

# Music Teaching at the Elementary Level: Selecting a Song Repertoire

Josée Vaillancourt  
Université Laval, Quebec, Canada

## Abstract

Considering the importance accorded to singing in elementary school music programs, and the recognition of the necessity of training children's singing voices, the music education specialist must have access to a repertoire of songs to be selected according to certain criteria. The abundance of children's vocal pieces, whether in score format, recording, or pedagogical material, and the absence of tools that would permit a critical analysis with regards to pertinent use in a pedagogical context constitute a major problem with regards to the selection of singing repertoire. What are the criteria one uses to make judicious repertoire selection for songs where the goal is music education in an elementary school? The goal of this research is to elaborate on a frame of reference resulting from the findings of two distinct sources: the first is from scientific and academic literature, and the second from research interviews with experienced music specialists. The methodology chosen for combining and comparing these findings is analysis of content. The frame of reference that results reveals four major categories of criteria for selection of repertoire, and each is examined in depth in order to clarify the active and reflective steps music educators and researchers must take.

## Introduction

Singing is the most direct way for children to develop their musical ability, and offers a natural approach for structuring children's musical knowledge and experience. Singing is considered by many authors, researchers, and practitioners to be the foundation of music education: "Singing vibrates within, it leaves sensations and memory traces which can support musical understanding at all stages (Glover and Young, 1998, p. 125)." It is important to note that singing refers here to group singing as practiced in a school music class. Considering the importance placed on singing in children's musical development, the recognized need for children to be taught to sing and, consequently, the emphasis placed on singing in elementary level music programs (Government of Québec, 2001), specialist music teachers must have access to a repertoire of songs selected on the basis of specific criteria. However, the abundance of vocal works for children – available in the form of scores or audio recordings – and the lack of tools for analyzing them critically in order to use them appropriately in the classroom, create a problem when selecting a song repertoire. The research question is as follows: What criteria can be used to make a judicious selection of songs for use in elementary level music classes? To answer this question, we have applied an inductive research process. The goal of the research project is to set up a reference framework using data from two separate sources: a corpus of carefully selected scientific and didactic works (we selected books that focused on the vocal repertoire used in teaching music or choral singing at the elementary and secondary levels, and on the selection of literature for children and young people), and a series of interviews with experienced music specialists working in Québec elementary schools. In all, eight women and one man were interviewed, identified as follows: (S1) for Subject 1, (S2) for Subject 2, and so on. The methodology chosen to combine and compare the data is content analysis, part of the

qualitative analysis paradigm. Four major groups of criteria emerged from the data: (1) aesthetic/musical criteria; (2) psycho-pedagogical criteria; (3) pedagogical criteria; and (4) cultural criteria. Our research focused in depth on the first three groups, in order to identify possibilities for reflection and action by music teachers and researchers. This paper presents the research findings in connection with aesthetic/musical criteria.

### **Analysis of the Data and Discussion**

Once the data had been analyzed and interpreted, the statements made in the corpus (theoreticians) and the comments made by practitioners were summarized, and the two data sets were compared to highlight the respective positions of the theoreticians and practitioners. This comparison is what we have chosen to present here, as five headings corresponding to the five musical/musical criteria considered by the authors and respondents: (1) musical quality of the song; (2) literary quality of the text; (3) text/music match; (4) quality of the written instrumental accompaniment; and (5) quality of the audio materials.

### **Musical Quality of the Song**

At first sight, there is no simple way to specify what, precisely, determines the quality of a song or piece of music. On this topic, some authors (Bennett and Bartholomew, 1997; Gould and Savage, 1972; Radocy and Boyle, 2003; Snyders, 1999) and respondents (S3, S6, S8) concur, generally stating that any assessment of musical quality remains partly subjective. The following comments were made by respondents: "I rely on my personal musical sense (S4 - 4.17);" "When I sing a song, and then feel like singing it again... just that, for me, rings a bell (S3 - 28.3);" and "I have to think about quality! Because [quality] is something that is big and small at the same time (S6 - 28.44)!" Among the authors, Snyders (1999) considers that "the challenge for music teachers is that they never have any evidence or objective criterion for measuring confidently, and with certainty, the degree of beauty present in each piece (p.149)," while Gould and Savage describe the intangible nature of a song's quality.

In his proposal for a new philosophy of music education, Elliott (1995) suggests that to understand the musical culture specific to a given society, the members of the society must share a certain number of implicit musical principles, linked to a specific practice and culture. He explains that the sound materials used in a musical work are always specific to a given context and culture (p. 84). Musical practices are characterized by the organization of particular sounds, predetermined by centuries of practice and experience that influence musical perception and listening: The listener expects and listens out for musical motifs that resemble and recall auditory information derived from artistic and cultural practices. These comments by Elliott go some way towards explaining subjectivity in the assessment of musical quality, since the assessment requires the ability to recognize the specific nature of various musical practices, each of which organizes sounds using its own standards and principles. In addition, and above all, an individual who assesses musical quality cannot ignore the personal and socio-cultural context in which they have grown up and received an education. In this connection, Radocy and Boyle (2003) devote an entire section of their book to the definition of what could be called "good music," and their observations open up a wide range of possibilities.

Among the philosophical or aesthetic positions defined, several authors in our corpus (Apfelstadt, 2000; Richardson and Atterbury, 1995; Beatty, 2000; Bliss, 1981; Bourne, 1980; Bruno, 1966; McRae, 1991; MENC, 1990; Persellin, 2000; Reames, 2001) consider that a degree of

objectivity is possible when examining the intrinsic values of music, its components and their aesthetic potential, referring back to expressionist theory. The researchers who use the expressionist paradigm state that the intrinsic values of music are made perceptible by the constituting elements of the piece of music and “bear its content or its aesthetic potential (Pettigrew, 1984, p. 5).” Apfelstadt relies on Leonhard and House (1972) and writes: “Well-written music finds the balance of tension and release, structural symmetry and asymmetry, and anticipation and surprise that makes listening and performing it a worthwhile experience (p. 19).” Atterbury and Richardson (1995), without associating themselves explicitly with this theory, clearly state that the principle of tension and release, “that provides an affective musical experience,” must be present (p. 37). In addition, they recommend that teachers look carefully at the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic structure of all songs to be taught to students to ensure that they are musically valid. It is also important to mention that several of the authors cited above express their thoughts succinctly through more superficial comments, without clearly identifying the characteristics of musical quality: “The expressive way that music powerfully impacts on individuals [mood] merits more distinct consideration (Beatty, 2000, p. 80);” “The song was aesthetic enough to both the teacher and children to warrant repeated performances (Bliss, 1981, p. 79);” “Inherent beauty and appeal for singers, director, and audience” are among the selection criteria for choral music applied by the choral conductors surveyed by Bourne (1980, p. 52); “The music should be excellent. Only the best-quality choral repertoire should be considered for inclusion in the school music program ... (MENC, 1990, p. 5);” “Selecting literature according to aesthetic criteria can help choral directors choose music that will heighten the interest of the choir (Reames, 2001, p. 123).” While the relatively blurred discourse of the theoreticians is based on the concepts of aesthetic quality and musical expressiveness, the respondents rely clearly on the basic elements of the song. They name these elements and rank them as follows: literary text, melodic and rhythmic components, and form, and for each element attempt to describe what reveals musical quality. It is possible to deduce from this that they conduct an assessment of the aesthetic qualities of the song, according to expressionist theory. However, only the statements concerning melodic construction and formal balance are specifically aesthetic, while the others are located at the boundary of aesthetics and psychopedagogy.

This highlights the need to take into consideration the associations or extra-musical factors addressed by Radocy and Boyle (2003), which emerge with relative clarity from the comments of the practitioners. The observation formulated by Radocy and Boyle is as follows: “Good music may be good because of inherent musical aspects; it may be good because of what people say about it in context; it may be good because of the use to which it is put (p. 379).” As a result, while incorporating the aesthetic theory cited above, they recognize that extra-musical factors may influence the judgment made. The results of the studies by Bourne (1980) and Forbes (2001) also show that an assessment of musical quality, when the term quality is not explicitly defined, may be based on both musical and non-musical factors. The criteria mentioned by the subjects of these two studies touch on considerations that are both musical and pedagogical or psychopedagogical. In our study, several extra-musical factors emerged from the interviews when the respondents were asked to describe the quality of a song; the most frequently mentioned was the attractiveness of the song for students (S2, S3, S6, S8, S9). In addition, for some respondents, the quality of a song’s construction was reflected in the learning process, which was generally facilitated (S2, S4, S7, S8). Similarly, the interviews show that the complexity of a song does not attest to its quality (S4, S5, S8). Here, we are at the boundary of aesthetic and psychopedagogical factors.

## Literary Quality of the Text

The authors and respondents also tended to agree with regard to the assessment of the literary quality of the text. Some authors (Bennett and Bartolomew, 1997; Bliss, 1981; Campbell, 1995) and respondents (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7) express concerns about the values transmitted by the text, for example, with respect to moral values that were unsuitable for a school context or the complexity of the subject. Bennett and Bartolomew (1997), as well as two respondents, mention this problem in connection with traditional folksongs, and some respondents (S2, S4, S6, S7) consider that contemporary pop songs are a questionable literary source. The potential solutions proposed by both groups are the same: (1) modify the text; (2) use the subject as the springboard for a discussion, and create links with the historical and social context; or (3) drop the song. Several of the teachers surveyed appear to adopt the third solution more frequently, especially when the song offers few possibilities for adaptation. It is also possible that the short length of time allocated for music classes makes it hard to launch in-depth discussions.

The need to ensure a suitable use of language is mentioned both by authors (Bennett and Bartolomew, 1997; Brinson, 1996; Bustarret, 1986; Giasson, 2000; Guérette, 1998) and respondents (S2, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8). For both groups, the poetical composition has value in itself and a wealth of varied, original images helps capture the students' imagination. For the authors, language must be used for the sound-based effects it includes; the rhythm, rhyme, and sound must be natural. A few respondents stress the importance of a substantial vocabulary. Last, for both respondents (S2, S4, S7, S9) and authors (Glover and Young, 1998; Gould and Savage, 1972; Guérette, 1996; McRae, 1991), it is important for the text to be meaningful for students and rooted in their learning program, either through the inclusion of songs connected with the reality of modern-day society or, for songs that are traditional or whose subject-matter is unrelated to children's concerns, by creating links with the cultural context from which they spring.

### Text/music match

The cohesion between the literary text and the music, their integration and the conjunction of these two components constitutes an aesthetic criterion for authors (Apfelstadt, 2000; Beatty, 2000; Bourne, 1980; Brinson, 1996; Bruno, 1966; Gould and Savage, 1972; McRae, 1991; Pettigrew, 1984; Richardson and Atterbury, 1995; Snyders, 1999) and also for all respondents. Although the descriptions of the theoreticians are formulated more clearly, it is easy to identify the factors common to both groups that are used to assess the quality of the music/text interaction. First, the intention of the text must be highlighted by the music (Brinson, 1996; McRae, 1991; Pettigrew, 1984; Richardson and Atterbury, 1995; S4, S6) without slavishly following or interpreting the text at a word-to-word level (Snyders, 1999); S9 states that the words must form one body with the musical style. Second, the music must comply with the tonic accents and prosody of the text; in other words, the accents must fall at the same time (Brinson, 1996; Gould and Savage, 1972; McRae, 1991; Pettigrew, 1984; Snyders, 1999; S1, S4, S5, S8, S9). Similarly, S3 and S7 avoid songs with phrases in which some syllables must be sung to several notes, or with more syllables than notes. Last, cohesion between text and music pays dividends for learning and performance, which become far more natural (Gould and Savage, 1972; S2). Although this last factor, the dividend for learning, relates more to the psychopedagogical dimension, the actual quality of the song is what is examined and revealed.

### Type of Accompaniment

Before addressing the quality of the written instrumental accompaniment and audio materials, it seems appropriate to look at the type of accompaniment used in classroom singing. First, it is important to specify the conditions needed to learn singing properly – the children’s attention must be focused on the precise sounds they must reproduce and on the ability to hear their own and their classmates’ voices. The teacher must be able to hear the children’s voices clearly in order to address the children’s needs (Pugh and Pugh, 1998), and change the pitch, tempo, and dynamics to match the students’ vocal ability (Campbell, 1995). To achieve these conditions, some authors strongly recommend unaccompanied singing (Bennett and Bartolomew, 1997; Campbell, 1995; Glover and Young, 1998; Pugh and Pugh, 1998; Atterbury and Richardson, 1995), an opinion shared by two respondents (S2, S5) who say that they prefer to teach singing without accompaniment. A guitar, which provides a relatively low level of sound, can help support the singing without drowning it out. Three authors suggest using a guitar (McDonald and Simons, 1989; Pugh and Pugh, 1998; Glover and Young, 1998) and one respondent (S2) uses it regularly. While a piano accompaniment is used by six respondents (S1, S2, S5, S7, S8, S9), and while two respondents (S3, S6) use the piano in equal measure with audio materials, its use is discouraged by Pugh and Pugh (1998). However, the theoreticians appear to be split on this issue. We note that the opinions of the authors and the practices reported by the practitioners diverge with regard to how to accompany singing in the classroom.

The use of audio materials reveals even more disparity. Only Campbell (1995) deals with the use of audio materials to accompany singing and, although she has reserves, she recognizes that they have certain advantages: they bring students into contact with a range of instruments and provide examples of various vocal styles. Alternately, the interview reports show that all the respondents use audio materials and appreciate their advantages. For one respondent (S4), even though she herself is a pianist, audio materials provide essential support and help with discipline and classroom management, allowing her to concentrate more on conducting and performance; S6 uses audio materials to provide a vocal model, while a third teacher (S7) appreciates the variety that is brought into the classroom by the sounds of instruments other than the piano. Whatever the type of accompaniment used, Campbell (1995) and Atterbury and Richardson (1995) consider that careful and controlled use constitutes one of the keys to its contribution to learning and performing a song.

### Quality of the Written Instrumental Accompaniment

Most of the authors who discuss the quality of the written instrumental accompaniment are those whose books or articles deal with choral singing (Beatty, 2000; Bourne, 1980; Brinson, 1996; McRae, 1991; Goetze, Cooper and Brown, 1990; Rutkowski, 1988) and they do not explore the situation very far. The exception is McRae (1991), who puts forward a set of precise conditions to establish quality: the accompaniment must have its own musical interest, it must be light-textured while helping to support the singing, and its instrumentation – whether a solo instrument or a group – must be consistent with and promote the general character of the piece. In addition, a number of studies listed by Goetze *et al.* (1990) and Rutkowski (1988) have looked at the effects of harmonic accompaniment on children’s singing. Their findings indicate that a

simple harmonic accompaniment, based on traditional tonal harmony, is more suitable than a complex, dissonant, and chromatic harmonic accompaniment. In addition, the limited amount of comments made by the respondents tends to show that this aspect has little weight in their assessment of the quality of a song or that they rarely use written accompaniments for classroom singing.

### **Quality of the Audio Materials**

The divergence between theoreticians and practitioners in terms of their preferred type of accompaniment is echoed here. Whereas all the respondents but one spontaneously mention audio recordings as a pedagogical tool, only Campbell (1995) comments on them as a form of accompaniment, and several others (Bruno, 1966; Bustarret 1986; Goetze *et al.*, 1990; Green, 1990; Hackett and Lindeman, 2001; Richardson and Atterbury, 2001) focus exclusively on the quality of the vocal model provided by recordings intended for use in schools. They generally recommend children's voices which, according to Green (1990), appear to provide the most effective model for classroom singing. A warning is made, however, with respect to commercial songs for children performed by adult singers, male or female, who provide a vocal model of questionable quality and whose range does not match the children's own potential (Bustarret, 1986). Among the practitioners, the quality of the sung performance is also of key importance and must help in voice training: timbre, vocal quality – a breathy chest voice and “belting” should both be avoided – pitch accuracy, breathing, the articulation of the text, and the melodic and rhythmic precision of the performance are all parameters that were assessed by the respondents (S4, S5, S6, S7, S9). They remain vigilant with regard to recordings by popular artists, for the reasons Bustarret gave. Like the vocal model they provide, the instrumentation featured in recordings is a factor of key importance for the respondents (S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8), since several tend to work with an instruments-only recording. Teaching materials based on this kind of recording are increasingly available on the educational market, and their use is becoming widespread. The practitioners listen critically to the products offered, and say that they prefer arrangements featuring a range of well-chosen acoustic instruments with a polished sound, expressing reserves with respect to recording with an overly quick tempo.

### **Conclusion**

The qualitative research process and data sources selected for our study help answer the question posed in the introduction: What criteria can be used to make a judicious selection of songs for use in elementary level music classes? Above all, the process and sources help describe the criteria in more depth and in a more nuanced way, and to place them in context from a theoretical and practical point of view.

We have chosen to devote this text to one of the four major groups of emerging criteria, namely aesthetic/musical criteria. The analysis of the data, via a comparison of two separate data sources, shows that the opinions and reflections of theoreticians and practitioners are convergent with respect to three out of five musical/musical criteria, but more divergent concerning the accompaniment of singing in the classroom. The results show, first, that any assessment of musical quality is inevitably subjective in part. It appears that by taking into account the stylistic standpoint from which the musical construction and its constituting elements are examined, a more objective result can be achieved. However, recognition for the possible presence of extra-musical factors and of their influence over the judgement made makes it reasonable to introduce presumptions when assessing musical quality. These extra-

musical factors may include, for example, the personal and socio-cultural background of the teacher and students, and certain psycho-pedagogical and pedagogical factors.

Based on these considerations, the interpretation and discussion of the data gathered for this study identify five musical/musical criteria that should be applied when analyzing the quality of a song destined for use in teaching music and the elementary level. The table below presents the criteria that emerged from the comments made by the authors and respondents, and lists their main characteristics. The criteria are non-prescriptive, but can set guide-posts for a selection process. To fully understand all the nuances of the table, it is necessary to refer to the discussion presented above.

### References

- Apfelstadt, H. (2000). First thing first: Selecting repertoire. *Music Educators Journal*, 87(1), 19-23.
- Beatty, R. J. (2000). Something to sing about! A selection and analysis of unison Canadian choral compositions for schools. *Canadian Music Educator*, 41(3 and 4), 71-82.
- Bennett, P. D. and Bartholomew, D. R. (1997). *Songworks I: Singing in the education of children*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Bliss, H. C. (1981). The development of a classification and retrieval system to aid teachers and researchers in organizing folksongs for integration into the elementary school curriculum (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, A42/06, 2552.
- Bourne, P. A. S. (1990). Instructional techniques for children' choirs: a curricular model. (Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, 1990). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, A51/04, 1150.
- Brinson, B. (1996). *Choral music, methods and materials; developing successful choral programs (Grades 5 to 12)*. New York, NY: Schirmer Books.
- Bruno, J. B. (1966). Folk music materials for use in the elementary school. Volume I: A source book of available folk music materials for integration in connection with the social living units of study recommended in the elementary course of study in Pennsylvania. Volume II: Source book of folk music materials for use with social living units in the elementary course of study for Pennsylvania. (Doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1966). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 21/10, 3112.
- Bustarret, A. H. (1986). *La mémoire enchantée: la pratique de la chanson enfantine de 1850 à nos jours [The enchanted memory: the practice of children's song from 1850 to the present day]*. Paris, FR: Éditions ouvrières.
- Campbell, P. S. (1995). *Music in childhood: from preschool through the elementary grades*. New York, NY: Schirmer Books.
- Elliott, D. J. (1995). *Music matters: a new philosophy of music education*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Forbes, G. W. (2001). The repertoire selection practices of high school choral director. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 49(2), 102-122.
- Giasson, J. (2000). *Les textes littéraires à l'école [Literary texts in school]*. Boucherville, Québec: G. Morin.
- Glover, J. and Young, S. (1998). *Music in the early years*. London, UK: Falmer.
- Goetze, M., Cooper, N. and Brown, C. (1990). Recent research on singing in the general music classroom. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 104, 16-37.
- Gould, A. O. and Savage, E. J. (1972). *Teaching children to sing*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.

- Gouvernement du Québec (2001). *Programme de formation de l'école québécoise, Éducation préscolaire et enseignement primaire* [Training programme for schools in Quebec: preschool to primary]. Québec: Ministère de l'Éducation.
- Green, G. A. (1990). The effect of vocal modeling on pitch-matching accuracy of elementary school children, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 38(3), 225-231.
- Guérette, C. (1998). *Au coeur de la littérature d'enfance et de jeunesse* [At the heart of literature for children and youth]. Sainte-Foy, QC: Éditions La Liberté, 1998.
- Hackett, P. and Lindeman, C. A. (2001). *The musical classroom: backgrounds, models, and skills for elementary teaching*. (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River (N.J.): Prentice Hall.
- L'Écuyer, R. (1990). *Méthodologie de l'analyse développementale de contenu, Méthode GPS et concept de soi* [Methodological analysis of developmental content: GPS method and self-concept]. Sillery, QC: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Leonhard, C. and House, R. (1972). *Foundations and principles of music education*, (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book.
- McDonald, D. T. and Simons, G. M. (1989). *Musical growth and development, birth through six*. New York, NY: Schirmer Books.
- McRae, Shirley W. (1991). *Directing the children's choir: a comprehensive resource*. New York, NY: Schirmer Books.
- Music Educators National Conference (MENC) (1990). *Choral music for children: an annotated list*. Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference.
- Persellin, D. (2000). The importance of high-quality literature. *Music Educators Journal*, 87(1), 17-19.
- Pettigrew, G. (1984). *Critères à respecter dans le choix d'un répertoire adapté aux besoins des chorales scolaires de niveau secondaire. Essai de maîtrise*. [Criteria to be respected in the choice of a repertoire adapted to the needs choral societies of secondary level schools. Control test. QC: Université Laval.
- Pugh, A., and Pugh L. (1998). *Music in the early years*. Andover, Hampshire: Routledge Ltd.
- Radocy, R. E. and Boyle, J. D. (2003). *Psychological foundations of musical behavior* (4th ed.). Springfield (Ill.): Charles C Thomas Publisher, Ltd.
- Reames, R. R. (2001). High school choral directors' description of appropriate literature for beginning high school choirs. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 49(2), 122-136.
- Richardson, C. P. and Atterbury, B. W. (1995). *The experience of teaching general music*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Rutowski, J. (1988). The problem singer: What does research suggest? Part II: Song materials and remediation strategies. *General Music Today*, 2(4), 24-29.
- Snyders, G. (1999). *La musique comme joie à l'école* [Music brings joy to schools]. Paris, FR: L'Harmattan.