

# THE SOUND OF SONGS WITHOUT WORDS

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## Background

When singing songs, there is an interaction of music and language. These are the two main forms of culturally acquired vocal behaviour. To understand more about the role of language in singing, we have studied an exceptional case of a child who sings songs although her language development is completely absent. This is a girl with an autistic disorder (early infantile autism) and severe mental handicap.

## Aims

The presentation describes the musical activity of the autistic child, focussing on her implementation of speech sounds in singing.

## Method

The study is based on a long-term video documentation of the single case, covering the period from age 3 - 15. The recorded singing events amount to about two hours of audio data or 269 instances of singing covering 28 different songs. Phonetic and musical transcriptions were prepared. The subject's musical abilities were assessed. Her phonetic output was compared with that of normal, developing and disordered speech.

## Results

The subject reveals good musical abilities in singing. Her way of handling the model songs, though, is somewhat different from normal song reproduction. As to her phonetic production, the vowels reveal a great similarity to the speech input, but the consonants show striking differences in the inventory and in the relative frequencies of phone types. The subject's consonant production is not typical for any form of spoken language.

## Conclusions

The autistic girl's musical ability in singing has developed even in the absence of language. We interpret her deviant sound production as a radical adaptation of speech sounds to musical purposes.