For John Feierabend, the lack of attention to musical development in television programs for children has long been a major concern. His answer to that problem? *The Little Red Caboose*, a half-hour television show with the primary purpose of developing and nurturing musicality in young children, is planned to debut in the fall of 2003. Feierabend (pronounced “FIRE-ah-bend”), who is director of music education at the University’s Hartt School, has been awarded a multimillion-dollar grant to develop the series.

Viewers will step aboard *The Little Red Caboose* and travel through the mythical town of Arioso. Along the way, they meet the train’s warmhearted conductor, Jane; a singing bird named Echo; and train-whistle diva, Madame Toot. These real-life and puppet characters will be regulars on the show, developed by Feierabend and the New York production company Sirius Thinking, Ltd. During each episode’s journey, children will learn new songs, practice a variety of vocal and rhythmic techniques, and increase their musical abilities—all while having fun.

“You don’t watch the show,” says Feierabend, who is also director of the National Center for Music and Movement in the Early Years. “You participate in it.”

*The Little Red Caboose*’s pilot episode has already been filmed, and Feierabend hopes more episodes will be ready to air in the fall of 2003. The show is aimed primarily at children between the ages of three and seven, an age group that he believes is uniquely receptive to musical stimulation.

The show has been designed to help children think and sing tunes, feel beat and rhythm, and be sensitive to the expressiveness in music. Rhymes and tunes will be taught through hearing and singing folk songs and other musical classics, using rhythm instruments, playing games, and dancing. Each episode will end with “songtales” that are ballads for children.

Feierabend’s mission for the show is simple: “It’s about folk music and teaching the music of the country to its people,” he says. “It’s about teaching music intelligence, so people can keep a beat in their head, be rhythmic, and have a sense of meter.”

Considering the resources and talent on the show, its red caboose and vivid characters may some day be as recognizable as *Sesame Street*’s Big Bird or *Blues Clues*’ chair.

“Perhaps a show like this can become a turning point,” says Feierabend.

Teaching the World to Sing

The evolution of *The Little Red Caboose* began four years ago when the Bingham Trust, a New York foundation that funds work in the arts, awarded Feierabend a $282,000 grant to complete any pilot project that best represented his music curriculum. The project had to meet three criteria: it should enrich culture, have widespread proliferation, and be inexpensive for the user. Feierabend met with Sirius Thinking, a company specializing in the creation of character-based, mission-driven children’s educational entertainment, and *The Little Red Caboose* was born.

After preliminary educational testing of the pilot was successful, the trust awarded Feierabend an additional $208,000—bringing the total grant to $500,000—to create a concept statement and determine the best strategy for implementing *The Little Red Caboose*’s musical education agenda nationally.

Feierabend then received a five-year, $3.75 million grant—or $750,000 a year for five years—from the Bingham Trust to develop and produce a series of 65 half-hour video segments of the show. The total grant of $4.25 million is the largest private grant ever earned by a faculty member of the University of Hartford.
Sirius Thinking, Feierabend’s creative collaborator, currently produces the popular PBS children’s literacy show Between the Lions. Sirius Thinking personnel comprise key talent from the Children’s Television Workshop, Jim Henson Productions, Nickelodeon, and Apple Computer. They have won Emmy, Grammy, and Parent’s Choice Awards.

Passionate about teaching music to young children, Feierabend wanted to ensure that The Little Red Caboose encompassed his “First Steps in Music” curriculum. He crafted careful guidelines for the program:

• The show will use diverse folk music—songs that have been passed down orally from generation to generation and that have simple melodic structures and repetitive elements that make them ideal for teaching young children to sing comfortably and correctly.

• The show must evoke responses from the viewer and have sufficient repetition in each episode to enable a child to assimilate the musical content effectively.

• Songs must be presented with little or no accompaniment. Much of the music of the TV show will be traditional, sung and played in simple ways with instruments like guitar and fiddle.

• The show will use realistic-looking and -acting children to engage and encourage the audience to become involved with the show. The children will be excellent vocal models and sing in “head voice” key. Head-voice singing occurs in the upper register with the sound resonating in the head, rather than the throat or chest.

• The show will appeal to ethnically diverse, three- to seven-year-old children.

• The show will include tonal activities, such as pitch exploration, echo and call-and-response songs, simple songs, arioso, and ballads. It must also include movement exploration, songs and rhymes with nonbeat motions, and beat-motion activities.

A Proven Track Record

Feierabend has had a long career in early childhood music development. In an award letter to the highly respected educator, the Bingham Trust noted, “We make this grant, not only on the merits of the project, but also on the basis of your track record as a musician, teacher, and researcher in the development of musical skills.”

The talented innovator developed his first early childhood music program in Philadelphia in 1979 at Temple University. After publishing his book Music for Little People at the University of Oklahoma, Feierabend brought his early childhood “First Steps in Music” program, along with a series of books and recordings, to the University of Hartford’s Hartt School in 1987.

In 1991, Feierabend became the first American recipient of the LEGO Prize, an international award given annually to someone who has made distinctive contributions to the conditions under which children live and grow. He used the award to create a music classroom lab and research room at Hartt for the First Steps in Music program. Part of the National Center for the Arts in the Early Years, the program is jointly administered by The Hartt School’s Community Division and the University’s Music Education Division.

Through research and many interviews with the elderly, Feierabend put together songs and rhymes for First Steps in Music that parents and grandparents have sung to their offspring for generations but which, with changes in technology and family structure, are in danger of being forgotten or even lost. The goal of First Steps in Music is to enable all children to reach their full potential in music and movement through informal music-and-movement activities.

“It’s playful. We’re not trying to hasten development, we’re trying to enrich it,” Feierabend says. “Many nonmusical skills are developed in a playful manner, such as verbal enhancement, motor skills, social skills, creativity, and emotional development.”

“We used to be a country that sang and made music, and now we’ve become a country that listens to recordings,” Feierabend laments. The spirited advocate of musical tradition adds, “I always say that I want to help raise future parents who can sing lullabies to their children.”

Mother and daughter enjoy a percussive moment during a First Steps session.