

## Melanie DeMore: Sending You Light by Irene Young, Tina Silano.

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### A Conversation with Melanie DeMore: Sound Awareness

The music program at St. Paul's Episcopal School in Oakland, California opened my eyes. I have grandkids there and have been treated to several of their school concerts. Every student, from the kindergarteners to the sixth-graders, performs. The performances, under the tutelage St. Paul's several music teachers, have always been impressive. Striking is the eclecticism of the music chosen, the quality of the children's performances and the musical versatility of the instruction that is always in plain evidence. Listening to my first concert there, it was immediately clear that in the pedagogy at St. Paul's, music education is regarded as an essential part of a real education.

In the past, I might have agreed with this proposition, but I'd never really had the direct impression of the truth of it. This happened at one of their concerts. It's not easy to describe what I saw. During one class's performance I began to notice the unusually rapt attention the kids were giving to their conductor/teacher. And I began to notice something about the teacher's bearing and attitude toward each child. There was a kind of dignity present that I'd never seen before—not a stuffy thing, in the least. But I could see a demand was being placed on each student in which there was an implicit quality of respect for each child. I could see how nurturing this demand and respect was for a child's growth. I could see this, and I had no doubt about what I was seeing.

After that, each time I attended a student concert at St. Paul's I always looked forward to what it might bring. And what I saw in the most recent concert compelled me to action. After the concert I approached two of the music teachers and proposed an interview. Melanie DeMore's class had performed a number of songs a cappella that included hand and arm movements and body slaps all in a syncopated rhythm. It was a relatively complicated matter and the performance required more than just memorizing the tune and the words. Body movements, timing and rhythm, the words and the melody all had to fit perfectly together. And each child had to be on the same page.

How could this complex demand and engagement not foster some kind of deep and beneficial development? Traditional cultures seem to know about the importance of such things. But by and large in our schools, it seems we've forgotten the crucial need for

cultivating more than just the ordinary thinking function. At these concerts I could feel that a broader kind of education was taking place. It was exciting.

Melanie DeMore's career is a multi-faceted one. She is a solo performer herself, facilitates vocal workshops for professional and community-based choral groups and has taught her "Sound Awareness" program in schools, prisons, and youth organizations in the US, Canada, Cuba and New Zealand. DeMore was a director of the Oakland Youth Chorus for 10 years and is a founding member of the critically-acclaimed vocal ensemble "Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir" and is also a long-standing member of "The Threshold Choir." She is on the faculty at California Institute of Integral Studies and at UC Berkeley.

After 21 years of teaching at St. Paul's she is moving on to new challenges so I felt myself especially fortunate to have approached her for an interview when I did. In the midst of her busy schedule we found an opening to talk on a sunny morning the 4th of July....

Read the full interview [here](#).