blackboard and a piece of chalk, and for the real musical experiences, of which notation is but the shadow, can anything be better than the piano, already present in every school, through which we can fill the child's ears with harmony as well as melody, and which, of all keyboard instruments, is best for rhythm?

Unfortunately, Mme. Montessori's love for apparatus of all kinds has led her into some of the errors with which we are all familiar in methods devised by people on both sides of the Atlantic during the past half century, devices that are always being re-discovered. Here we have again the large staff with movable notes—this time a board painted green (colour looms large in all Montessori material) with the lines in bas-relief. On the lines and spaces of the C scale there are sockets into which discs with the names *do, re, mi*, etc., are fitted by the pupil. The sol-faing is, of course, on the fixed *do* principle.

Next comes a set of cards variously coloured, each containing a single five-line staff, without clef, on which is written an exercise to be played on the bells or other appliances. The dimensions of the material used are always given. These cards are seventeen centimetres broad and the notes two centimetres in diameter—facts of absolutely no importance. The eleven-lined staff (double staff) is soon introduced, and on this
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the discs can be arranged in patterns. It was a great discovery that the notes from middle C up and down on this double staff formed a rhombus (p. 325). Then comes the music-paper stage, and the children write what they have played on the bells, which seems to be chiefly the C scale, up and down (p. 323).

This kind of material is not to be commended, but in the Montessori Method it is redeemed from absolute uselessness by being associated with the bells and other instruments of sound. The xylophone, too, is used to illustrate the transposition of the scale in a very good and practical way (p. 328). But it is all cumbrous and costly, and most of it unnecessary.

Dr. Montessori knows (and says on p. 326) that notation is *not music*. They [sic] why not teach *music first and plentifully*, through nature's own apparatus, and when the time comes for teaching its notation, do it more directly and easily and naturally. If we are to judge by this book, the net result of the teaching of pitch-relations during those four years (seven to eleven) is pitifully small.

The teaching of rhythm is much better. Starting with marching to music, it in some ways approaches the Dalcroze plans in their beginnings. There is much that is most excellent in this part of the music chapter, but when we come to the teaching of *notation* of time we are faced again with a large green chart with musical staves, and notes equipped with pins that may be stuck into the wood (p. 351). In what way is this apparatus better than a blackboard and chalk?

When time and tune have to be put together we are thrown back upon the scale for the melodic element. Mme. Montessori has almost a religious reverence for the scale. In one place she describes the children listening in absolute silence to 'the classic beauty of this succession of sounds.' Here again, the scale, 'the classic type of melody,' lends itself beautifully to the interpretation of various kinds of measure. So the scale of C is played in 2-4, 3-4, and 4-4 time. It sounds dull to us, but it must be possible to find enjoyment in it, for Mme. Montessori remarks that 'Every one must have spent hours at the piano playing simple scales and finding a delicious variety in the exercise,' which is not the experience of the average student.

There are several musical howlers in the book. One of them may be attributed to the translator. We often speak of playing from the treble or bass *clef*, instead of *staff*. Now the Italians, like the French, use the same term for the instrument for opening a door and for the sign which is the *key* to the pitch of a given portion of the staff, and the translator uses *key* as the equivalent of *chiave* in its symbolic sense. So we find the treble and bass staves alluded to as 'the higher and lower *key*

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(p. 325)' and the children 'learn the scale of *do* major in *the two keys*.' In describing the black and white groupings of the bell apparatus—the keyboard plan—it is said that the white spaces represent whole tones and the black spaces semitones (p. 314). Again we find the black notes spoken of as accidentals and the white ones as non-accidentals. The scale of D Flat, for example, 'begins with an accidental.' All this is pretty bad, and does not give the reader who knows anything about music confidence in Miss Maccheroni's musicianship. The music chapter should be revised for a future edition.

It was not to be expected that a scientist without knowledge of music should at once hit upon the best ways of teaching it; but when a conviction of its need came it would have been wise to look beyond her own narrow environment and inquire what had been done in other places. As a matter of fact the Dottoressa seems ignorant of the musical life of her own country. She says, truly enough, that education is the prime requisite (but we have then to decide what education means), and that without such education 'we have a people of deaf mutes, for ever barred from any music,' and that is why 'though the music of Bellini (!) and Wagner is played in the public squares, the drinking bars are as full as before.' But she is hopeful. 'If, however, *from those pupils of ours* a whole people should grow up,' etc., etc. In other words, Italy may be musically regenerated by the Montessori Method.

Now, I know nothing about the music in Italian schools, but I can tell of what I have heard and seen in that country quite recently, and have never seen in any other country. If you

chance to be in Naples in the opera season, take a stall at the San Carlo any Sunday afternoon and look around. Everywhere there are children. That vast opera house—the second largest in Europe, I believe—is like Drury Lane in the Christmas holidays. The boxes, tier upon tier, hold whole families, from the grandparents to the long-clothes baby in the nurse's arms. (This is *true*). And what they have come to see is not a pantomime but an opera. Not Bellini, perhaps, but Wagner, or Verdi, or Mozart, or Mascagni, or Puccini, something from the week's repertoire, with the same artists and the same orchestra. People whom I have told about it have asked: "Don't the children make a noise while the music is going on?" No. Eyes and ears fully occupied, they are quite still. What it is all about, of course, the kiddies don't understand, but they drink in the music. A wee boy who sat by us (so tiny that his weight could not keep down the spring seat and he had to sit on its up-turned edge) confided to his grandfather after one of the acts of the *Traviata* that he 'liked Violetta very much.' And well he might, [p 340]

for it was Graziella Pareto, who has been singing the same rôle here in London this season.

All classes go to those matinées, for they are at popular prices. I found that the servants in our house knew the *arias* quite well. Oh, yes, the Signora was playing *La Traviata*, or *Rigoletto*. They knew *Ah! fors e lui* and *Libiamo*, and *La donna e Mobile*. I put it to our readers: which is the more likely to produce a musical people, this drinking in of music itself, or travelling up and down the scale of C hundreds of times (p. 317) and listening to those eight wretched little tunes which, after much experiment, have been selected as the children's daily bread, and are 'repeated over and over again' (p. 342). Which is musical education?

Of street music I did not hear much, but there was plenty of it before the war. Not the beautiful men's-voice quartets that one heard in Germany in the old days—that one may hear in almost any Welsh village to-day—but the music that visitors expected and looked for, the Neapolitan folk-song, sung with much artistry to the accompaniment of guitar and mandoline.

No. Italy is not musically deaf, nor dumb.

All honour to Dr. Montessori for her scientific spirit, her patient investigation, her tireless devotion to her chosen task, and her real love for little children. But her craze for 'Didactic Material' is leading her astray. The arithmetic section of the book, where such material *is* necessary, is overweighted with it, and in the grammar section it leads to erroneous conclusions and quite fictitious results. The Dottressa says 'No one but a child would have the patience to study grammar so profoundly and at such length' (p. 47); but the grammar game is only a continuation of the old game of matching colours. To the child, nouns are black, verbs red, pronouns green, prepositions violet, and so on; and they are arranged in boxes divided into labelled compartments, to which he has to restore them when the game is over. Lest it should be thought that the analysis and composition of sentences would involve too much thinking, it is expressly stated (pp. 45–6) that as the child's attention has to be concentrated on the colours and positions of the cards in different boxes, all intellectual effort is the [sic] eliminated.

I may be wrong, not being a convinced Montessorian, but it seems to me that grammar, *real* grammar, cannot escape being an intellectual exercise, also that the child's early language training—like his music—should be *ear*-training, and that in directing his attention to colours and shapes we are directing it *away* from language-values, just as we are directing it away from music values when we present to it large coloured staves and notes that can be handled. Even used in the most intelligent way, these things are but impedimenta.

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