



## **Inclusive Singing Lessons for Children with Special Needs** **Elizaveta Koroleva**

*Providing singing lessons to children with special needs creates particular challenges and may require some special strategies, but does not mean turning singing lessons into therapy sessions. Successful individual lessons can prepare children with special needs for successful inclusion into a singing group. Singing ability is a prerequisite for this, as are interpersonal competencies. The case study of one boy with cerebral palsy demonstrates some strategies used and shows what can be achieved.*

### **I. Introduction**

Lisa Koroleva leads the NANO children's choral school in Vienna, using mainly acapella singing as her teaching medium. Singing is a natural form of self-expression but can be challenging for children with special needs, which may create social and interpersonal barriers. The philosophy of NANO is to transmit the joy of music and singing to children, creating a strong community of children from different backgrounds and providing them with the professional training to allow them to join recognised choirs or to become soloists.

### **II. Singing Lessons, Not Therapy**

Singing teachers have to teach singing, whether that be to fully able children or those with special needs. As a useful comparison, therapists may use music and singing as a means to achieve developmental or medical goals. For singing teachers, music and singing is the goal. The techniques used can be the same for all children: movement like marching and clapping, physical aids like soft balls and scarves, and musical communication like call-and-response, explanations of sounds and musical terms. Some children with special needs may need more physical support and a lot more patience than other children, but the musical aims can be the same. Indeed, the pace of learning should ideally follow that of other children and the techniques need to be the same so that all children will be able to participate fully and equally in inclusive groups.

### **III. Case Study: Daniel**

Daniel has infantile cerebral palsy and when he began singing lessons about four years ago, he was very passive. He was well aware of music but did not actively produce sound. The change from being a passive listener to an active singer was one big challenge. The other was achieving communication with Daniel, which meant understanding his means of communication. His parents helped explain his body language and after getting to know Daniel—over a period of about a year—his use of individual words or phrases could be understood as expressions of questions, suggestions or desires. However, his musical development was also a form of positive feedback, as was his parents' encouraging comments.

Daniel's intonation and articulation were improved through normal singing exercises, even though his physical condition restricts his ability in some areas. Critically, this does not impose a glass ceiling on him: the aims for him are the same as for other children. All children develop at different speeds and everyone in a group will have different ability levels. When Daniel was musically ready to join a group, he did so. In some areas like memory, he is the best in the group. However, he is more passive in a group and will need continued individual support. Being in a group requires more interpersonal competencies, such as being able to listen and to take turns, which are explicitly worked on with all children as part of NANO's philosophy.

Singing has had a positive effect on Daniel's personality and social skills. Daniel has become more open, more communicative, and his emotional intelligence has developed. He sings frequently because he enjoys singing. At NANO, he is a singer like everyone else, and that is special needs inclusion in practice.