Music has far greater power to affect our minds and bodies than most individuals realize. I was aware even as a young child how much music affected my own energy level, mood, and thinking. At age nine when I was playing the organ for a worship service, I began to notice the power I had as a musician. One Sunday, it dawned on me that the way I played the music had an effect on others; I could control the way the offering was received by changing the speed of the piece of music. So, I gradually increased the tempo, and to my delight the men moved faster. Then, slowed down the tempo, and the ushers walked slower.

At that moment, I experientially understood a phenomenon in music that is an underlying principle for much music therapy activity and for educational and personal uses of music in our lives. Music can affect us physiologically and psychologically through a process called "entrainment." As music is listened to, and if we "resonate" with it, it can change us. Depending on how certain musical elements are combined, music can excite or calm, stimulate or relax, and control or free us or others.

Music has a calming effect. When our then 5-year-old daughter Cathy was having difficulty going to sleep, we found that playing a recording of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony (No. 6) was sufficiently calming to put her to sleep. I arrived at a hospital in Berea, Kentucky one day to conduct a therapeutic session in the Extended Care wing and found a 17-year-old male crying. I was told he had been crying for over two days, and everyone was on edge. The staff asked if I could do anything with music to calm him. I began playing music that mirrored his agitated mood (loud, dissonant, disorganized, complex) and gradually changed the music to reflect the transition toward becoming calm (softer, consonant, ordered, simple). Within 20 minutes he had stopped crying and went to sleep. The nurses called me a "miracle worker." Music has that marvelous, God-given power to "calm the savage beast," as the Bible describes David's music calming the King Saul.

In special education classes I have used music for both therapeutic and educational purposes. Because music affects many levels of our brains, it is uniquely able to affect emotions and set the mood of the classroom, or home. Music can be used in conjunction with almost any activity throughout the day, with any person, no matter what his or her disability may be, no matter what the age. Following are some ways that music can be used in the lives of those learners with special needs, with suggestion of the type of music to be most effective in a particular area.

Use music:

1) to awaken an individual (in the morning or from a nap). Start with gentle music, softly played, and gradually increase tempo and volume.

2) to increase energy. Increase volume as well as tempo (from 60-70 beats per minute to 90-120 beats per minute).

3) for exercising. A steady, strong beat increases endurance and helps motivate and organize steady movements during muscle development time. It can also be a diversion, as well as a pain-reduction mechanism.

4) during eating. Quiet, moderate to slow tempo music can aid digestion and help keep individuals calmer and quieter.

5) during bathroom breaks. Calming music can be a good diversion and helps relax muscles.

6) to set the mood in the room. The kind of music chosen can set the mood as learners enter the room. If they need to be energized, lively music awakens energy and expectations. If they need to be calmed, gradually decreasing volume and tempo can calm them down.

7) to welcome class members. Singing greetings and names has more impact than just speaking the names.

8) to teach information, ideas, and concepts. Information learned through singing activates both hemispheres of the brain and increases memory function.

9) to give directions. Singing instructions is often more effective than saying them.

10) to help create an environment for reading. Play soft, instrumental music while students read. It helps diminish distractions and keeps their minds from wandering.

11) to time assignments. Let the playing of a musical selection be the timing activity rather than the clock.

12) for motor development. Many musical activities can increase motor skills development. Many percussion instruments provide immediate
feedback while developing motor skills.

13) for release of emotions/feelings. Playing aggressively on a drum or other percussion instrument provides a safe vehicle for the release of strong feelings.

14) as an alternative communication system. Playing question and answer games with instruments provides another communication opportunity for members with limited verbal development.

15) for social skill development. Learning to take turns, to be a leader, and to share is more easily facilitated in a musical situation.

16) for rewards. Use listening time or playing time as a contingency for completion of a task or appropriate behavior.

17) as a recreation or leisure activity. The rich variety of musical resources available today makes it possible for almost anyone to be successful in music making for pure pleasure or joy.

18) for going to sleep. Quiet, slow, calm music is wonderful for a transition from being awake to being asleep. Because music can alter consciousness so easily, it is a natural to provide a secure environment for peaceful sleep.

Music Activities

Music activities used in special education include: moving to/with music; playing instruments or creating sounds on objects that serve as instrument substitutes; singing; listening to music; creating music/sounds or words and movements to music; learning information about music, instruments, composers, or learning to read music.

Certain instruments lend themselves well to the adaptability needed with persons who have special needs. A variety of percussion/rhythm instruments is a basic starting place. Kazoos are great for musical as well as speech and respiratory development. Recorders, ukuleles, omnichords, chime bells, and adaptive guitars are also used successfully with special members.

Teachers need to take advantage of the variety of recordings that are available today through companies like Kimbo and Educational Activities. As I concluded the original version of this article published in Special Education Today April/May/June 1996, "...May God continue to use the special gift of music to enrich the lives of those special individuals He has entrusted to us to teach and love."