

***From "Art Ability: Fifty Creative People Talk About Ability and Disability"
by Simon Goodenough (1989)***

*Bill Fawkes: Mary Hare Grammar School for the
Deaf*

The Mary Hare Grammar School for the Deaf is an independent boarding school near Newbury, in Berkshire, for students aged eleven to eighteen. Pupils are selected from all over the country and fees are paid by the respective LEAs.

Bill Fawkes is a trained history teacher and amateur musician who

has been working with deaf children for twenty-eight years. He has a family of five children himself and it was their obvious enjoyment of music as they developed into teenagers that started him teaching music at the school twelve years ago. He found that many of his students had an interest in pop music, so he taught them first to play chords on an acoustic guitar and was enormously encouraged by the results. The school now has a band of fifteen players who can hold their own in concerts alongside groups from local comprehensives. He has piano students who have successfully passed Grade 5 in piano and theory and he hopes to get them to Grade 6. The recorder group plays quite a bit of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music at a very pleasant and acceptable level.

Bill feels strongly that deaf music students should be judged on precisely the same standards as their able-bodied counterparts. He is vehemently opposed to any special exams that would make allowances for deaf students.

There are now two deaf schools in the Brighton area who have been consulting him on how to get started with music. In 1985 a teacher from Toledo, Ohio, visited him to learn about setting up a music department in her own school. In September 1985, Evelyn Glennie, the deaf percussionist, gave a concert with the students at the school.

Music is a rare thing in schools for the deaf, but I think it's beginning to catch on. Several schools are now beginning to bring music into their curriculum, so pupils will be coming into Mary Hare in the future with perhaps a little bit more experience than before. Things like drawing, painting, sculpture, have been generally accepted with the deaf; music is a new thing. Percussion instruments have been used to aid speech and so on but music has always been related to something else; whereas what I've been trying to do, and what people are generally beginning to try, is to do music for its own sake and not for any ulterior motive, though of course ulterior motives do come out.

We give concerts in local villages and we take part in the local schools carol concert in Newbury; we play an instrumental item, which a hearing school does also, so it's not peculiar. We've done day conferences and illustrated talks on methods of teaching at Watford and in Northampton. We've played in Oxford and the Royal Festival Hall foyer, and we're giving a public performance in Huddersfield Town Hall and in the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester.

All the pupils take music in the first two years of school, whether they've done it in the past or not; they're split into classes of about ten. The main thing is to show that music is fun, not plodding along but getting the enjoyment from the beginning. Then you work to see what you can produce in any particular group. Of course, the quality will vary from group to group. Some are musical and some are not, just as in a hearing school. After the second form it's all

voluntary; those that are musical go on with their activities. It's not necessarily about exams but those who have talent may find it a challenge to take an exam.

The examiners don't know that they are deaf. This I insist upon. If you have a special paper for the deaf then you destroy the whole object of normalisation. With many deaf children, certain aspects of the aural test are very difficult, not to say impossible in some cases, but I insist that we are not going to have special aural tests, simplified or whatever. What we are trying to do, with the Chief Executive of the Associated Boards, is to devise some new aural tests which would be OK for hearing-impaired children but would also be appropriate for the hearing, so they could be run parallel. Within that, you can make certain provision, just as you might make a special provision for blind or partially-sighted children but it is not a concession. It is providing the chance to change some of the more stilted aspects of the aural tests, in any case. What we want to do is to get on a level with everyone else in competing and sitting exams. This is the exciting thing.

I've discovered that musicality has nothing to do with hearing. It sounds odd but it's true. Musicality is something almost independent of hearing. When the children come to me in a group for music, I do not want to know their case histories; I have ten individuals who have done more or less nothing musically, who are a mixed bag of abilities. What I'm trying to do is to discover a musicality within them and bring this out. We start on that very low basis, just as one would with a hearing group of children. I have heard cases of people saying, 'Now this child has a certain type of deafness, therefore there's no point in her trying to learn the guitar or the flute because it isn't possible.' But I let them pick up the guitar and see what happens. That could confound the experts. Frances, who you heard this morning on the guitar, has had about six or seven lessons but what has carried her through is her rhythmic sense, which we have worked on since she came here. It is a mistake to put a child on to an instrument which is more sophisticated before she has built up some bodily rhythmic sense.

Before mankind made musical instruments, we used the instrument we had, namely our body, as a rhythmic thing to express either sadness or joy or whatever, and that eventually led on to making musical instruments as extensions of what was already there. If you work with children, getting them either to march on the spot or clap their hands rhythmically or sway their bodies and get this innate thing going first, in the way that man has evolved, then there will come a point at which you can intuitively say, 'Right, now we can introduce a couple of notes on a recorder or piano, or do an ensemble like we did this morning.' Then it leads on. The little girl beating the brush on the side drum this morning, she was very deaf and her rhythmic sense when she came here had not been developed. But she can do that in time with everybody else because she has built up her innate rhythmic consciousness. You establish rhythm first.

The thing that interests me is that I have come to discover this by working with deaf children; it's an aspect that's not even been thought about by people who have been musically trained. Yet so much of what I'm going to write or say about the deaf is not peculiar to the deaf. It's a general thing. I'm talking about children and the innate needs of children. They need that rhythmic ability brought out – hearing, deaf, blind or whatever. Don't start from the premise,

'These children are deaf, so what can we do.' Start from the premise, 'These children are children and children develop in this way, or humanity develops in this way.' Many of the problems will drop off like scales from a fish's back. They'll simply disappear.

We neglect the basic things of human need. Rhythm and song are absolutely primeval. Take a recent example – a person in a local town decided that the children were so deprived of songs and music that the mums would get together a song session and teach the children the little nursery rhymes and things of this kind. This is appalling in a society in which we are supposed to be developed and civilised. See the way that a dignitary is welcomed in an African state; they greet him rhythmically, absolutely spontaneously. Go to a football match – we only do it when we are relaxed. We've lost the ability to relax, we have forgotten; we are so sophisticated, so scientifically orientated, so research conscious. We've forgotten poor old King Solomon, who needed music to soothe his troubled breast.

My eldest daughter plays a guitar very vaguely, strumming you know. In her holidays this summer she went along to help at a mentally handicapped centre in Newbury and took her guitar and sang and she said the kids were spellbound. Yet it isn't part and parcel of their life.

We set out to discover whether deaf children, children with a hearing problem, could enjoy music and make music. The answer is, 'Yes.' That's the total justification. And they can entertain other people by making music. Music can communicate itself. It's a non-verbal communication. It's very interesting watching the elderly ladies in Women's Institutes getting on the same wave length when our kids start off with a rousing song, a Beatles song or something like that, and gradually the toes start tapping. The interplay is there. The deaf are communicating with the hearing and giving them an entertainment they probably didn't expect.