

INTERVIEW WITH JANE SAPP

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After viewing this wonderful film, *Someone Sang for Me*, several times, I realized what important ideas about arts programs, here a choral music program, were embedded and exemplified in Jane Sapp's work. Rather than trying to write out my own versions of some of those ideas, I interviewed Jane. I had met her in the 1980's, when she and her family were working at the Highlander Research and Educational Center in Tennessee, and knew she could eloquently articulate her thinking behind the activities we see so vividly on the screen.

Our conversation ranged over seven questions, in this order:

1. How does the “**transformational power**” of the arts come about?
2. What is the role of student **writing** at the end of some discussions?
3. How are the **songs** selected?
4. What is the place of musical **skills** in the program?
5. How do the students get opportunities for **leadership**, mentioned as one of the goals?
6. What are the students' **responsibilities** as group members?
7. How could this after-school program be **adapted** for the regular school day?

Jane did not have these questions in advance, and what follows is her thinking out loud. Our conversational format is retained: my brief questions in italics and her

answers edited only for length. Together, Jane gives us some of her program principles with which other music educators can design their own.

I

You speak in the film of the “transformative power” of the arts, and we see it happen for Shavaughnya. The change in her bodily stance, in the way she holds up her head, as well as what she says--about her hard life at the beginning and her exciting possibilities for college at the end. Can you say more about how that power works itself out? How you think about it?

I’m thinking about so many kids who go from where Shavaughnya was to where she is now. . . There are several layers. One layer is the group, the artistic process that involves a group of people trying to create something together. There’s something in that process that is strengthening and affirmative. It also creates a sense of community, and the kids are strengthened by each other. Another is that something in the artistic process keeps possibilities open; it helps you always to need to see what is possible for you to do.

It is possible to create a song. I’m thinking about this group I worked with at MIT last weekend for their Martin Luther King youth conference. My kids had to lead a workshop. It would meet for an hour in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, and each group had to create something in that time. MIT originally asked me to do it. I refused and said I was totally leaving this workshop up to the kids. I wanted it so much to be their process. What was interesting to me in watching them was how they did the workshop, how they saw the process. I saw our process reflected back to me.

They called their workshop, “From an idea to a song.” The first thing they did was several icebreakers. My kids, for their morning hour, spent time just on getting to know each other. They did all kinds of icebreakers, all kinds of games. You wouldn’t even think we were ever going to get to the music part, because they spent time on building relationships with the kids in the room.

Then they did something very interesting. They took a simple song, “Row, row, row your boat,” and they told the group, “We can take this song and do something different with it.” And they started creating a rhythm, and then they started “Row, **row** (clap), row your boat,” and somebody got on the keyboard and did some stuff, and people started clapping. Before you knew it, there was this wonderful thing that happened. What I saw was that first, “Let’s build relationships, the sense of the group,” and then “I can show you what’s possible for you to do.”

When we came back in the afternoon, they started discussing issues. They knew they had the kids then, because they had the relationships, and they had built a sense of trust. So the kids were ready to talk about all kinds of stuff that was on their minds: violence, what it means to be a teenager, what their fears are, what their hopes are, what their dreams are. What they decided was, “What we’re talking about is life, our life. So let’s make a song about our life.” That’s what the song was, and it was beautiful. The only thing I did, at one point, was to go and give them a **little** bit of confidence that they could actually make this song happen, because they were trying to be so perfect about it.

The point is that I saw a process reflected back to me in what the kids did, in ways that I had not thought about. I saw them saying, “First of all, we need to get to know each other.” And that is indeed what we do here. I spend a lot of time just getting to know each other, talking, having dinners together, going out together, doing things together, because building that relationship is really important. And then watching them using the arts to show what is possible, that’s also building confidence: “I can do something; I can say something; I can **think** something, and make it happen.” So many young people, especially when we look at issues of class and race, feel powerless in their lives, and they also feel that their communities are powerless. If we can engage them in a process that shows them that they can make something happen, it really is transformative for them.

II

*That’s such a great way for a teacher to see what’s important to her kids, to watch them take over the teaching role and see what they select and carryout. One other thing that happens in the film, at least once: you have the kids all **write** something. There’s been a discussion, and then they all take out journals. Is that an important part of your process?*

Two reasons: One, I don’t want them to lose the moment. A lot of feelings get created out of those discussions. In the film, you can see the kids get excited, or you see Shavaughnya being a little moody, or whatever. The discussion creates something inside of them; it stirs up something. I have no way of capturing that and holding on to it, except to have them write it down or create a song out of it, and writing it down is the first way of creating a song.

I really stumbled onto that, writing it down, I didn't start off with it. I happened to be working with a group of kids, and it was really difficult to get them to speak. That's another reason why I have them write it down, because then you can get everybody to speak. I wanted to know how each person was **hearing** the conversation and **feeling** the discussion; so it just occurred to me to have them write, even if it was just three sentences.

The first time, when I stumbled onto this writing, I read what they wrote and then typed it out, and I gave it back to them, "Here's what you wrote." I noticed that they passed it around to each other. "I want to see what you wrote, I want to see it." I thought, "Hmmm, they're really interested in each other's ideas." So I kept doing that, asking them to write. What I saw from them was their way of hearing from each other, and sensing how each person took the ideas. So it became a part of my process.

And, if we create a song out of a discussion, it is a way to use everybody's words. In the creation of a song, for me, the group process, the collective community process, is very important. I'm not sure why, but it is. But I do know if you're creating a song with kids, and you include something they have written, that each person has written, even if you just take a phrase, when that person hears their phrase in that song, you can just see them rise. You can see the pride in their faces. You can see them strengthen. It's like you honored them, by using their words. You have legitimized their thinking. You have legitimized their existence, to a

certain extent, by giving voice to some phrase, some gem of their own thinking.

When I saw that happen, I kept doing it.

What probably doesn't come through in the film is that I've done this all around the country. So what the work here in Springfield allowed me to do was to have a consistent amount of time with a group of kids who sort of solidified a process. Some of this I had tried out in different places, but I had never had the opportunity to be in one place long enough to keep working through it.

III

*That brings up a question about how you select **songs**. Hector is one example in the film where his words become the verses of a song, with the "Fallen Angels" chorus. Is that a regular part of the program?*

Yes, the students are **very** free to do that. There are two processes: what I call the **collective** song-writing, and, if anyone has a song that they want to **bring** to the group, I encourage them to do that too

I can explain it like this: In the African American tradition, you have a form of singing that's called "Leader Chorus." Many people are familiar with the "Call and Response" or "Leader Chorus" form, where a strong talented voice makes the call, and the group responds. What I like about the call and response structure is that it affirms the strength of the **full** group while, at the same time, the person who has a **special** gift has a place to stand out and we can nurture that gift as well. There's always been that delicate balance.

[In choosing other songs] there's so many things I think of. Sometimes I choose a song not so much for the kids as for those that I think will be listening to them. For example, my little ones did this show tune, "If we could talk to the animals. " We had to sing in New York at the Museum of Natural History for the Jane Goodall 40th anniversary, and they wanted us to sing a song like that, about animals. We learned that song and "Over the Rainbow," because I wanted to show the range of songs that they were capable of doing.

And I wanted the **kids** to also know that there was a range of things that they could do, that it's not necessarily the song, but what you **bring** to the song—that you could take something that's **not** familiar and what you do every day, but the power of your life, and your experiences, and your knowledge, and your culture, and your spirit, can be **breathed** into anything you do. You can breathe it in to "If we could talk to the animals," you can breathe it into chemistry, you can breathe it into algebra—that's where I hope it gets taken. Sometimes I choose songs because of what I want the kids to learn about how their life experiences can be translated into other things. It's not only the other things breathing into you, but you're breathing into them as well.

I taught the little elementary school kids a song in Latin, "Dona Nobis Pacem" (sings the first line) for a Christmas program. When they sang that song--when you **encourage** them to use that voice, that spirit, that's already there--what they brought to that song—I got chillbumps every time they sang it. It was just **so** beautiful, **so** special.

Then I'm always wanting songs that keep the kids connected to some things: to history, to a pride in themselves, confidence and affirmation. I feel these kids don't get enough affirmation; they don't get enough of it in the schools--when you come from communities where people are always saying there's something wrong, there's not enough there, it lacks in whatever. So I really want to overdo it. "I am beautiful," "Black is beautiful"—you can't say it **enough** to them.

Then, I try to choose songs that also help them think about other people, and how they're OK too. There's a song that Voices of Today does, it's called "The Puzzle Song." The song really says that all of us are part of the puzzle. I want them to know that if you are special, there are other special people too, and that it takes all of us.

I want them to know the songs of the civil rights movement, because they're songs of **hope**, they're songs that came from people who were determined to make a change. I hear the kids say, "Ohhhh, you can't change this. This is the way it is," especially when we talking about problems in the schools. I tell them, "I remember in the fifties, hearing, 'Ohhh, this is the way it's gonna be. You young people, you may as well just come on in and sit down, because all that marching, all that whatever—white folk been doing this for years. And it ain't gonna change.' But it **did** change. Maybe not all of the changes that we wanted, but some **real significant changes** did take place, because some people believed that you could make change." That's what I try to tell them. And that's why I want them to know those songs, like "I Woke up this Morning with My Mind Set on Freedom," and

“Don’t you Let Nobody Turn You ‘Round.”. I want them to **believe** that change is possible. If you stand up, **something can happen**.

And there’s some songs I choose because they’re musically **challenging**. I want them to experience the challenge of stretching their own voices and their own skills as musicians. I want them to know music, and sing octaves, and arpeggios, and stretch themselves musically. So there are all kinds of reasons.

IV

*You mention that some songs you pick just to challenge them and stretch their **skills** as musicians. How do you do that?*

When I was studying music myself, when I was an undergraduate, I remember a piano professor who would constantly drill the scales, the scales, the scales [mocking piano scales with her voice]. I did a terrible job. But, I remember he gave me two compositions to work on. One was a Brahms Rhapsody in B Minor, which has scales in it, and the other one was a Liszt, very grandiose. And he said, “It is **amazing!** If I gave you this as a scale to play, and I just said, ‘Play in octaves, up and down the scale’ [she sings the Liszt chords as scales], then you’d play it terribly. But if you have to execute it in a composition, it’s **beautiful!**” He was asking me why that was. I said, “Maybe this makes more sense to me, when it’s connected to the composition.”

I think about that with the kids. When you do, “Some - where” [sings the first word of “Over the Rainbow”], that’s a leap of an octave [then sings the whole first line]. There’s a lot of leaping around in that song. They had a hard time with it

at first, but they struggled with it **harder** because I wasn't asking them to do [sings scale without words]. I was asking them to do [sings], "Some – where." They struggled to try to get it because they really wanted to sing the song. They weren't trying to sing the octave, they were trying to sing the **song**. And they sang it beautifully.

I'm always saying to them, "Tell me the story now," and that makes them want to say the words more clearly. So we don't have to do this "k-k-k, p-p-p" I had to do when I was studying. If I hear them not doing it, I say, "Well, I can't hear you say 'Please' so you have to go **P-**." And they will, because what they're trying to do is tell me a **story**; they're not trying to sing the consonants, or sing the vowels. I've just found that working on **interpretation** of the song, I can get the skills within that.

And they know the songs are going somewhere else, to an audience. We're not just going over and over it for nothing.

V

*At the end of the film, in addition to all your other goals, you mention **leadership**. The MIT workshop is a fabulous example. Are there other opportunities?*

Lately, we're getting to do a lot more of that. We just did a program last week at Holyoke Community College, talking about the film, and the kids had to do it. We're going to Vermont in April, when the Head Start centers all come together. My group performed for them about three years ago, and now they've

asked for the group to be the keynoters for the conference. So again, they'll sing and speak—about what it means to be in the **group**, what the experience has been, why it has been important for them, what can they say to others about trying to start something like this—like they did in Holyoke. That's the teen-agers. I've not done as much of that with the little kids.

At the MIT conference, someone commented to me that my kids stood out. (There were about a hundred kids there." He said, "They seem so friendly, warm. And they just support everybody so much. Whenever anybody stood up to say anything, they were clapping, and they pay attention." He also said how **politically** aware they are. Now that was really interesting to me. We do have a lot of political discussions; we talk about what's going on in the world. We have a lot of arguments, mainly with them telling me I'm back in the days. We were talking about what we were going to wear, and I said, "Why don't we wear African togs?" There was a big long discussion. "It's not hip; it's not cool; it's not whatever." We've had discussions about my memories of the Civil Rights Movement, and we've had arguments. "Times are different. What you all did back then, we can't do that now."

That discussion was a **major** turning point with my earlier "Voices of Today" group. Kids now—they don't have a lot of hope that things can be changed. I **told** them about the kinds of things that got changed during the civil rights movement. That was a major breakthrough, because then tears started flowing, and they started telling me about all the kinds of racism that they're seeing in their

lives, in the schools and other places where they are. It just moved them to know what that struggle had been like. I talk about the civil rights movement **all** the time, with them.

When the kids at the MIT conference were asked, “What do you think was King’s mission? And what do you think will be the mission of youth?” a lot of people said, “Bringing black and white people together.” One of my kids stood up and said, “Yeah, I think that King wanted to bring people together, but I think that he wanted to unite **souls**. When he finished there was like a standing ovation for his comments. That’s Dimitri. Their leadership really emerged in this conference last weekend. I think it was because I said, “I will not say anything. It is all **totally** up to you.” So they knew the whole ball game had to be theirs. I’m just so proud of them.

VI

We’ve talked about what the students learn, what their opportunities are. What are their responsibilities?

That’s an interesting question, because the kids have invited some people to go. I have rules, but the kids really in a sense execute them. All the typical things: I want the kids to be drug-free. We’ve had some problems there. We try to give people an opportunity to get themselves straight. But if not, they have to go. I once had a kid in the group who became involved in a gang—we cannot have that.

Attendance is important. I don’t want to hear about frequent absentees from school. Attendance in the group’s not a problem; the kids **want** to come. I

encourage the kids to keep their grades up. I've said to them, "I know you can try real hard sometimes, and you're having problems with a subject. But it's your responsibility to say you're having problems, and let's figure out how we can get some help."

One other rule, and this is my **hard and fast rule**: I do not tolerate them disrespecting each other. That is not acceptable. That will throw them out before a lot of other things. In this group, they **have** to show respect for each other, and they must **support** each other. I can't have this laughing at somebody because they sang a song and it sounded funny to you, or talking about people behind their back—all that kind of stuff. I won't tolerate that. And it's a responsibility of theirs to make sure not only that **they** have an attitude of respect, but that they help to create that atmosphere within the group. We struggled with that for a while. But now it's pretty much the culture of the group. For the little kids, the same is true for them.

VII

*Last question: As the film explains, your groups now meet after school. If you, or somebody like you, were to do what you're doing **within** the regular school day, are there adaptations they would need to think about?*

[A long pause.] Most chorale teachers want to start with the repertoire, because you have to push to get ready for the Thanksgiving program, the This program, the That program. I feel that sometime, but I don't let it push me because I know, I always know, that the result of the other way is going to be so much more **powerful**. It's more than the singing, it's the development of the **person**.

So I think that the adaptation is an adaptation of **time**, time to really get to know the kids in the group, time to focus on those other things that have less to do with the repertoire, and more to do with developing the person, developing the kids to be ready to **bring** something really special to the repertoire.

What you want is **music**; you want the **spirit**. That has to come from the person. So first work on the person. That's the adaptation that has to be made. You can't just listen and hear soprano, alto, tenor, and bass; you gotta look and see Janie and Jeffie and Carmen and Erica, and all of the textures that they are—textures, and possibilities, spirits, and intelligences. I think that's the difference in my approach.

A Final Comment

Jane Sapps' core ideas are supported by academic research. For example, Shirley Brice Heath speaks from a decade of research on arts programs around the country about their "capacity to enlist young people in meaningful planning, assumption of "real" roles in organization and management, and sustained focus on details critical to quality-level long-term production" (2001, p 10). And Pedro Noguera, writing from his long research experience on "how racial identity affects school performance" in both California and Massachusetts, recommends that teachers "find ways to incorporate information related to the history and culture of students into the curriculum....[and inspire students] by getting them to believe in

themselves, to work hard and persist, and to dream, plan for the future, and set goals” (2002, p3).

Jane’s is not a lone voice. But, most important of all, hers is a **teacher’s** voice, showing us in the film, and explaining to us in this interview, just what it takes to bring these important ideas to life.

Heath, S.B. (2001). Three’s not a crowd: Plans, roles and focus in the arts. Educational Researcher, 30 (7), 10-17.

Noguera, P.A. (2003). How racial identity affects school performance. Harvard Education Letter, 19 (2), 1-3. (Excerpted from Noguera’s chapter in M. Sadowski (Ed.) (2003). Adolescents at school: Perspectives on youth, identity, and education. Cambridge MA. Harvard Education Press.)

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