

## **Some thoughts about singing in a language different from English**

(part of program notes for concert dedicated to music from Spanish speaking countries)

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Parents and students often ask why we sing songs in other languages. There are many good reasons. Over the past several years, we have sung most of our songs in English, but also some in French, Spanish, German, Italian, Latin, Russian, Polish, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Ty, Zulu, Shona, and Ga. Singing in foreign languages actually helps children listen more carefully to unfamiliar sounds and sing with greater consistency of vowel tones. It helps children learn to distinguish phonemes, or basic sound blocks needed for good reading skills. Singing in foreign languages also help children learn to memorize sounds, words, and sequences. Because we use Pestalozzian principles of Observe/Experience/Reflect students become actively involved with their minds, bodies, and hearts. Singing in foreign languages exposes children to sounds not found in English and prevents the brain from pruning sound recognition cells. Young children who hear sounds found in foreign languages are better able to learn other languages later and speak with less accent.

Why a whole program dedicated to Spanish songs? My friend, Dr. Mary Goetze, professor of music at Indiana State University, recommends focusing on one language at a time, and immersing students in that language so they learn a core group of sounds, words, and cultural understanding. We are singing most songs in this program in both Spanish and English for four reasons: 1) to validate and celebrate those of our students who speak Spanish as a first language, 2) to help those children make connections between Spanish and English, 3) to help our native English speakers learn some Spanish, and 4) to foster greater understanding, acceptance, and caring for those struggling in school to catch up with native English speakers.

Probably the most important reason for singing in other languages is it helps us learn about other people's customs, their different ways of thinking, and their ways of making sense of the world. It gives us a wider perspective to view and understand our own world. It lessens our tendency to think we know everything and do everything the 'right' way. It helps us be more compassionate and caring, learning that people everywhere are basically the same as we are. All peoples of the world love to sing, laugh, dance, and be in community. The human physical and neural systems seem to be hard-wired for music no matter what country one lives in. Music can reach across political differences and bring the world a little closer to peace. And if none of the previous reasons resonate, music is just plain fun.