



**INTRODUCTION**

**MUSIC  
ENGAGEMENT  
WITH THE  
ELDERLY**

*“When through the woods,  
and forest glades I wander,  
And hear the birds sing  
sweetly in the trees”*

*(How Great Thou Art)*

## BACKGROUND:

After discovering that listening to music involves several areas of our brain, it seemed only natural to use it as a way of engaging deeply the elderly population that has been so profoundly impacted by physical and mental changes due to the aging process. Maureen McCarthy Draper's statement in her book "The Nature of Music" spoke volumes with these words about the significance of music upon the lives of God's creation: *"Beautiful music is the promise of happiness, a doorway through which we can enter the fullness of our being."*

Thus, given the fact that when the ear hears beautiful musical strains floating in the air it is like the very breath we inhale for sustaining life in all of us, it seemed only logical to explore a variety of methods and techniques conducted individually and in large groups to determine how to better engage older people.

Since, unlike the eyes that have lids to close, the ear is automatically the receptor of the vibrations produced from the notes being performed, the potential impact for everyone is enormous. Without our knowledge, each note is being enriched by the brain and delivered to the very core of our being in a form that has been designed with our needs in mind. In other words, no two people hear or are touched by a song in the same manner. Maureen McCarthy Draper goes even farther by stating, *"A great symphony can stir qualities of our humanity that we need and long to feel; exultation, grief, dignity, compassion, playfulness.... At times music brings the gift of self-forgetting, inviting us to slip out of our own skin. But paradoxically, because it connects us with our emotions, music often brings more self-awareness. And it is easier to own our emotions when we meet them through music."*

Even without having access to the latest studies on the brain and music, Martin Luther, through simply observing the people he served when listening to music recognized the impact it had upon the human mind; so much that when having been instructed by law that he could no longer use the written word as a method of communication, back in 1524, wrote a missal of 8 hymns as a way of moving people's hearts and minds toward God; one of which was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" that was accepted by even his enemies during the Reformation. His reasoning for gravitating toward music as a means of stressing ideas without losing his life was clarified when he stated: *"Music drives away the Devil and makes people happy. They forget thereby all wrath, unchastity, arrogance, and the like. After theology, I would give music the highest place, and the highest honor."*

Consequently, based on Luther's observations as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century regarding the power of music upon the brain, is it any wonder that elderly people whose bodies have been dramatically changed by the aging process react in such obvious ways? In fact, there is nothing more fascinating than to watch relatives of a nursing home resident sit spell bound, wearing smiles of amusement, as they study the face of a loved one singing and swaying to a favorite old song. Having grown accustomed to their relative being in an uncommunicative state, they are totally captivated by the response.

## OBJECTIVE:

Given the latest scientific information on how the brain responds to music, causing the individuals to react in a more fluid and responsive manner, it seemed only natural to investigate a variety of ways for using music to more deeply engage the elderly. In so doing, not only would it benefit the lives of the



older individuals, but also serve as a resource for those in the community working with or entertaining the old folks when offering performances. Value would be added to both the giver and receiver.

#### MUSIC ENGAGEMENT CATEGORIES

- 1) **Music and the Brain (My Father's World):** Basic background on some of the latest research and how the brain reacts to music.
- 2) **Music and the Nursing Home Staff:** (A Spring in My Step and a Song in My Heart) Background on the importance of Nursing Home Staff as it relates to engaging the elderly in music. A staff that is well trained, inspired, and empowered by the owner/administrator creates a win/win situation for both employees and residents. [\(Accompanying Video\)](#)
- 3) **Large Group Performances:** (Community members perform music for large groups of elderly people in a health care facility setting.) Given this scenario, what methods can be added to increase the participation of the audience? The Joy Pickers & Senior Saints from Schweitzer United Methodist Church, Springfield, Missouri (a group of 35 individuals using both instruments and the human voice) served as test model for accomplishing this goal.
- 4) **Bedridden Residents:** After the large group performance, certain individuals that had furnished the entertainment volunteered to perform at the bedside of those residents unable to attend the large groups session due to health restrictions by using both instruments and the human voice as a form of engagement.
- 5) **Nursing Home Choir:** An opportunity to belong to a choir was extended to interested residents. Not only were their social skills enhanced by working together as a team, but also represented with pride their fellow residents by participating in a large group performance. Once again, they could give, rather than just receive; a behavior sacrificed when moving into a facility due to needing assistance with their daily living.
- 6) **Wheelchair Dancing:** Even though the residents were no longer physically able to use their entire bodies to dance, they learned ways to keep time to their favorite music from a sitting position that also allowed them to engage deeply when listening to performances.
- 7) **Grand Finale:** Using the old hymn "When We All Get to Heaven," this next to the last inspirational chapter, not only shows the culmination of the process of engaging the elderly in music through a joint community effort, but also demonstrates the joy the nursing home and church choir members experienced when the Glendale Gardens Silver Saints journeyed to Schweitzer United Methodist Church, Springfield, Missouri, and joined their voices for a time of musical worship. [\(Accompanying Video\)](#)
- 8) **At the Altar of Age:** This closing chapter will touch your heart in ways never experienced as you learn how nursing home residents gracefully deal with their winter season of life. It is not only inspiring, but also serves as a model that is filled with courage and hope as their final destination comes into view. [\(Accompanying Video\)](#) *Remarkable video recording of "What A Day That Will Be"; one of the residents' favorite songs that is sung by Assistant Activity Director Melody Childers. (Made possible through the efforts of ClearBox Rights License Manager, Brian Litwin who took the initiative and obtained permission from the owners of the song for it to be recorded and offered exclusively by [www.devotionalembbers.com](http://www.devotionalembbers.com). Thank you, Brian!}*

PROCEDURE

\*\* Each chapter described above contains information along with matching still life shots of step by step directions for ease in integrating the musical techniques into nursing homes worldwide.

CLOSING:

Dramatist Christopher Fry's following quote says it best with the words.

*“Oh, the fabulous wings  
unused, folded in the heart.  
Music allows us to spread our  
wings, even when they may  
be protecting tender,  
vulnerable places.”*

