

# Singing is a human right for a child (Part 2 of 3)

*Oscar Escalada, choral director, composer and professor*

**Singing is a human right for a child (Part 1)**

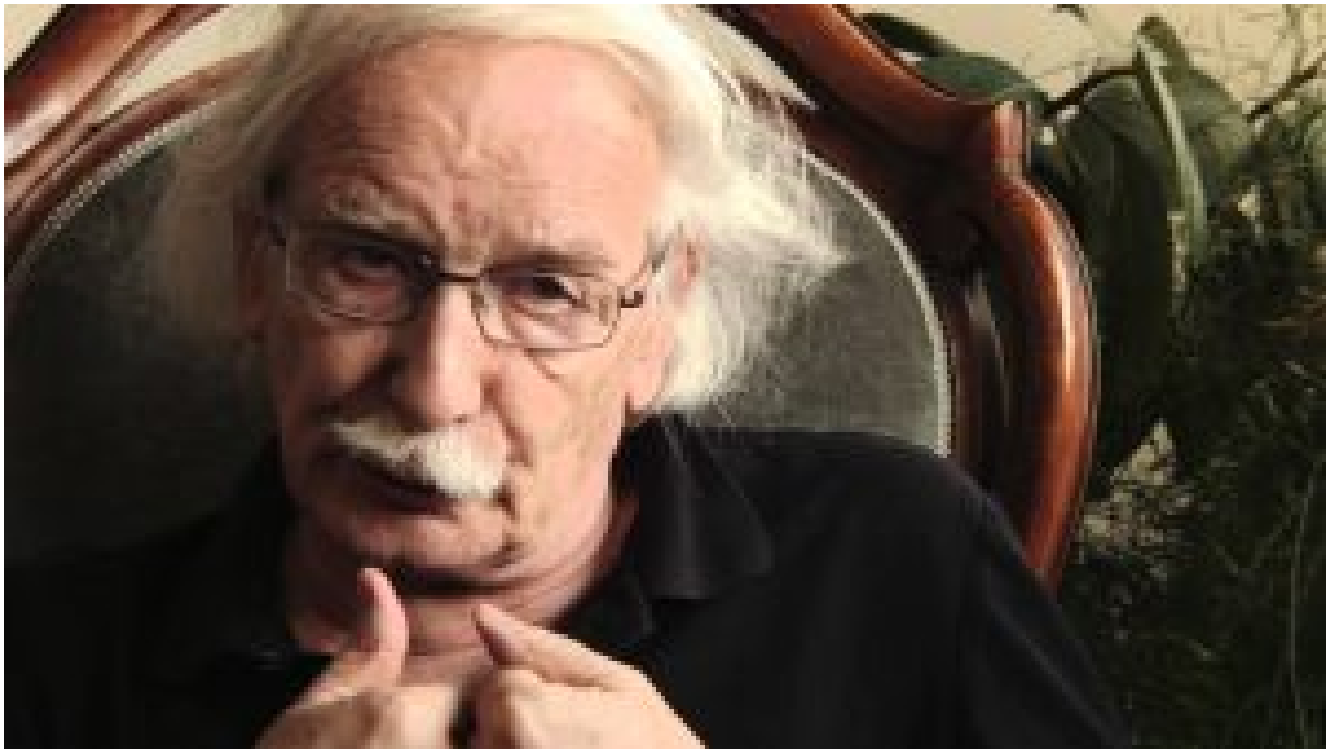
**Empathy “Take that boy on the street. Teach him to blow a horn, and he’ll never blow a safe.”**

**From the musical The Music Man, 1958**

Aristotle famously believed that “*man is by nature a political animal, that is, social: he lives in families, clans or groups known as villages, towns, cities or nations, and he feels a need to associate with other people similar to himself to live as a social animal.*” As every scientific study carried out since then has gone on to prove, he was right.

Science has proved beyond all doubt that human beings are not born good or bad, but rather are born with propensities or tendencies which can lead to an aggressive or exploitative attitude towards others if these are not channelled properly.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the late 1980s Italian neurobiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti from the University of Parma discovered the existence of neurons which specialise in mirroring others, which he called mirror neurons.<sup>[2]</sup> He gave them this name as they produce the same neural activity both when an action is performed and when an observer sees the same action being performed, thus mentally representing the behaviour of the other as if the observer were itself acting.



Dr. Giacomo Rizzolatti from the University of Parma

Mirror neurons explain how we can access and understand the minds of others, and they also make possible the intersubjectivity which enables us to behave as social beings.

These neurons are responsible for our social lives and are particularly active during our childhood, as they are heavily involved in the process of learning through imitation. They allow us to reproduce in our brain what another person is doing.

What we are talking about here is a complex form of psychological inference in which observation, memory, knowledge and reasoning combine to allow us to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. This cognitive, rational and emotional process is what we call *empathy*.

Mirror neurons are directly connected to human behaviour.

Moya-Albiol<sup>[3]</sup> divides empathy into three separate components:

- Cognitive: being aware of the feelings of another person
- Emotional: experiencing the same or similar feelings to another person in the same situation

- Social: responding with compassion to problems another person is facing

*“The empathetic response includes the ability to understand the other person and to put ourselves in their position on the basis of what we observe, verbal information we receive or the information we can access from our memory (taking a perspective), and the emotional reaction of sharing their emotional state, which can cause sadness, discomfort or anxiety.”*

Investigations carried out by Dr Jean Decety from the University of Chicago<sup>[4]</sup> have shown that human beings have social traits which begin to develop during childhood. Perception of human relationships begins in the interactions between mother and child, and it is there that the first steps in the development of empathy are taken. An individual will consequently adopt the parameters to which it is exposed in its social environment and culture and, by imitating them, will become socialised with its fellow human beings as it adapts its behaviour to theirs. If these relationships are impaired, perhaps as a result of belonging to a dysfunctional family in a deprived social environment, what the individual learns will be what the mirror neurons have received as information. These mirror neurons imitate the actions and behaviour the individual has observed.



Dr Jean Decety from the University of Chicago

Two incidents relevant to this subject, the first in 1993 in Liverpool, England, and the second in 2007 in Maldonado, Uruguay, can help us understand the phenomenon of empathy and mirror neurons as a key element in human relationships given that, as we have just seen, mirror neurons can imitate what we learn from our social environment.

The children involved in these incidents were between 10 and 14 years old, and the cases were similar: there were three children, two of them killed the third, and the first two continued playing as if nothing had happened. The exact details of each case are not relevant here, but what does matter is that the killings were carried out by children of similar ages and that they displayed the same attitude towards the crime they had committed.

In the Liverpool case, the judge concluded that the children were aware of what they had been doing. However, they showed no remorse and merely attempted to pretend that what had

happened was an accident involving a train before continuing with their game.

The two cases had one thing in common: the children had had a troubled childhood, coming from dysfunctional families with a history of alcoholism and domestic violence. As a result of their antisocial behaviour they were cast aside by the people around them and were left to fend for themselves, frequently living on the streets from an early age.

Once these facts had been established, and in the light of Dr. Rizzolatti's discovery, the investigators agreed that the reason for the children's lack of remorse and for not recognising that their actions were a crime lay in their undeveloped mirror neurons, a consequence of not experiencing the shared emotions that come from a loving family. This, they said, was behind the children reproducing what they had experienced during their troubled childhood and the lack of affection they felt towards anybody else.

The children were adjudged old enough to be responsible for actions and given life sentences. After a number of years in prison, psychologists who treated the children during their imprisonment eventually managed to make them appreciate the horror of what they had done, and their behaviour was altered to such an extent that eight years into their sentence they were conditionally released for good behaviour. However, a few years later, one of them returned to prison for distributing child pornography.

It seems that thus far no studies have been carried out on the Uruguayan children.

The importance of the discovery of mirror neurons is clear from these incidents, which serve as a brutal example of the worst depths of human behaviour. Of course, the differing degrees of events which can demonstrate this are a reflection of various behaviours, most of which will not necessarily

descend to such criminal depths. But they do show the importance of mirror neurons, and particularly the impact that missing or underdeveloped mirror neurons can have.

Bearing all this in mind, children should be encouraged to take part in choral activities as they can be an effective tool in softening the aggressive traits we often see today. Choral singing provides the necessary environment both for developing empathy and for exhibiting it, even in children with similar backgrounds to the children in the cases described above.

By singing in choirs a child develops a sense of belonging to a group, a community in which all members feel an emotional bond. The public recognises them and shows that it approves of them by applauding at the end of every concert, but this applause comes from an appreciation of the artistic and aesthetic expression, that is, the emotions the singers have expressed. It allows the individual to present him or herself as a human being with thoughts and feelings without making fun of them; on the contrary, in fact, it is the ability to display such sensitivity which earns them the applause.

In the same way, those who participate in choral activity become socialised through spontaneous events and processes. Every member of the choir has an important role to play and the whole choir works together towards a shared objective.

The characteristics of a team and of a family as described by Mary Alice and Gary Stollak<sup>[5]</sup> strongly support this hypothesis (it is worth mentioning that Mary Alice Stollak is a director of children's choirs in East Lansing, Michigan and that Gary Stollak, her husband, is a psychiatrist specialising in families and a professor at Michigan State University). They state that the results of their investigation *"suggest that the individual feels more like a member of a family than a member of a team. Of course in every choir, just as in every family, there will be stressful and problematic situations [...]"*

*However, these situations can subsequently be beneficial for satisfactory development of the choir."*

This matters, as it introduces the perspective of interpersonal recognition. A choir is characterised by the need for its members to work together much as a team must work together. But teams are usually united by their efforts to defeat an opponent, which is not true of a choir as there is no opponent to defeat. This means that individuals in a choir work together for very different reasons from those involved in a competition between football, rugby, hockey teams, which George Orwell memorably described as "war without the shooting". A choir is attempting to produce a result which stems from the work all its members have put in as a team, an aesthetic and sensitive result which is expressed through the human capacity for spirituality.

The approval that an audience shows for this activity with its applause is a display of affection and gratitude for the sensitive, heart-rending, moving or stirring experience the choir has communicated to them. For the individual on the receiving end of this applause, the approval shown by the community for what he or she has produced helps reaffirm their self-esteem and they are grateful for it. The idea of the choir as a family put forward by the Stollak husband-and-wife team is of great importance in this context, as it implies that, despite both choirs and families having to confront "stressful and problematic situations", their members also receive affection.

All art requires the participation of the viewer, listener or reader, and temporal art such as music, literature or theatre is no exception. The audience may consist of the choristers' families or other people with whom they have dealings every day. However, putting on a concert is akin to staging a play in which everyone has their assigned role: family members "play" at being an audience and on the stage their children "play" at being artists.

The same applies to any other artistic performance, regardless of whether or not children and their families are involved. A Shakespeare play performed at The Globe Theatre in London by Sir Laurence Olivier and the Royal National Theatre Company<sup>[6]</sup>, for instance, also requires audience participation, and indeed the performance would not be possible without one. Everyone knows that what they are watching when Othello kills Desdemona is fiction and not a crime, yet although they know what will happen when the play starts they still feel troubled, happy, sad or moved in various ways by something which in reality is not happening.



Othello kills Desdemona...

Whether the artists are children or adults, then, the same audience participation is required. It does not matter that, once the concert is over, the children's parents will find them, take them for something to eat and continue their normal family routine, for in this almost magical moment the child is an artist and his or her mother and father are part of the



audience. It is interesting to note that this “play” always follows the same, simple rules: one person sings on the stage while the other listens in the seats. But the person listening is not alone, sitting on their sofa at home, but is instead surrounded by other people in a place they have purposefully travelled to with the aim of enjoying themselves. The enjoyment is a sensation they expect to feel as a result of their children’s singing, and they prepare for it in the same way that their children prepare to sing to the best of their ability. The moment of the performance is the reward for both parties, proof of art’s capacity to arouse our emotions – those same emotions which the children in Liverpool and Maldonado lacked.

Children living on the street can take part in choral activity without any prior experience, as singing uses the voice, an instrument we all possess. All they need is the opportunity to learn how to use it.

Maud Hickey is a professor at Northwestern University in the United States. She is involved in a programme aimed at young offenders behind bars and has written an interesting report on her findings, from which I have taken the following paragraph:

*“Research on the effectiveness of arts education in detention centers is scant but growing. In the recently published Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education, my review of the research literature on music programs in detentions centers found that music programs produced extra-musical psychological outcomes, such as improved confidence and self-esteem, improvement in learning skills, as well as improved behavior and reduced recidivism.”<sup>[7]</sup>*

The use of choral singing as therapy for addiction to drugs and alcohol is not new. In my last book I made reference to the Minnesota Adult & Teen Challenge Institute, which has

offices in the US cities of Twin Cities, Brainerd, Duluth, Rochester and Buffalo and runs a range of programmes for young people both inside and outside of prison. Their short-term programmes last between 30 and 60 days while their long-term programmes last between 13 and 15 months, and all are open to young people and adults, male and female. A typical day consists of chores, chapel, meals, a study period, choir practice, classes, free time and devotions. In the long-term programmes choir practice is obligatory "*whether or not you can sing*", as director Sam Anderson puts it. Although it is a religious institution and the choral programme involves singing in a different church in the local area every week, the scientific basis behind its activities is akin to that of a non-religious school. The advantage of the programme in the churches is that the participants sing every Sunday "*whether or not they know the songs*", but this can also occur as part of a programme featuring weekly concerts in clubs, retirement homes, soup kitchens and other intermediary organisations from the very start.

I will conclude by telling you two stories of MA&TCh patients with the aim of giving an insight into the programme from the perspective of those taking part in it. Their testimonies are worth telling from a personal viewpoint, away from the science and theoretical knowledge behind the programmes. I have removed the names but otherwise their testimonies remain as they were originally told.<sup>[8]</sup>

The first person is 36 years old and has been drinking heavily on a daily basis for 10 years. Despite his addiction he managed to hold down a job, pay his bills and taxes etc., but the addiction was seriously affecting his life. "*I felt that there was no hope and that my life couldn't prosper any more than it had. I was stuck feeling that this is it, so this is what I'm going to continue to do.*" His family and friends helped him admit that he was an addict and he agreed to start the institute's programme. That was 10 months ago.

The other is thirty years old and has been an addict for 16 years. He began to take marijuana and consume alcohol when he was 13, and when he turned 18 he started using meth. He has served time in various prisons and has tried various treatments, all without success. He was let out of jail in 2011 but slipped again and began taking meth intravenously, almost dying from a blood infection. Three years later he heard about Teen Challenge, and when he left prison again he ended up there. *"I went through a lot of changes here. I came in not wanting to deal with authority, not wanting to listen to the rules. It was bad. I wanted to fight. Finally it clicked in my head that I need to do this so I don't get kicked out."*

Both men talk about the experience of singing in similar terms. *"When I signed up I knew about the choir and that I would have to be a part of it. My first concert was just two days after I started the program, and I didn't know any of the lyrics. However, I had to wear the standard choir uniform, take to the stage and basically try and lip sync my way through the songs. I learned them with time and lost the nervousness I had in those first few days, and I enjoy the spirituals, the gospel music and feeling the affection from my community. We're reaching out to our people with the songs we sing. If they can help someone, it's worth it."* One of them is now one of the conductors of the choir (the institute has eleven choirs in total) and runs the soundboard. *"When we talk about that time we say that we're a Band of Brothers because of the time we've spent together. We help each other and challenge each other. And when we succeed we cheer each other on. It's pretty cool. The feeling of brotherhood you get is probably the most ministering you'll get while in the program. The staff are good, the classes are good, but it's the fellowship that saved my life, I'll tell you that."*

**Choral singing can save lives. It is a human right for**

**a child, and society has an obligation to make use of it.**

*Translated by Christopher Lutton, UK*

*Edited by Laura Massey, UK*

[1] Vicente Garrido Genovés, *Universidad de Valencia, Spain*

[2] Marco Iacobini, *“Las neuronas espejo”, Katz Editores, Madrid 2009*

[3] Moya-Albiol, Luis; Herrero, Neus; Bernal, M. Consuelo, *“Bases neuronales de la empatía”, Revista de Neurología; No. 50, pp 89-100*

[4] Decety, J., Ben-Ami Bartal, I., Uzefovsky, F., & Knafo-Noam, A. (2016). *Empathy as a driver of prosocial behavior: Highly conserved neurobehavioral mechanisms across species. Proceedings of the Royal Society London – Biology, 371, 20150077.*

[5] Mary Alice and Gary Stollak, *Choral Journal, Choral activity, a team or a family?*

[6] The Globe Theatre, in the Bankside area by the River Thames in London, is an exact replica of the theatre where Shakespeare put on his plays. Sir Laurence Olivier is considered one of the greatest actors of the 20th century and was particularly well-known for his performances in Shakespeare plays, and he also directed the Royal National Theatre Company.

[7] Maud Hickey <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/maud-hickey>

<sup>[8]</sup> Their names feature in an article by Pippi Mayfield on DL-Online, 9 September 2015.