

New, Fun, and Just Plain Cool

Crazy Wisdom Kids in the Community

By Karen L. Totten



Jessica & Maraca show off their musical skills at Robinsongs for Kids

Music Together offers music enjoyment for little ones and their parents

“All children are musically inclined.” That is the premise of a national program for babies, toddlers, and young children called Music Together, run locally by Robin Robinson of Robinsongs for Kids. The program is aimed at bringing music back to families, through interactive play designed to engage and delight children and adults alike.

Every child can achieve basic music competence, which Music Together defines as singing in tune and tapping in rhythm. “You don't have to be an Olympic swimmer to have fun swimming.”

Robinson, who brought this internationally known music program to the Ann Arbor area, says every child can achieve basic music competence, which Music Together defines as singing in tune and tapping in rhythm. “You don't have to be an Olympic swimmer to have fun swimming,” she notes. In the same way, children can enjoy hearing and moving to music and singing or playing along, without having to feel they need to be evaluated on their level of skill. She stresses Music Together is not performance based, but a fun program of both unstructured and guided activities designed to let each child participate at their own pace and on their own level.

“Children look to their parents to see how to behave in this situation,” says Robinson. Adult involvement with the music is important. For parents who might be a bit shy to tap their fingers, sway to the music, dance, or play a kazoo, Robinson reminds them that skill is not at all a factor. “Adults are modeling the behavior” for the children, she says. “That is how their children learn. Some children will watch for a long time, even months; some will be more active in class. It does not matter, because each child is processing according to her individual way.”

Robinson says participating in making music in this kind of group setting can increase social skills. It can also provide bonding for parent and child, and provide a bridge to more formal music training in school or private lessons. “And they love it!” she adds.

Classes are for mixed ages, from birth through age five, which leads to the question: How does a three-month-old respond to a conga beat? “You will see his arms and legs get going,” says Robinson, “or he will shake the instruments, instead of chewing on them.” Parents can engage the littlest ones with tummy rubbing or swaying to the beat, among other strategies. “Even with singing, you can listen to an infant's tonality or phrasing when he vocalizes,” says Robinson. That cooing and vocalizing can tell much about a child's mood and response to what is happening in his environment.

Robinson stresses music, in general, is good for what ails us, too. In her blog on her website, Robinson posts a link to a Dana Foundation article on the use of music therapy for treating brain injury. “Music activates more parts of the brain than any other activity,” say researchers Michael Thaut, professor of music and a professor of neuroscience at Colorado State University, and Gerald McIntosh, medical director for the Center for Biomedical Research in Music at Colorado State University. New technologies help scientists look at our brain's response to music, and the findings are amazing.

The application of this research has already begun in physical therapy, for instance, where therapists might ask patients to walk or move limbs in time to a rhythmical beat. The music helps establish parameters within which the patient can work, making it easier to move smoothly and with less effort. Music can also help those with language and cognitive issues.

Robinson came to Ann Arbor two years ago from New York City, where she received her Music Together training and had been teaching the program for eight years. She also was a musical theater actress, performing on Broadway and around the world, and fronted her own country-rock-pop band, for which she wrote songs and played acoustic guitar. Robinson earned a BFA from U of M in musical theater, including two years as a music major, where she learned all the theory basics.

The Music Together program originated in 1986 when Ken Guilmartin and Lili Levinowitz began collaborating on music education materials and classroom techniques. Both had extensive backgrounds in music and theory. Guilmartin, a graduate of Swarthmore, studied composition and pedagogy at the Manhattan School of Music and earned a certificate in Dalcroze Eurhythmics. Levinowitz was a Ph.D. candidate at Temple University doing innovative research focused on tonal and rhythm development in young children. She is now a professor of music education at Rowan University and director of research at Center for Music and Young Children, which Guilmartin founded and directs. The program they developed now serves over 2,000 communities in 25 countries.

For more information on the Music Together program, including class times, locations and prices, contact Robin at Robinsongs for Kids, 734-929-2133, or visit robinsongsforkids.com.

Gemini sets tales to music on new CD and in concert

Gemini, the energetic and highly entertaining musical duo of Sandor and Laszlo Slomovits, transport listeners old and young to places of delight on their recently released CD, called “Once Upon a Time.” A collection of traditional stories and original works with musical accompaniment, the brothers regale their listeners with their musical talents, rich harmonies and wonderful story-telling abilities.

Robin Robinson, director & teacher at Robinsongs, and Cooper.



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The popular duo has been telling stories at their concerts for years. (Their original story, "The Rooster," also appears in this collection.) So, in 2008, the brothers decided to begin collecting some of their best-loved tales. The result is a project that includes traditional stories such as "The Bremen Musicians," and original pieces such as "Perfect Pitch," on which San's daughter, Emily, now in high school, plays beautiful violin to accompany the plot line.

"These tales are not only wonderful to listen to, but in one way or another are consistent with our core values," says San. Each story imparts something that all can learn. In fact, San often is asked to name his favorite song, to which he replies, "I won't sing a song I don't like. They are all my favorites! It is the same with the stories."

Gemini performs their Annual Thanksgiving Benefit Concert on November 28 in support of the Holden Newborn Intensive Care Unit at Mott Children's Hospital, where San's daughter, Emily, was born 16 years ago.

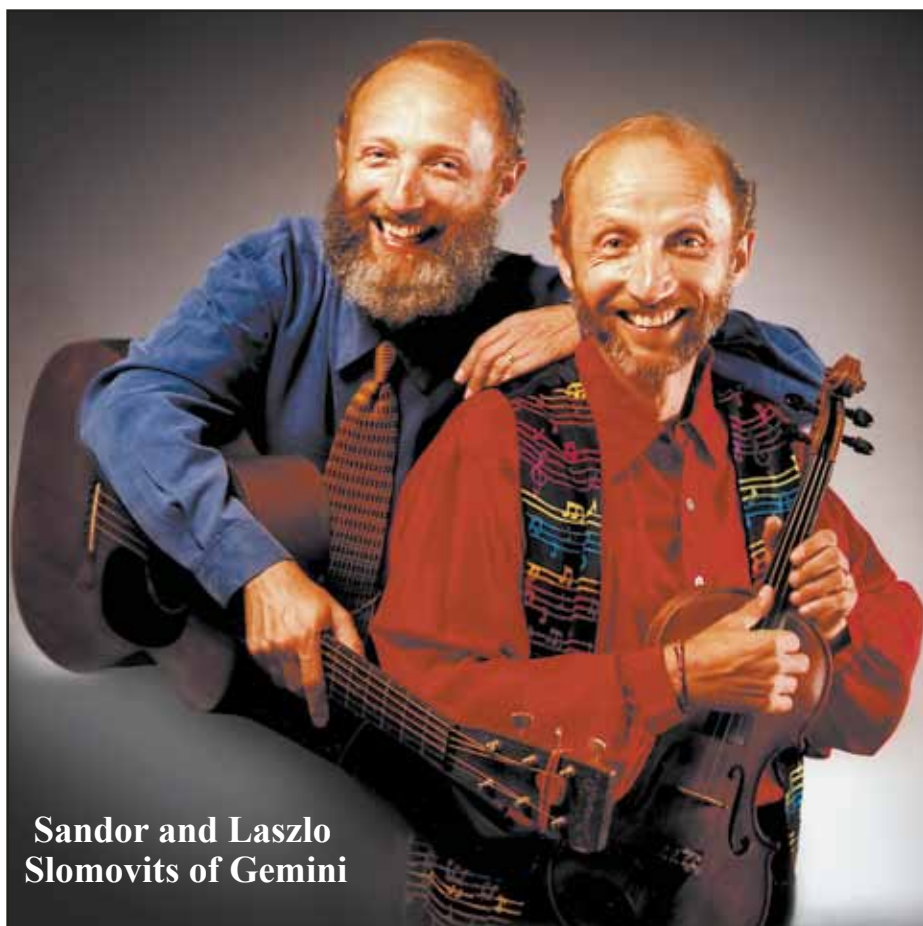
One very lovely and tender piece is "The Two Brothers," which is reminiscent in some ways of O. Henry's classic tale "Gift of the Magi," in its theme of sacrifice for others, blended with a bit of irony. In the song that accompanies the story, San and Laz quote some Hebrew, which San translates in the singing version as, "How good it is and lovely, for people to live as one."

Another wonderful tale is "The Crowded House," wherein both the main character and the audience come to understand at the same time the brilliance of the local rabbi, who gives advice throughout. The original Yiddish tale involved a man having difficulty living near his noisy animals, for which problem he seeks out the wisdom of his rabbi. San changed the premise to use musicians, not animals, and the influx of more and more music creates "a musical madhouse" involving everyone from a piano-playing friend to a gathering of townspeople as audience. Crowded, indeed.

Many Crazy Wisdom readers likely already know that the Slomovits brothers have been writing music and performing together many years — in fact, since 1973, when they first came to Ann Arbor. Born in Hungary, and having lived in Israel for three years before moving to the U.S., the two come from a musical home. They are accomplished on many traditional instruments like violin and piano, and less common instruments such as the bones and the bodhran, an Irish frame drum. Their list of honors and awards is impressive and include awards from *Parent's Choice Magazine* and the American Library Association.

One upcoming opportunity to experience their humor and excellent musicianship is at the Annual Thanksgiving Benefit Concert that Gemini performs in support of the University of Michigan Mott Children's Hospital. The Holden Newborn Intensive Care Unit is where San's daughter, Emily, was born and cared for 16 years ago. She will be joining her uncle Laz and dad San on violin and vocals for that performance. Aron Kaufman will also join the duo, playing percussion, and Brian Brill will play piano. This year's concert will be at The Ark on Sunday, November 28, at 1 p.m. Stories will abound.

It is well worth a visit to the Gemini website at geminichildrensmusic.com to explore further. The CD is available locally at Nicola's Books or through the Gemini website.



Sandor and Laszlo Slomovits of Gemini



Leo Robertson paints the town-- well, one part of it!

Why did Leo Robertson, a junior at Ann Arbor's Skyline High School, spend a month of his summer out on the sidewalk in the hot sun on Washington Street? He had a mission: redesigning and painting the façade of Ann Arbor's teen center, The Neutral Zone.

The façade makeover is Robertson's original design, done in a modified Art Deco style. The building had been a fairly quiet, earth-toned neo-Gothic former warehouse, the front made of old brick and timber. No longer is it modestly self-effacing. Now you can't help but notice the electric blue and shocking pink anchor stones as you pass by, or the deep green steps leading into the building, just down the street from Amadeus and across from the Bank of Ann Arbor, at 301 E. Washington.

"Leo is an exceptional young person," says John Weiss, Neutral Zone's executive director. "Teens here are encouraged to take initiative and take ownership of the space where they hang out." So when the idea came up to paint murals on the back of the building, Robertson's interest was piqued. He had an idea — instead of murals behind the Zone, he wanted to paint the front of the building.

"Leo put together an elaborate proposal," says Weiss. "He had color samples of different paints and schematics. I was very impressed with the deliberate thought he put into the project." And so were others Weiss consulted with Robertson's proposal in hand, including other teens and two adults on the Center's Board of Directors. He also conferred with a lawyer who works with the group, who determined there was no historic designation precluding altering the building façade in the manner proposed.

Robertson, who has been a member of the Visual Arts Council at Neutral Zone for two years, has painted murals before— two, in fact, for the Ann Arbor Open School.

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“One of my murals was painted over in anticipation of a movie shoot that never materialized,” said Robertson. He still feels a bit unhappy about its loss. But you can still see the other one at the school, on the wall by the office. In addition, Robertson has worked on set design for productions at Skyline High. Asked about his preference for murals over painting on canvas, Robertson said it is easier to create detail with a two-inch wall brush than with a small standard brush, as one would use on canvas.

After high school, Robertson plans to put his repertoire of building and artistic skills to work. He plans to study architecture, not only to learn design, but also to participate in the manufacture of eco-friendly building materials and in the construction of projects. He already has learned something about interior design and landscaping, and he can do brick laying, small projects in wood frame construction and painting. Tilework, he says, is next. “I plan to teach myself,” he smiles.



Children performing at Nightfire Performance Theatre

Community High's Springer Scholarship winner is a younger-than-usual novelist

Nadeem Persico-Shammas is the kind of recent high school graduate who likes to dabble with computers and play video games. He's read and enjoyed all the Harry Potter books, and likes a variety of music from alternative rock to classic, electronic, and metal. Sound like a fairly typical 18-year-old? Maybe not so much. He's also the kind of person who, in the fifth grade, set himself the task of writing a novel. He wrote 40 pages of a fantasy story about time travel and evil emperors and then stopped, but the experience was enough to convince him that he liked writing and that it might be his forté.

Winner of this year's Suzanne Ruth Springer Scholarship Award for creative writers at Ann Arbor's Community High School, Persico-Shammas received a \$1000 honorarium toward his college education. That fifth-grade writing practice proved helpful. “I still think it was a big job for a young kid,” he says. He hasn't tried to finish the work, but he is still amazed that he attempted it. “I enjoy writing,” he says.

Persico-Shammas was chosen from among his peers by the Community High school English Chairperson Judith DeWoskin, in conjunction with other English faculty. The scholarship, named in honor of the mother of local businessman David Ufer of Ufer Insurance and Yoga Focus, was established in 2003. Ufer explained that the intent was “not to impose another academic requirement on an already jam-packed senior year,” but to honor excellent writing.

Students do not compete for the award in the traditional sense. It's very important that the student chosen is not only a great writer, but one who possesses love of the written word and who encourages that love in the community around him or her. Past recipients include Claire Seibers, 2003; Amelia Granger, 2004; Katherine Shanks, 2005; Anneka Goss and Maggie Dethloff, 2006; Eva Miller, 2007; Noam Samuel, 2008; and Lisa Raymond, 2009.

Nowadays, Persico-Shammas writes about concepts. “I write experimental prose,” he says. “I'd like to think it doesn't fall into one particular genre.” As for favorite authors, heavyweights top his list, including Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Although he hasn't yet chosen a major at U of M, where he will be an entering freshman in the fall, Persico-Shammas definitely has creative writing classes on the agenda. He adds, “I might do something with computer science or film, which is another kind of storytelling. I'd like to learn film making.”

Suzanne Ruth Springer, for whom the scholarship is named, loved Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. Springer attended Ann Arbor High School, where she was Senior Class Officer. “She was certainly an important reason why I love to read,” said Ufer. Throughout his childhood, Ufer was offered opportunities to extend his familiarity

Robertson admires the work of artists such as Salvador Dali and Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas. He is fond of Art Nouveau styles, which shows in his choice of colors and design for the Neutral Zone project. The color choices are reminiscent of those used in painting Victorian homes: bright, light colors that draw attention to architectural details.

Joining Robertson on the façade project were Neutral Zone Art Director Trevor Stone and Carlos Vasquez, a longtime friend of Robertson's and a fellow Skyline student. Paint used for the project was the low-VOC, latex base, self-priming and sealing kind, donated by Anderson Paint Company. Robertson received professional advice from John Crawford of G & Q Painting, who has worked with Neutral Zone on a number of previous projects. Crawford helped secure supplies and offered his opinion on the art and science of painting a building exterior.

The Neutral Zone, established in 1998 by teens for teens, is dedicated to “personal growth through artistic expression, community leadership and the exchange of ideas,” as expressed on their website. They offer programs in the visual arts, music, literary arts and leadership, and are known for performance poetry, all-area teen art shows, and their newly remodeled, student-run recording studio. Teens can learn about everything from how to write a good college admissions essay, to DJ-ing for fun or profit, to screen-printing t-shirts and banners, to the best cadence to present a piece of poetry to an audience.

Their website is www.neutral-zone.org and the phone number is 734-214-9995.



Halloween performance at Nightfire Performance Theatre

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with books and authors, from an invitation to see Robert Frost when the poet came to speak in Ann Arbor (Ufer was a third-grade student who declined the offer, much to his later regret) to opportunities to use the bookmobile when it came through his neighborhood.

Springer taught at the Children's Play School on Forrest, begun by Margaret Grace Dow Towsley, where she worked with young children. Ufer chose Community High as the location for this honorarium in part because "Community is the kind of school I could envision my mother attending, if it had existed in the 30's and 40's." Other schools already had scholarships of a similar nature in place, he added.

To extend awareness of the Suzanne Ruth Springer award, and to further honor the recipients, Ufer is planning a website with a sampling of material from this year's and past Springer Scholarship winners. Look for the site in the months to come at srsscholarship.org.

Mayan Womb Massage technique aids fertility and more

The Naturopathic School of Ann Arbor will be offering a 16-contact-hour course in Mayan Abdominal Massage Training, Level One Self-Care training in techniques that can support conception, fertility and childbirth, aid in digestion and support men's prostate health, among other things. The three-class series will be offered November 5, 2010 from 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. and November 6 and 7 from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Registration is \$350.00, with a deposit of \$200.00 due by September 30.

The course will be taught by instructor Jen O'Hagen of New Jersey, an affiliate of the Arvigo Institute. O'Hagen will apply techniques developed by Dr. Rosita Arvigo in conjunction with Don Elijiio Panti, a renowned Mayan shaman of Belize, with whom Dr. Arvigo studied for a 10 years. Don Elijiio believed a woman's center is her uterus, and to maintain good health it should remain in balance.

In conjunction with the class, private, one-on-one, half-hour sessions will be offered to interested persons.

Mary Light, founder and director of the Gaia School of Herbal Medicine and the Naturopathic School of Ann Arbor, suggests that this course will be helpful to a range of midwives, massage practitioners, nurses, and women and men interested in abdominal massage and its benefits. Students will learn structural work to reposition a prolapsed, tilted or fallen uterus. This technique also supports the prevention and treatment of benign prostate enlargement and digestive problems. "The goal," says Light, "is to give women and men access to techniques they can use to support their own health care and its processes." She notes, "It is empowering information and practice."

Fertility is, of course, a sensitive subject. Many women who desire pregnancy are not able to achieve it, for a variety of reasons. This class will not address any medical reasons for fertility issues. In addition, newly pregnant women (up to 19 weeks); those with active abdominal cancer, infection, or hernia; women in active menstruation; or those using an IUD for contraception are not recommended for the course.

For more information about the class and about the Mayan Womb Technique, please contact Mary Light at 734-769-7794 or visit her website at gaiaherbalstudies.net.

Nightfire teaches dance improvisation-exploration for Halloween

Just in time for Halloween, Nightfire, a performance theater and dance troupe in Ann Arbor, will offer workshops and a dance party for families and children in late October. Bring your mask, if you like, and wear clothing in which you can move freely as you learn about cats, their history and nature. Purr, prowl and play! Workshops will include instruction and improvisation utilizing a mix of World Music and various approaches to movement, including dance forms from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

Nagler has been working with children since 2000, and she has a long history of involvement with dance. She notes that Nightfire's emphasis on creativity and collaboration helps children explore avenues of performance and theater that they might not obtain in other settings. "As a result," she says, "children often come away with renewed confidence," which serves them in school drama activities or ignites their interest in more traditional dance instruction.

In fact, the name of the group comes from a place of imagination, says Nagler, where a community might gather around a fire to tell stories or celebrate. Nightfire courses often explore environmental or mythic themes, and Nagler offers courses throughout the year.

A sliding fee scale is applied; prices for the two events will range from \$5 to \$12. The location and exact dates for the workshops can be obtained from Irena Nagler at 734-996-1772 or birena@umich.edu or on the Nightfire website at www.twofeather.com/nightfire.

Playful Wisdom coaches students to find their learning style

Learning Coach Michelle Gantert Guenther of Playful Wisdom is an advocate for students struggling with school and its myriad tests, projects, reports and reading requirements. In her work with children and young adults, Guenther takes discouraged learners and helps them find positive, personally-tailored means of addressing learning challenges. She helps kids learn how smart they are and guides them to confidence in matters academic.

An engineer by training, Guenther's job at one point was to observe natural systems to see how they work, in order to then find ways to use those natural processes to help solve engineering dilemmas. After deciding to home-school her children and studying the work of various learning theorists, Guenther developed a system for assessing and addressing the learning processes of children.

Each child is an educational world unto herself, Guenther observed. She also observed that many educational programs assume all children learn the same way. Hence, Playful Wisdom was born, as an alternative to that approach.

Clients come in for an initial assessment, wherein Guenther observes and gently works to reveal the individual learning process of a student. She discovers whether

Each child is an educational world unto herself... (but) many educational programs assume all children learn the same way.

or not one doodles when listening to new material, if one likes to listen to music when he studies, or hums while working, or if one lets ideas percolate awhile before writing, among other things. These and many other unique learning habits can be understood and then applied in positive ways, so that they can help students feel more comfortable as learners.

Students meet with Guenther for six or seven sessions following the initial two-hour consultation. She shows clients tools they can use to let their learning process work for them. Clients have ranged in age from six to 39. With younger students, Guenther involves parents in the process, both as reassuring presence and as in integral part of the educational process. Her work also includes communications counseling for couples or those interested in learning how they process information and ideas, and how they can interact with others to communicate those ideas. Guenther can be contacted at 517-795-6026 or info@playfulwisdom.com.

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CRAZY WISDOM KIDS

**A new regular section of
The Crazy Wisdom Community Journal**

Articles, calendar listings, advertisements, music and book reviews, and other features... focused on raising conscious and spirited kids...

Mindful Parenting

Good Eating Habits

Integrative Medical Care for Kids

Yoga and Kids

Dads and Babies

Mothers and Daughters

Eco-friendly family living

(If you like our new CW Kids section, and would like to be contributing to it, contact bill@crazywisdom.net. We welcome story ideas, illustrations, feature writing, and photographs)