

# Taming the Anthill

by Jean Spanko

Zany Alternatives

for  
Music

**DOWNLOAD** edition



“Teaching music to middle-schoolers is like trying to tame an anthill!”

**--Dr. Douglas McEwen**

**SAMPLE**

To Bill, Mother and PeeWee

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# INTRODUCTION

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## *Hello, I'm Your Music Teacher*

Why didn't someone warn me? There I stood, waiting innocently for my first class of eighth graders, knowing they would share my enthusiasm for music. Quietly they would file into my room and await my wise instructions. Gently, but firmly, I would guide them through the intricacies of a Beethoven symphony. The few uncertain singers would match pitches with me and be thankful for my assistance. We would marvel together at the genius of Mozart and easily create our own masterpieces on classroom instruments.

"Begin with a familiar song," said the methods book. "Let's see; you all know *America*, right?"  
**Wrong!**



"If I try anyway," I pleaded. I made a feeble attempt which earned the giggles of the rest. "Maybe a little louder?" Everyone yelled. Unshaken but determined, I introduced the listening lesson. "Switch topics if your presentation bogs down," said the methods book. The tone arm slipped out of my sweaty hand and skidded across the record with a rasp. The class howled. Time crawled.

I hereby apologize to those students who were victims of my first clumsy years of teaching. They were left with a gaping void in their music education. But, on the second thought, maybe they deserve their lack of culture in return for sabotaging so many of my lesson plans.



**SAMPLE**

It is now twenty years since I wrote *Taming the Anthill* is a collection of practical suggestions for keyboard. Oh yes, there are a few in the book were developed in my classroom through trial and error, tears and love.

... actually enjoy it (except on Mondays). *Taming* techniques (oops -- classroom management skills), and skills of singing, listening, music reading, composing and ...ers thrown in to help preserve your mental health. Some of the ideas as planted by teachers older and wiser than I. Other strategies have evolved

You may possess but the newest piano in your district or the state's finest stereo system, but until you create an environment in which the kids become your allies in the battle of musical wills, no plan of insurrection can truly flourish. You've got to tame the anthill.

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## FIRST IMPRESSION

### *Do I Have To Do Anything in Here?*

#### LOOK BEYOND THE GLARES

There they sit, tipping back their chairs, drumming on their desks, impaling you with glares guaranteed to unnerve the most hardy soul. How do you transform those faces into friendly smiles? Start by looking a little closer.

Behind each sullen mask you'll probably find an uncertain kid who's afraid of being humiliated in front of his classmates.

"What if I'm the only one who sings?"

"Dad says I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

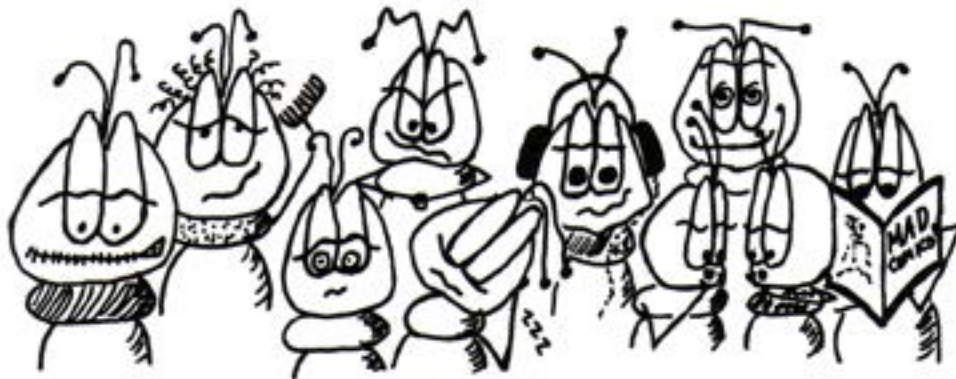
"Last year Mrs. Johnson made me sing in front of the whole school. This Spanko person isn't gonna make that happen again."

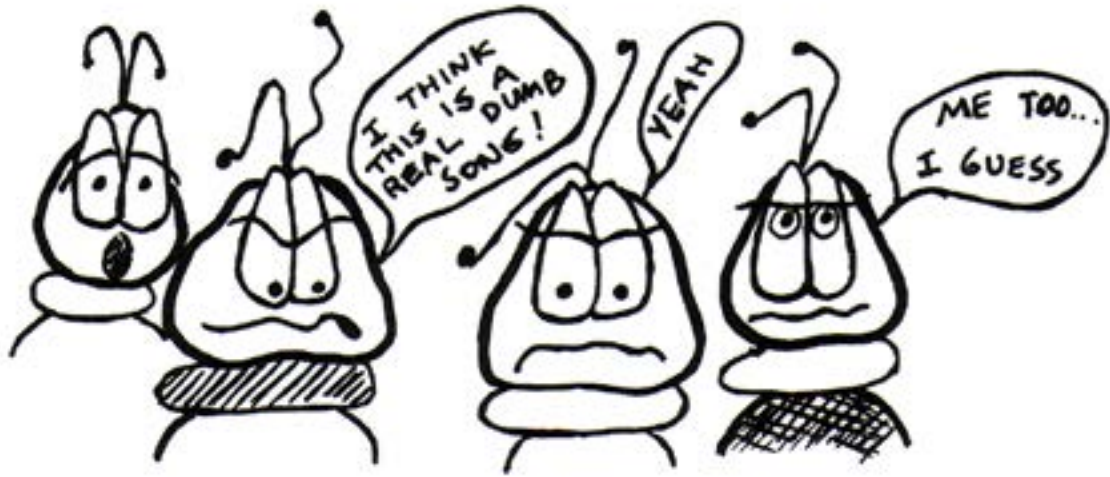
Begin by putting on a friendly face, making a few reservations and swear on your granny's grave that you will not embarrass them.

Let them know exactly what you're capable of. Beyond that, the other rules are common sense:

- 1) Don't stab the kid next to you. (Until lunch.)
- 2) Don't jump out the window. (The school doesn't have insurance.)
- 3) Don't set the joint on fire. (I refer to the school.)

Use outlandish examples such as these; you'll feel them coming around.





## I HATE THAT SONG!

Negative attitudes are contagious. You certainly can't prevent a student from hating a particular song, but insist that he wait until "gripe time" to express his opinion. The best time for this is a good time for this. (Be sure to provide this time; don't run over with your lesson plan.) Their views at times of their choosing!) If you provide "gripe time" and if a class member complains, he or she erupts with, "I hate that song," complainers will soon feel the wrath of "I hate that song" until gripe time.

Flexibility is a must for both you and your students. Give new songs a chance to grow on them. But, if a song remains unpopular for a long time, admit defeat and let it go. Look around for another tune that might be more popular.

## OPINION SURVEYS

Make a list on the board of the songs the class has sung for the month or grading period. Have students list their three favorites and three they liked least. In order for votes to count, students must list specific musical reasons that influenced their decisions. You'll get a more accurate reading if you require students to write their opinions and reasons without discussing them.

Post the results of the survey for all classes. Students may be surprised to find a song appearing as a favorite for one class is a big loser for another. Surprise! We don't all love pizza!

## SINGING THE TOP 40

Don't neglect the rich array of contemporary pop songs as part of your singing repertoire. Not only are these songs fun to sing, but they can serve as terrific "hooks" for leading into discussions or study of vocal quality, form, instrumentation, mood, and practically any other music concept.



“Where do I get the music?” Publishing companies print octavo arrangements almost as quickly as a song hits the charts. Copyright laws prohibit you from making song sheets without written permission from the publisher, but some songs are simple enough to be learned by rote. And, if one of your students just happens to bring in the lyrics to a tune all neatly printed as an extra credit project, well . . . . You can also have the class sing along with the record and learn the lyrics that way.

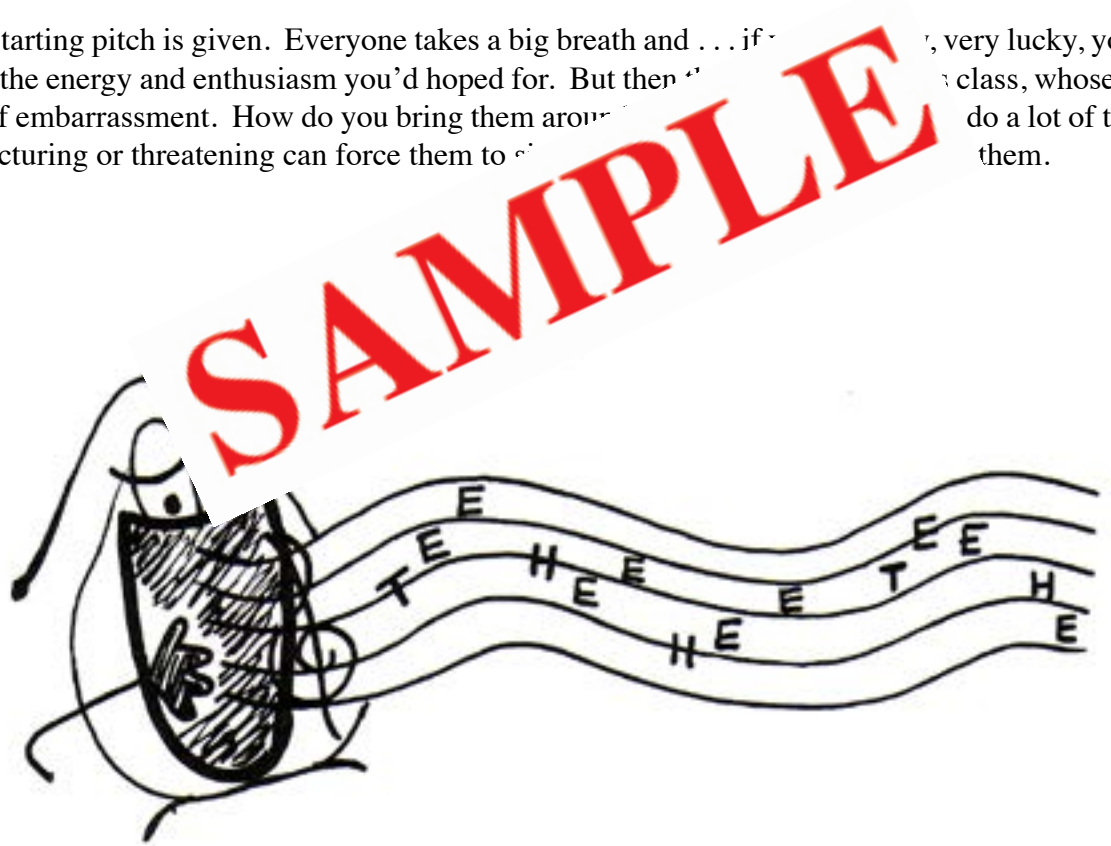
Warning! Examine the lyrics carefully before agreeing to use a Top 40 tune, even if this means venturing into your local record store to check the lyrics on the album slip cover. (The mumbles are an important part of some singers’ expressive intent, you know.) Singing an “R-rated” tune in class can cause you a lot of misery from an outraged parent or principal, even though most of the kids will tell you, “What’s the big deal? Everyone knows that!”

Keep abreast of the Top 40 by listening to the kids’ favorite FM station at least once a week. Chances are you’ll hear one or two tunes that fit into your aesthetic range. Offer these as Top 40 singing fare, rather than depending entirely on student suggestions. (If you don’t like a tune, you won’t be able to hide this from the kids even if you try to act like a “good guy” by singing it.

We are asking our students to keep their minds open and explore many types of music. If we ignore the contemporary pop scene, we negate this message.

### THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

The starting pitch is given. Everyone takes a big breath and . . . if . . . very lucky, your class will sing with all the energy and enthusiasm you’d hoped for. But then . . . a class, whose only sounds are giggles of embarrassment. How do you bring them around . . . do a lot of things, but no amount of lecturing or threatening can force them to . . . them.



## THE SPANKO SERENADE

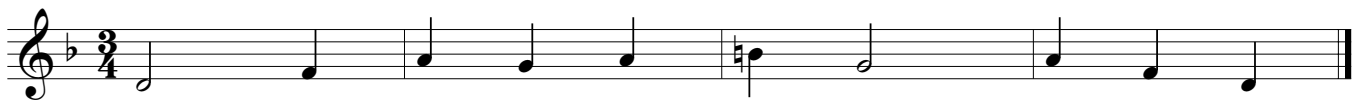
### Theme



### Rhythm Changed



### Meter Changed



### Mode Changed



### Disjunct Contour



### Pitches Added



Changes in tempo, dynamics, key, articulation and tone color could be demonstrated on any of these variations. Keep a record of the final list to refer to in future listening.

## RUSSIAN SAILORS' DANCE

This piece is not a theme and variations in the classical sense, but it is a compelling composition for junior high/middle-schoolers to use in beginning their repetition with variation discriminations.

Put the Russian folk song, the foundation of the composition, on the board in three phrases and teach students the song. Ask for a volunteer (bonus point) to place letter labels by each phrase to show the song's phrase design (**A B B**).

Gliere's composition is in the key of A minor--too low for most young singers. Our version is in C minor but use another key if you prefer. Also, the rhythm of the original folk song is a bit different than Gliere's realization. We adapted the text to fit Gliere's version.