

THE TOMATIS METHOD
Singing With The Ear

By
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Singing With The Ear

by Ron B. Minson, M.D.

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Ron Minson, M.D., of The Tomatis Centre

“My one wish in writing about the Tomatis Method is to convey the joy, happiness and gratitude I hear from our clients. This task is especially difficult because we hardly have a language to fully express our experiences, but the importance to do so is great!”

Like many parents of children with learning disabilities, my introduction to the Tomatis Method came through the deep suffering and pain of my daughter Erica. As parents seeking solutions to her dyslexia and consequent depression, our suffering was no less acute.

All the love we poured into Erica, adopted at three weeks of age, was not enough to console her from the ravages of a listening disorder that manifested in her learning disability. Even with specialists, tutors, special education teachers, medications and other therapies, Erica reached the stage of suicidal depression by 19 years of age. That's when I heard about the Tomatis Method through a musician-therapist friend. Doubtful, skeptical and fearful of being let down again, still we ventured to gain help from this seemingly strange approach to therapy — listening to the music of Mozart to deal with depression and reading problems.

Offering Erica my emotional support as fully as possible, I entered the program with her. I wanted to experience what she might be going through. The results surprised me — bringing phenomenal, long-lasting benefits not only for her but also for me.

When she started the program, Erica almost immediately felt her depression lift. Her sense of awkwardness and uncoordinated body movements began to disappear as she developed a deeper sense of self and an intense listening to her body. I could see a brightness in her eyes that I had not observed for years. More animated and talkative, she was able to express her deep feelings for the first time. She had more energy and required less sleep. She even wanted to complete high school on her own through a correspondence course.

Five years after being in the Tomatis program, Erica still enjoys these benefits. Now working at the same job for two and one-half years, she is still without depression.

We credit the Tomatis Method with saving her life.

As for me, I feel increased calmness and require less sleep. I rarely feel overwhelmed. And I've become more joyful and more organized. Happily, I've been able to juggle multiple tasks simultaneously without the familiar stress and irritability that accompanied having too many things to do. Very importantly, my “authentic” voice was released as I experienced a fullness and resonance I had never known.

The remarkable changes in my daughter and myself prompted me to go to France where I studied directly with Dr. Alfred A. Tomatis. I'd like to describe what I learned about this man's life, his theories and practice.

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Great 20th Century Thinker

I believe Dr. Tomatis will be recognized as one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century. Many of his early theories, including the dominance of the right ear for speech, language and musicality, and intrauterine listening, first garnered criticism and controversy. They have now been established and accepted by the majority of professionals in this field.

Born in Nice in 1910 to an Italian mother and French father, Dr. Tomatis was premature, weighing just over three pounds at birth. Left for dead while his frightened young mother was being attended, his astute grandmother noticed signs of life and was able to revive him.

As a sickly child, young Alfred was repeatedly diagnosed inaccurately, and unsuccessfully treated by many doctors and specialists. Then he met a doctor who, puzzled by the boy's symptoms, simply said, "I don't know what's wrong but I will find out." This attitude deeply impressed Tomatis — so much that he made a decision to enter medicine as a profession.

To give his eight-year-old son a better education, his father put Alfred in a Parisian school to study and learn French. Because his native tongue was Nicoise, he felt like a total stranger in this new French language, and experienced the shame and embarrassment of a dyslexic child unable to communicate. Gradually he overcame his difficulties and entered medical school at the Sorbonne, keeping alive the promise he made as a child. After a tour of army duty during World War II, he specialized in otorhinolaryngology (ENT) — specialty for ears, nose and throat — and opened a private practice.

Voice-Ear Connection

Alfred's father Umberto Tomatis, a world-renowned operatic bass, sent many of his fellow musicians experiencing difficulty with their voices and musicality to his specialist son. At that time, people believed the voice was strictly controlled by the larynx. Through his work with musicians and singers, Dr. Tomatis discovered a cybernetic loop between the ear and the voice. The voice is really under the control of the ear!

At the same time, Dr. Tomatis was studying hearing loss among aircraft factory workers for the French government. Here, he discovered hearing loss can be caused psychologically as well as physically, and that distortions in hearing can affect the entire body, psyche and nervous system.

In addition, he developed a keen interest in intrauterine listening and life in the womb. It was sparked by two things: his premature birth and the work of Conrad Lorentz on singing and non-singing birds. Dr. Tomatis became the first scientist to write about the unborn child's ability to hear and listen in the womb. And his own difficulty in learning French prompted Alfred to study the combination of language with dyslexia, learning disabilities and the ability to integrate foreign languages. Underlying all of these pursuits was his relentless desire to "find out" when faced with puzzling illnesses in his patients.

Theories Now Accepted

In more than 40 years of research and practice, Doctor Tomatis discovered the incredible role the ear plays in our development and how it supports our well-being. He learned that distortions in hearing and listening often contribute greatly to bodily and emotional disease. Many of his theories, once controversial and disregarded, have been proven and accepted.

For example, he developed his theory of the dominant right ear by observing that the precise control of musicians' voices is governed by their right ears. Just as people have a dominant hand or eye, the leading right ear is most suited for control of speech and musicality.

His work on intrauterine listening turned Dr. Tomatis from the laughing stock of his medical community into a credible source. He believes the unborn child hears and even listens to the mother's voice in the womb. The voice is a source of nourishment. Interrupting the continuity of the mother's voice to a newborn child could significantly contribute to the learning disabilities my daughter experienced. Today, it's well-known that there's a higher incidence of learning disabilities in adopted children than in the general population.



Role of Ear In Charging the Brain

As a psychiatrist, I have witnessed the positive effects of cortically energizing or charging the brain hundreds of times while working with depressed or anxious patients, and while treating patients with traumatic brain injury.

Eighty percent of the neuro receptors for sound (the hair cells in the Organ of Corti in the brain) respond only to frequencies above 3000 hertz (cps). This provides one-third of the charge the ear supplies to the brain, with the other two-thirds

coming from stimulation to the vestibular system of the inner ear. This system governs muscle tone, coordination and balance. Stimulating it contributes to changes in body posture, vocal control, balance, handwriting, gross and fine motor movements, and integrating body "schema".

When listening to the high-frequency filtered music of Mozart, most people experience profound positive changes in energy, appetite, concentration, attention span, and other mental and bodily functions. I strongly emphasize the importance of appropriate counseling in conjunction with this listening.

Using the Tomatis Method, I have personally helped people suffering from sexual abuse, depression, anxiety, traumatic head injury and chronic fatigue syndrome overcome many — and sometimes all — of their symptoms. They no longer need medication.

The key? I combine the Tomatis Method with counseling that focuses on the present and future, not the past. Then clients can make changes very rapidly — changes which seem permanent. I know that the satisfaction of seeing people experience the joy, energy, and freedom from many disabling symptoms is highly gratifying. That reward keeps more than 200 centers in the world alive and well!

Electronic Ear

Dr. Tomatis developed a sophisticated apparatus called an electronic ear to replicate the workings of a normal ear. It helps retrain the two muscles of the middle ear which are often damaged by multiple ear infections. He combined this electronic ear with a series of high-pass filters to gradually drop out the low tones. This way, he ultimately arrived at the enriching and nourishing frequencies above 8000 hertz, the sounds similar to how a mother's voice would be heard in the womb. The frequencies are then fed to the listener through special headsets equipped with bone and air conduction transmitters. Changes stem not only from retraining the muscles of the middle ear, but from the cortical charge the brain receives from the ears. In effect, they act as transducers of physical sound into electrical energy.

Basically, the Tomatis Method taps into the music of Mozart — primarily his violin concerti rich in high frequencies, Gregorian chants, and the filtered mother's voice for children. Each program is individually orchestrated with variations on a theme so there can be differences of length and time, depending on the individual. Each session generally lasts two hours, while most programs vary from 20 to 40 days. They are grouped into phases spaced by three-to-four-week breaks, allowing integration and assimilation to occur.

The Passive Phase

Aligning with the anthropological and developmental models of listening and hearing, the Tomatis Method begins with the passive phase. The client listens to the music of Mozart gradually filtered through the electronic ear. Sound passes to the listener through both bone and air conduction in the headset. Two channels — one for low tones and the other for high — open and close intermittently through an electronic "gate" that further alters the listening experience. Unfiltered Gregorian chants from the Abbey of Solemnnes is used for relaxation. The filtered mother's voice, used mostly with children, helps not only charge and nourish the brain, but also taps into its affective component to nourish emotions. We often see an increased desire to listen and communicate in this phase.

The Active Phase

In the active phase, the listener becomes more personally involved. Following the reverse process of defiltering the music and mother's voice, called the Sonic Birth, clients begin to tone, sing and repeat words and phrases into a microphone. They listen to their modulated voices through the electronic ear and headsets. This phase ends with reading aloud, thus completing the developmental model of language acquisition and expression.



Singing With Our Ears

Dr. Tomatis, in his work with hundreds of musicians and singers, pioneered the discovery of the ear's role in controlling the voice. He realized that distortions in hearing are reflected in distortions in singing or speaking, so we can only repeat with the voice what the ear can hear. This was named the "Tomatis Effect" by the French Academy of Arts and Science.

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Musicians and especially singers who have participated in the Tomatis Method make remarkable gains which I have witnessed repeatedly. One client, Mary, suffered from moderate depression and wanted a career in opera. She not only gained relief from her depression but also made "years of gain in her singing ability", according to her professional voice instructor.

Other singers speak of increased resonance, especially in the body. They notice deeper, easier breathing and breath control, and a rich, fuller tone of voice with more awareness of harmonics and overtones. Many discuss the "sensation of the mask", important for appropriate production of full resonant tones. Kinesthetically, this fosters accelerated gains in vocal training. Most of all, people experience more energy and enjoyment.

Spiritual/Philosophical Underpinnings

Perhaps most difficulty comes in expressing the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of Dr. Tomatis' method. Frequencies above 3000 hertz represent the zone of creativity, energy, ideas, ideals, intuition and mysticism. The zone of the body is 125 to 750 hertz while the zone of the American English language and communication is from 750 to 3000 hertz.

Many clients, troubled by what they call "blocks to creativity and intuition", often relate in very detailed ways how this latent ability opens up, removing emotional and psychological constraints. They experience a much deeper listening to themselves, their bodies, their inner voices, and the refined, rarefied vibrations of their own listening. Dr. Tomatis believes people are like antennae, ideally suited to hear the mystical words of God. By raising our ability to tune in, this becomes a reality.

Ode to Joy

I've been honored to be with clients as they share tears of joy and appreciation for help given their child — once a shy, retreating, angry and despairing person who couldn't read. I experienced tears of my own as I watched a frightened, microcephalic child who clung to her mother in fear. She finally "let go" to play with other children with a sense of ease and contentment. This girl had little ability to express herself, but learned to make intelligible sounds, words and phrases after working with the Tomatis Method. She became free from her prison.

I often witness the light coming from the faces of many clients talking about their changes: singers talking about the gains in their voices and musicality; depressed and anxious clients feeling free, energized and calm; head injured people reclaiming some of their lost functions after the neurologist stated nothing more could be done.

These experiences fulfill my own childhood dream of becoming a doctor and "finding out why" — echoing the desire of a great 20th Century thinker, Dr. Alfred Tomatis.

The author has written in depth about his experience with his daughter Erica in the book *Music and Miracles* edited by Don Campbell, (Quest Books, Wheaton, IL, 1992, chap. 8). For an excellent paper on the theological and spiritual dimensions of Dr. Tomatis' work, read "Hearers of the Word" by Schwager in *Pastoral Music*, (Pastoral Press, Washington, DC, 1992, pgs. 20-25).

The Tomatis Centre, Inc. is located in Denver, Colorado. It was founded by Dr. Ron B. Minson, and his wife, Kate O'Brien-Minson. They share operating responsibilities and Ron designs and directs individual client programs.