

Musical and Textual Content in Children's Vocalizations

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Children's musical culture has developed into a broadly researched topic over the last twenty-five years. Scholars have been writing about just how children's "myriad ways of musicking manifest their musical and social identities, communication, and interactions" (Harrop-Allin, 2011, p. 157).

Childhood has been described as a "site of struggle over representations of sameness and difference, society, and the individual" (Minks, 2002, p. 379). Children navigate social situations, express emotion, establish hierarchy, and define roles through their lighthearted and playful interactions with siblings, friends, and schoolmates. This ongoing relationship with music is nurtured and accommodated by siblings, friends, educators, caregivers, and family members. When children engage with music of their own choosing or creation, the results can display the "characteristics of communicative interactional strategies, verbal artistry, and improvising that support entertainment, cooperation, group solidarity, negotiation of activities, and individual expression" (Corso, 2003, p. 29).

A common misconception is that children's musical cultures are lacking the research merit of adult music-making. Gaunt (2006) urged resisting "the patronizing impulses to 'other' or exoticize children's music culture by treating it as less modern or primitive, less complex, or less serious" (p. 54) in comparison to popular commercial music, adults' music, or written genres of music". In fact, as Minks (2002) points out, most "collections of children's lore have not usually been intended for children themselves" (p. 4) but rather for parents and educators.

Ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1967) stated "The gap that at first seemed to exist between the styles of the music of children and of adults closes when it is seen that most of the children's songs are compressed, and sometimes simplified, versions of adult music" (p. 193). Children observe the world around them in an attempt to navigate the constantly shifting scenarios playing out in their daily lives. Using musical activity to maneuver through the puzzles of childhood and maturing is a cross-cultural commonality in children's play.

Emberly (2013) stated, "Children construct their musical selves on both individual and communal levels. As active agents they are encouraged and constrained by contextual elements that significantly shape the musical sounds they receive, repeat and create" (p. 80). The everyday musical activity of children can create "informal performance spaces in which the significance of social acts is publicly displayed, discursively interpreted, and contested" (Minks, 2007, p. 53). The purpose of this review was to examine the relevant literature that addresses the presence and purpose of musical and textual content in children's vocalizations.

While language and cultural nuances in music may show variations in different countries, children's musical culture shares "similar features of melody, rhythm, form, and text topics that transcend culture" (Campbell, 1991, p. 15). The melodies children choose to sing are often closer to singing-speech (Campbell, 1991; Hopkin, 1984; Jones & Hawes, 1972; Lum & Campbell,

2007; Merrill-Mirsky, 1998; Minks, 2002; Opie, 1985; Roberts, 2013) although there are “definite ascents and descents in these songs” (Hopkin, 1984, p. 6). The tunes are regularly pitched in a lower range, closer to the child’s speaking range (Campbell, 2010; Gaunt, 2006; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988; Roberts, 2013). The intonation in a free setting is “not necessarily accurate” (Merrill-Mirsky, 1988, p. 5) and depending on the level of energy might even end up as “shouted rather than sung” (Opie, 1985, p. 55). The lower pitch placement may be “due to the fact that they are also doing something and therefore do not want to be bothered with ‘singing’ as such – the tunes being a kind of heightened speech” (Opie, 1985, p. vii).

A limited melodic range, usually less than a 6th and rarely more than an octave (from G₃ to C₄), is typical even if it means taking a known song with a wider range and condensing it to a smaller interval span (Addo, 1996; Campbell, 1991; Hopkin, 1984; Jones & Hawes, 1972; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988; Opie, 1985). Within this limited melodic range, the most commonly heard intervals of a descending minor third, a fourth, and a second are what Riddell (1990) referred to as the “natural chant of childhood” (p. 134).

Children singing together outside of a rehearsal or classroom setting rarely sing in harmony unless the parts have been learned in a formal setting (rehearsal, class, church) and brought to the music-making (Hopkin, 1984). This type of harmony, if present, would come from older students with the confidence and competence to lead the games and simultaneously sing a harmony part.

Songs and games by children, or songs for children that have become part of the playground lore often begin with “introductions which were unrelated to the song or game itself, but served in an introductory function” (Merrill-Mirsky, 1988, p. 149). Repetition is a common element in the way children structure their own songs and games (Campbell, 1991; Hopkin, 1984; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988; Prim, 1991) especially strophic form (Campbell & Wiggins, 2013). Children also have a fondness for call and response singing games, something played in a circle with a leader singing and most likely moving in the middle.

How to define what is a child’s song? Hopkin (1984) decided “a song is a children’s song if it has become a part of the children’s repertoire” (p. 1). Yet scholars have found that songs by and for children can originate from parents, teachers, friends, camp, radio, television, or online. There are several categories of songs, chants or a combination of both during free play. These singing games can “link children’s sociality with their music-making because successful musical participation enables successful social participation” (Harrop-Allin, 2011, p. 163).

Parodies are a favorite type of song for children around the world. Certainly, there is a magnetic pull for children in particular types of silly or “naughty” lyrics and movements that allow for the potential to “shock adults through vulgarity, bawdiness, or ridicule of authority” (Harwood, 1993, p. 6). Opie and Opie (1985) discussed how this type of buffoonery with its prankish gestures and fantastic words could bring a child to a “state of self-intoxication, providing a much-needed release from the real world”. It serves a wide range of purposes allowing children to “challenge, undermine, and disarm adult power, to explore taboo topics as various as sex and toilets” (p. 391).

Children can be found anywhere sonically engaging with their current environment. Yet there are moments when a child consciously starts to string together melodic fragments, repeating motives, until it becomes something they can perform again and again. Barrett (2003) writes of the influences from popular music on children’s song-making, particularly “the use of syncopation, anacrusis, melismatic approaches to text setting, and the development of a complex vocal involving both chromatic alteration and wide intervals” (p. 205). Songs by children are described by Barrett (2003) as “a form of musical narrative that builds on their experiences thus

far, as a means of making emotional sense of themselves and their worlds. Songs may be viewed as transitional events through which they symbolize their feelings and articulate their understanding of their encounters with their worlds” (p. 201).

In addition to songs that are shared from outside and within children’s lives, there are the impromptu musical utterances that flow freely from children. Campbell and Wiggins (2013) defined musical utterances as “short melodic segments that include sustained pitches of a few notes to a wide diatonic spread of pitches” (p. 4). The spontaneous phrases “flow effortlessly from ideas somewhere deep within the mind’s ear” (Campbell, 2010, p. 67). Musical utterances can give “a glimpse at possible influences that may have become a mainstay in (children’s) musical repertoire” (Lum, 2007, p. 99). Lum and Campbell (2007) referred to these spontaneous musical ideas as “compositions in progress” (p. 37).

Lum (2007) described a child’s seemingly unconscious creation of a melodic utterance as “summoning up musical fragments with links to their home environment, previous experiences with the media, or of their own unique creations” (p. 103). The melodies streaming from the children also “reflect an understanding of traditional nursery rhyme and song material as it is presented to children”.

Blacking (1967) found Venda boys and girls in South Africa sometimes knew and sometimes sang each other’s songs even though there were songs known as “boys” or “girls” songs. Harwood (1987) found that boys knew fewer songs and that singing games were not ranked high on their lists of favorite free time activities. Young girls practice acting out what they see around them, what they imagine their future holds. Girls have a full repertoire of songs and chants that reflect the life stages: “childhood, adolescence, courtship, pregnancy, marriage, motherhood, career, separation, old age, death, after death” (Arleo, 2001, p. 127). Girls often are drawn to “flirtatious linguistic play with ‘dirty’ words and reference to sexualized body parts”. Girls singing games can be “explicitly sexual and provocative, and aggressively loud” (Grugeon, 2001, p. 99).

Over the last forty years, there has been a “tendency for singing games to be played by progressively younger children” (Harwood, 1993, p. 5). There is a “passing of the torch” when it comes to singing games. Once particular games are picked up by younger children, it is common for the older children to move away from that particular singing or handclapping game (Marsh, 2008; Opie, 1985). Older girls, perhaps ages 9-11, might “pointedly exclude most of the younger children as well as anyone who lacks the boldness” (Minks, 2007, p. 46) displayed by some of the singing game leaders. Singing games can provide a safe harbor for exploration of otherwise taboo issues during childhood. What might be considered inappropriate expression of curiosity can be expressed through humor and song (Merrill-Mirsky, 1988).

The effect of radio, television, and of course, the Internet on children’s interaction with music cannot be underestimated. Barrett (2003) describes this effect as “powerful legitimating forces of digital and electronic media culture in shaping the ways in which children understand their worlds” (p. 196). The globalized nature of children’s worlds is expanding at an astounding speed. Children with access to television, movies and the Internet are “active member(s) of a globalized, glocalised, and media-ized youth that connect (them) to worlds beyond (their) own” (Emberly, 2013, p. 87). Children’s playground culture has been compared to “modern mass media culture with its cycles of fashion and popularity” (Sutton-Smith as cited in Jopson, 2010, p. 4).

As Harwood (1993) stated, “Children’s games and songs from historical collections may give a romantic picture of children skipping happily around the Maypole... (they are) more likely to

be moon walking and rapping into imaginary microphones” (p. 6). Children do not differentiate music gleaned from media versus traditional sources. This allows for traditional “and new pop songs to ... appear to coexist contentedly alongside one another” (Jopson, 2010, p. 3). This coexistence allows for the creation of a “hybrid mixture of new and old, the transitory and the folkloric, blended together and tailored to the children’s needs” (British Library Learning, 2011).

Popular music becomes important for many children at younger and younger ages. Minks (1999) found that 4th and 5th grade was an important period for connecting with pop music, but even early elementary children are avid fans (Campbell, 2010). Harrop-Allin (2011) described the “adaptation of a Zulu clapping game (song) to suit its urban contemporary context. It uses the tune and text of a pop song, combined with gestures and movements associated with township culture” (p. 160). Children are avid observers. They glean the ways of their musical culture by indirect and direct interaction with the performative practices of the adults and older children in their immediate environment (Campbell, 2010; Griffin, 2009; Harrop-Allin, 2011; Lew & Campbell, 2005). Children “develop their own repertoires of songs that are influenced by but separate from, the surrounding adult world” (Lew & Campbell, 2005, p. 57). When it comes to learning music, children can hear “complete melodies, in authentic performance style, and are able to join in at their own rate” (Harwood, 1993, p. 7).

Children’s personalities play an important role in determining whether they will be observing, participating, or song and leading (Corso, 2003; Gaunt, 2006; Opie, 1985). Imitation, participation, and repetition are the main teaching tools in the social realm of children (Harwood, 1998; Jopson, 2010; Mapana, 2013). Children regularly take an inherited singing game and piggy-back a modern tune, and perhaps change the actions (Campbell, 2010; Harrop-Allin, 2011). Explicit verbal directions are not normally used unless a child with enough social capital to be included simply doesn’t understand the song structure. This step of continuing the flow of play is necessary in order to allow the amusement to continue which is a high priority for children (Brady, 1975). There is great incentive for children to learn the music of their social milieu. Blacking (1967) found that “children are compelled to acquire practice and confidence” in the music “at the cost of being ridiculed by others if they fail” (p. 139).

There are numerous commonalities throughout the world in children’s music. Studies conducted in Ghana (Addo, 1996), Zimbabwe (Kreutzer, 2001), South Africa (Blacking, 1967; Emberly, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2011), The Gambia (Koops, 2010), Tanzania (Mapana, 2013), Korea (Marsh, 2008), Singapore (Lum, 2007), England (Grugeon, 2011), Norway (Marsh, 2008), Nicaragua (Minks, 2002) or African-American culture within the United States (Brown, 1977; Corso, 2003; Gaunt, 2006; Harwood, 1998; Hopkin, 1984; Lomax-Hawes, 1968; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988; Riddell, 1990; Roberts, 2013), the similarities are clear while simultaneously, musical features particular to individual cultures are present. Kreutzer (2001) found that “the developmental sequence for acquisition of singing skill is parallel across cultures, but that the level of achievement is influenced by environmental factors” (p. 210).

The shared features throughout the world include “similar features of melody, rhythm, form, and text topics that transcend culture” (Campbell, 1991, p. 15). Lew and Campbell (2005) found that there are “cultural variations in how children participate in musical play and at what ages they are expected to play in certain ways” (p. 59). In the U. S. , Merrill-Mirsky (1988) wrote that the “rise and fall of the semi-sung melody tends to reflect the linguistic patterns of Afro-American English, standard English, Mexican-Spanish, and the Southeast Asian languages” (p. 5).

The strong influence of African-American music traditions is present across a wide spectrum of children's informal musicking. Perhaps the most prominent musical feature in children's repertoire that originated in African/African-American traditions is found in the use of rhythm, and flatted 3rds and 7ths in many melodies (Brown, 1977; Gaunt 2006). Singing around the beat, with the freedom to loosen the restrictions found in other types of music, is a common characteristic of African-American singing or clapping songs, chants, and games.

It would be inaccurate to state that all musical characteristics of children's musical culture are identical. There are cases of culturally specific preferences and musical attributes that can be diametrically opposite. For example, the tritone is rarely featured in Anglo-American songs, yet in Wagogo music from Tanzania the same interval is the dominant musical feature in the traditional melodies. Without the tritone, the tunes cease to sound "Gogo" (Mapana, 2011).

As Harwood (1993) stated, children often demonstrate on the playground "abilities cultivated in the general music class, but inside our schoolrooms those same children can seem devoid of energy or imagination, lacking rhythmic sense, and unable to sing or move with confidence" (p. 4). Rather than resisting the tide of mass-mediated pop culture, music educators may well be served to ride the wave of what will "consistently leak into classroom and social settings" (Minks, 1999, p. 94) in spite of different curricular content.

A study of the musical and textual content in children's vocalizations is beneficial for understanding the ways children interact with music in their daily lives. The vocal musicking of children opens a doorway for music educators to better understand children's natural inclinations toward and interactions with singing as well as the commonalities and complexities that are present in their vocal collaborations and creations. The potential for developing pedagogical practices based on what is present in the vocal musicking of children is vast. Educators could learn to incorporate the holistic nature of transmission that takes place in the lives of children. While singing activity in the culture of children has many commonalities throughout the world, it is incumbent upon those interested in children's musical behaviors to understand the nuance in the differences. These musical utterings, melodic fragments, phrases, and tunes have merit and musical and artistic worth.

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