The ARTISM Music Project

Autism: Responding Together In Sound and Movement

Interactive music-play program at The Florida State University
What is Autism?
The autism spectrum covers a wide range of conditions involving significant challenges in social interaction, behavior, and communication. The CDC estimates that one out of every 110 children in the United States has an ASD, or autism spectrum disorder.

What is ARTISM?
ARTISM stands for “Autism: Responding Together In Sound and Movement.” The ARTISM Music Project is a federally funded program for children on the autism spectrum and their families. The centerpiece of the ARTISM project is the ARTISM Ensemble, a music performance collective featuring the talents of children with ASDs, their parents, and professional musicians representative of diverse world music cultures. Music-play sessions on a specially designed E-WoMP, or Exploratory World Music Playground, along with concerts and other public outreach events are central to meeting ARTISM’s mission of providing direct services to people with autism and to raising autism awareness throughout the state of Florida.
What defines ARTISM’s process and philosophy?
Whatever forms they may take, ARTISM programs are grounded in a philosophy of following the child’s lead and, beyond basic safety considerations, proceeding with no pre-determined expectations or demands regarding final outcomes, musical or otherwise. The ARTISM approach privileges a priority of allowing the participating children to define their own terms of creative exploration and social engagement as music-makers.

Does an ARTISM program reaquire an ARTISM Ensemble?
No. Again, the concept of ARTISM, rather than the specific content of an ARTISM program, is the project’s key factor. The model is extremely flexible and malleable to a plethora of situations.
What is an E-WoMP?
The E-WoMP, or Exploratory World Music Playground, is the ARTISM project’s central facility. It features an array of portable, affordable, accessible percussion instruments, the majority of which were provided to the project by Remo, Inc.

Can you create your own E-WoMP?
Yes. The original E-WoMP design can be fully replicated or may be adapted and customized to suit specific programmatic, space, and budgetary needs. Moreover, the E-WoMP principle and the ARTISM approach may be applied to virtually any combination of instruments in any type of location. An ARTISM program could even be implemented using no instruments at all, for example, using only vocal music, movement activities, or body music.
What is ethnomusicology and how does it inform the goals of ARTISM?

In ARTISM, we approach musical engagement as an ethnomusicological enterprise. Ethnomusicology has been defined as “the study of music as culture.” In ARTISM, the musical world of the E-WoMP is our culture and the children with ASD who participate in the project are the “cultural insiders” of that world. Their expertise and authority—as music-makers, social beings, and representatives of the cultural space they inhabit—are unquestioned. The rest of the participants—the parents, the music-play facilitators, and even concert audience members attending ARTISM performances—are there to learn from these children: to gain insights into what they find meaningful, valuable, musical, and fun; to appreciate their uniquely individual and culturally collective abilities and modes of expression; and ideally, if invited to do so, to share actively in all of this through their own musical participation.

What makes ARTISM an ethnomusicological project?

In entering the E-WoMP, we approach our task much as an ethnomusicologist does in entering “the field” to conduct fieldwork, whether in Bali, Ghana, Paris, Miami, or anywhere else in the world. Ethnomusicologists do not try to teach, direct, change, improve, or “fix” the musics they explore through their research and participation, let alone the musicians who create those musics. Similarly, our task is not to teach or direct; it is not to change, improve, or “fix” people on the autism spectrum. Quite to the contrary, it is to listen well, to learn, to connect and communicate, to appreciate ability rather than focus on disability. Ultimately, it is our responsibility, and indeed the responsibility of all members of a humane and compassionate society, to accept and value the person with autism as a person who is whole, complete, capable, and deserving of respect and attention on his or her own terms.
How can you get involved with an ARTISM Music-Play program or start your own?
For information on how to launch your own ARTISM project or get involved in an existing program in your area, contact Michael Bakan at michaelbakan@gmail.com. We are currently facilitating the development of satellite ARTISM programs throughout the state of Florida and would be very interested in hearing from you. Grant funding in support of new projects is possible.

Where can I learn more?
For basic information on autism and ASD:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html

For publications related to this project:
www.michaelbakan.com (“Recent Articles” link)

For information on ethnomusicology and applied ethnomusicology:
http://webdb.iu.edu/sem/scripts/aboutus/aboutus.cfm
http://webdb.iu.edu/sem/scripts/groups/sections/applied/applied_ethnomusicology_section.cfm

For information on music therapy and autism:
http://www.musictherapy.org/research/factsheets/
http://www.musictherapy.org/assets/1/7/bib_autism10.pdf
This program was made possible by the generous support of the following:

The National Endowment for the Arts • Florida Department of State – Division of Cultural Affairs • The Florida Council on Arts and Culture • The Florida State University College of Music • Council on Culture & Arts For Tallahassee/Leon County (COCA) • FSU Autism Institute and Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) • Remo, Inc.
FROM CHILDREN/PARENTS INVOLVED IN THE ARTISM MUSIC PROJECT:

“I like it because I get to beat on drums and do all sorts of stuff. It makes me feel pretty good. It helps me learn to let things out a little and have fun.”
- Judah Coffee, child participant

“Being a part of the ARTISM Ensemble is a priceless opportunity for our family. It gives us a creative environment in which to play, grow, and experience music together with some truly wonderful people. ARTISM has helped our son grow in his capacity to express himself and present his own collaborations to others in a public setting, to be comfortable and excited about doing so, and to appreciate and understand the creativity of other people while working together to create amazing music.”
- Mary and Larry Coffee, Judah’s parents

“Coming to the ARTISM rehearsals is my daughter’s one meaningful social activity, aside from school. It is her only opportunity to meet with fellow musicians who respect her talent and contributions without patronizing her. I believe she thinks of ARTISM members as friends. I think of our group as a family to her.”
- Sophie Wacongne-Speer, mother of child participant Emilie Speer

FROM CONCERT AUDIENCES:

“This is the first time I’ve experienced something like this! Great way to bring awareness to the community! Awesome job!”

“The music had such amazing personality. I enjoyed every minute of it. Keep up the hard work, because it’s paying off.”

“Thank you for the wonderful work you are doing. I am an ESE educator and think you are onto something good! Enjoyed it!”