The sound of silence

Everything was dark around Ethan. Adrenaline rush, rapid breathing…he was definitely nervous. Suddenly, all the lights went on and he could finally see the cheering crowd. The audience was clapping and shouting but, for Ethan, the place was in complete silence. He took a glance at the crowd and looked for his parents. Amy and Michael were right there, first row, with a huge smile and twistingly moving their hands in a silent applause. Ethan felt relieved and supported. He turned his head right and saw his friend, Martha, with the drumsticks. One, two…one, two, three, four! And they started playing, as they had been practicing in the rehearsals over the last months. Considering it was their first concert ever, it was much easier than Ethan was expecting. However, it had not always been like that.

When Ethan was born, in 2006, Michael and Amy were full of joy. He was also the first new born in the family, so everyone was elated. Sadly, concerning news came soon after his birth. Apparently, baby Ethan was losing his hearing ability and, eventually, he became completely deaf. Ethan was barely three months old and, due to his recent disability, he started crying a lot more than usual. Amy and Michael tried almost everything. Pacifiers, long walks…but nothing seemed to work. They were hopeless and close to despair. One day, late at night, Amy was exhausted. Ethan had been crying for hours and she needed to rest, so she sat on the sofa and put baby Ethan close to her chest. He was still crying, so Amy, while trying to calm herself, started to softly sing her favourite song, which she had heard earlier that morning on the radio. Unexpectedly, Ethan stopped crying and, after a few moments, he started to smile. Amy was shocked and interrupted her song, which made Ethan respond by going back to his previous crying mood. Amy quickly restarted her song and Ethan smiled again. She kept singing, while tears of joy were appearing in her eyes. It was the first calmed moment with Ethan in weeks! Just then, Michael entered into the living room.

* Is it me or is Ethan not crying anymore? Wait a minute…are you singing, Amy? – asked Michael.
* He is even smiling, Michael! – exclaimed Amy, with another big smile in her face – Come, look!

Michael was surprised. Seeing her wife and her son in such a peaceful scene made him very happy too, a feeling that they had both almost lost for the past weeks.

* Can I try? – asked Michael.
* Sure! Come here and sit next to me – answered Amy.

Once Michael was in place, he took Ethan, held him close to his chest and started singing. However, something was different with him. Baby Ethan slowly closed his eyes and, all of a sudden, he fell asleep.

* How have you done it? – asked Amy.
* I don’t know! I was just singing like you were… - said Michael – Go to bed, honey. You look tired, you need to rest. Don’t worry, I’ll stay with him.

Right before she went to sleep, she gave one last look to Michael and Ethan. Michael raised his thumb up, stating that everything was fine. Ten minutes later, Michael fell asleep too. The three of them deserved a night like that, being at ease without knowing that it was the beginning of something special.

Days passed by and Michael and Amy learnt to feel the needs of Ethan. Amy’s singing was the key for Ethan’s laughter, while Michael was in charge of putting the baby to sleep with his unique vocal style. They even tried different songs, always getting the same response from Ethan. However, considering Ethan’s disability, they still didn’t know what kind of magic trick they were performing to induce those reactions on him. So, they decided that the wisest option was to ask the doctor.

* Hi, Amy! Hi, Michael! How is little Ethan? Is he still giving you a hard time? – said Doctor Lake while opening the door of his office.
* In fact, doctor, Ethan is doing pretty good these days. We don’t know why, but whenever we sing, either he laughs or tends to fall asleep, depending on who of us does the performance – said Amy.
* Have you said…singing? Are you sure? I mean, you both know that Ethan is completely deaf, so there is no chance for him to recognise any sound around him – stated Doctor Lake
* We know, that’s why we wanted to ask you – answered Amy.
* Can I see how you do it, Amy? – asked Doctor Lake.
* Uhm, do you want me to sing here, right now? – said Amy, blushing.
* Yes, please, if you don’t mind. Don’t worry, dear, my kids always laugh at me because I only sing at the shower and, apparently, I am terrible at it. So, trust me, I’m not going to judge your style – said Doctor Lake while winking an eye to Amy in complicity.

As she had done for the past days, she took Ethan, held him to her chest and started singing. Almost immediately, Ethan started to smile and laugh. Doctor Lake was amazed by what he was observing and, just like that, something came up to his mind.

* Amy, can you hold Ethan far from your chest? But don’t stop singing – said Doctor Lake.

Amy did as the doctor said and Ethan stopped smiling. However, it was Doctor Lake who was smiling at Michael and Amy.

* I know what is happening here. Have you notice that, when you were initially singing, Ethan slightly turned his head so his ear could be in touch with your chest? Try again and check it out – said Doctor Lake, with confidence.

Once again, Amy held Ethan close to her chest and resumed her singing performance. Automatically, baby Ethan turned his head instinctively and did what the doctor had just described. Michael and Amy looked at each other, astonished.

* Ethan is feeling the vibrations of your voice through his inner ear and it is triggering emotions in his brain, just like the sound of music does for us. He is experiencing music in his own way – said Doctor Lake.
* But why does he laugh with me and falls asleep with Michael? – asked Amy.
* That is probably because Michael has a deeper voice. When he sings, the vibration of his vocal cords is slower and stronger, which might induce a calming feeling for Ethan that puts him to sleep. However, Amy has a high-pitched voice, which means her vocal cords vibrate faster and weaker when she makes sounds. In this case, the higher frequency of the vibrations through Ethan’s inner ear seems to be activating his brain and making him feel happy – explained Doctor Lake.
* So…what would happen if he experiences different songs or music styles? – asked Michael.
* Well, that is definitely something that would be worth trying – said Doctor Lake, while nodding his head.

And that is what Amy and Michael did through the years. Since they discovered that Ethan was able to feel the music in his own way, they started to implement new ideas. First thing they did was installing a small speaker on Ethan’s crib. That way, he was able to feel the vibrations of the music beat. Initially, they learnt that the intense and slow rhythm of reggae, rap or rhythm & blues induced Ethan into a profound sleep. In contrast, rock, pop or even salsa music always put him in a good mood, due to the fast beat of the songs.

Ethan grew older and he quickly understood that, despite not being able to listen to music like everyone else, he could also have a special connection with it. For that reason, when he turned 12 years old, Michael and Amy decided to give him an unexpected gift. After tearing the wrapping paper of his present, Ethan felt overwhelmed when he discovered the most beautiful guitar he had ever seen.

* Is it really for me? – asked Ethan in sign language.
* Well, it is your birthday, isn’t it? – replied Michael.
* Yes, but…I won’t be able to play it well– said Ethan, concerned.
* Of course, you will, honey – said Amy – We have already talked with James, a music teacher that will help you to learn how to understand the musical notes through their frequency of vibration. It will not be easy at the beginning, but music has always been your special thing, since you were a baby, despite your deafness. We know how much you love it and we are sure that you will accomplish anything you set your mind to.

As expected, Ethan struggled a lot at music lessons, trying to tell the difference between each musical note. The frequencies and vibrations were all so similar! He thought on several occasions that it was going to be impossible. However, he was fully determined to learn and, after four years, he did it with the help of James. One day, James brought someone new to class.

* Ethan, this is Martha. Martha, this is Ethan – said James.
* Hi! Nice to meet you – said Martha, slowly, in sign language.
* Well done, Martha! Not bad for a first timer! – exclaimed James, and then switched to sign language – Martha plays in a band, Ethan, and their guitarist has just left the group, so they are looking for a new band member. What do you think? Would you like to join them?
* Uhm, I don’t know if I am ready…– said Ethan.
* Of course, you are! Besides, we could tight a small speaker around your chest, so you can fell the beat of the music. That way, you will be able to play along and follow the song. But you will have to practice, Ethan, you will have to practice a lot – said James.
* Tell Ethan that I play the drums, so he could always follow my lead too! - exclaimed Martha.

And, in that moment, Ethan felt it. He was more than ready to play.