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Art Songs for Young Children

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Most of our cultures offer children a rich heritage of folk songs—songs that nurture developing musicianship and carry the culture. Similarly, in language, our cultures offer children a rich heritage of folk literature—nursery rhymes and folk tales that nurture developing language and carry the culture. In addition to the wealth of folk materials, language offers artistic little stories and poems written for very young children. Children don't have to wait until they are old enough for Shakespeare to experience quality literature. They can experience art at tender ages--the Peter Rabbit stories of Beatrix Potter, the lovely little stories of Margaret Wise Brown, the poetry of Walter de la Mare and Christina Rossetti. Music, however, has never provided art songs for very young children to complement the rich heritage of folk songs. Nor have we traditionally felt the need for such.

However, with the research that has been done on music learning over the past twenty or thirty years, we have begun to understand how the young child acquires music, what his musical needs are, and how best to address those musical needs. As we uncover the young child's developing musicianship, we discover that very young children are ready for a much broader range of expression, greater complexity in rhythm and meter, greater lyricism, and greater variety in tonality than we had traditionally thought. We find that the very young child is truly an artist; that he doesn't have to wait until he is old enough for Bach and Schubert to experience the vocal art.

Little children are so close to art. They perceive the sound and imagery of words better than we do. They are truly artists in the way they experience nuance in the artistic combination of words, melody and rhythm. Little children deserve art songs that nurture their musicianship, compel their artistry, yet reflect their young ages.

We have all observed that children can be attracted to songs with cute lyrics, gestures, and pop accompaniments. Their attention to such periphery, however, doesn't begin to match their focused attention to tonality and meter. Even infants will stare with such intensity when hearing the various tonalities and meters, that they don't even blink. Children of all ages are compelled by tonality and meter, and the more exposure they have to a variety of tonalities and meters, the more they develop tunefulness and rhythmicity.

Much of the American culture offers only duple and major. It is the modes and the less familiar meters that capture the child's musical imagination—his audiation, his musical mind. We might think in terms of there being two imaginations—the traditional one and the musical one. Songs that capture the traditional imagination do not necessarily capture the musical imagination, as delightful texts or stories are often set to trite music. Songs

that most capture the musical imagination do not necessarily capture the traditional imagination, as those songs can be without words. The art song captures both the child's imagination and his musical imagination—his musicianship, allowing him to experience the vocal art at a tender age and propelling his artistry to new heights.

Movement is an essential part of children's artistry. It is the most direct connection to the child's musical imagination as well as to the music itself. The most immediate kind of movement for the beginner is also the most musical in the developed musician—fluid, sustained movement—what happens between the beats. It is through movement that young children interact with music most intimately. They can express a song in movement long before they can sing the words. By experiencing the song through successive repetitions, their movement takes on greater expression, they discover the relationship between the words, melody, and rhythm, and they begin to sing what they move. They become the song—in all its nuance.

The songs for demonstration were chosen for children from three to eight-years old, with the more advanced material being for children older than preschool. The vocal range of the songs for the youngest and the least developed singers is the recommended beginning singing range—the audiation range—with a tessitura from the D above middle C to the A above that. The more advanced songs go beyond that range.

All of these songs are from the Come Children Sing Institute Song Library. The first four are from a songbook appropriately entitled “Cherry Blossoms”—70 songs with texts of Japanese haiku. The others are from a songbook of 150 songs entitled “Dance, Merry Voices!”—with texts of rhymes and poems from all over the world. The handout indicates the country of text origin, tonality, and meter for each song.

As with the children, we will sing these little songs through successive repetitions, exploring the song in movement, uncovering our own artistry in expression.

Song 1: The Frog and the Cherry Petal

With children, any one of these little haiku songs can become a ten to twelve minute experience. The children become so engaged in the vocal art that they don't want the song to end. They relish the time to roll the words over their tongues, time to discover in movement how the words interact with rhythm and melody, and time to delight in their own artful discoveries. The more the song is repeated, the more the children revel in their own artistry.

Song 2: Never in a Hurry

In “Never in a Hurry,” children express in movement and song the subtlety in the ease of the butterfly, with the phrase about a chase that sounds faster yet is in the pace of the gentle butterfly. They express in their bodies and voices the very things that we try so hard to accomplish with older children in choral performance—to express the contrast

inherent in different phrases; to grow on a long note; to express the meaning of the text through the melody and rhythm.

Song 3: Moths

How delighted we would be if our twelve year olds would be as sensitive as kindergartners to the anticipation and articulation in the line, “And soon the moths will sally forth.”

These songs are intended to be taught without piano, accompanied only by movement and eyes of wonder. Initially setting the tonality and meter with songs without words prepares the children’s audiation to receive the additional layer of text. If children observe you moving while singing the song, they will join you in movement as the song continues to settle in audiation. With successive repetitions, a community of little artists explore the song in movement and in voice, and begin to demonstrate its every nuance. It is very gratifying to engage as a musician with such young artists.

Song 4: The Little Fly

Is it necessary that children understand the literal meaning of the poetry? No. These songs speak to children through sound and imagery more than through literal meaning. Children understand the poetry better than we do. To make a haiku literal is to take away its magic.

The haiku songs are like little kernels of vocal art ready to bloom in the artistry of children. With these, children as young as three can experience naturally the essence of the vocal art—the expressive sound of consonants, the vowel colors, rhythm propelling a phrase, diction exciting a phrase, the building of a line, and how all of these things work together with breath and with movement in the expression of song and in the expression of soul.

The haiku songs provide a rich opportunity not only for children three to eight years old, but for older beginners and for the children’s chorus. These short little songs can be used for warm-ups with the children’s chorus, as they are like framed miniatures of the choral art.

Many songs for children have too many words. The short, colorful texts presented today are not only age-appropriate, but musically appropriate. They invite children to experience text in its expressive import as it intertwines with melody and rhythm. They encourage artistry to spring from audiation without interruption from memory.

Many songs, both folk and composed songs, fit text into a regular meter such that the meter takes precedence over the poetry. When the expression of text is given priority, rhythms are much more interesting, often resulting in shifting meters or shifting tempos. When the expression of text is the stimulus for the song, tonality and meter become the stage with appropriate sets—a sound concept—a “sound stage” for the performance of

the “play,”—the poem. The composer, as the director of the play, then coaches his “actors,” melody and rhythm, to interpret those lines most expressively. When successful, text, melody, and rhythm become one artistic whole, inviting artistry from the youngest of children—as well as from the finest of musicians.

Moving now from the haiku texts, we go to folk rhymes from various countries. Rhymes that naturally capture the imagination of children are here set to music that naturally captures their musical imagination.

Song 5: Wake Up Jacob

I used “Wake Up Jacob” last semester with kindergartners and was just amazed at the expression with which the children sang and moved. They were like little choral conductors drawing tension out of that first long note, releasing it into the word “Jacob,” sustaining the suspense through “Day’s a-breakin’” and then literally “breaking” into a dancing last phrase.

Song 6: Otto Would A-Riding Go

It is important that we model freedom in movement, as children will mirror our every inhibition. I had knee surgery a few weeks ago, and last semester I could only bend so far. There in front of me was a group of kindergartners with arthritic knees!

The next two songs move from the fluid, sustained movement to greater precision in meter—macro and micro beat movement, demanding greater skill.

Song 7: Willie Boy, Willie Boy

Willie Boy offers an interesting “stage play” with different tempos in triple meter. Once we get beyond the shock of the notation, it really lays very comfortably. “Willie Boy” and “Otto Would a Riding Go” are much harder to read with the changes in meter and tempo than they are to sing. The children are very comfortable with the changes, as they express naturally in song and movement without the encumbrance of notation. As composer, I often had difficulty notating songs, as what flowed so naturally in expression was not easy to notate with shifting meters and tempos.

Song 8: The Drums Call the Village to Dance

Using a drum to support macro and micro beats adds a new color and a bit of authenticity to this South African rhyme. As I was trying to decide which songs to present for demonstration, I talked to my husband about “The Drums Call the Village to Dance,” trying to explain that this simple rhyme laid so well in unusual unpaired meter, like a cloud hovering over a summer rain. His humorous, yet perceptive response was that it was similar to the strength of the Habanera from Carmen.....

The last four songs provide a bridge to choral performance for the young singer. Each of these songs includes piano accompaniment.

Song 9: Lie A-Bed

I find it interesting that this lovely little poem of Christina Rossetti lays so nicely as a lullaby in unusual paired meter. This song was originally written in the audiation range. However, as children grew as musicians through preschool with the kinds of songs that have been presented here, it became apparent that kindergarten and first graders had grown into performance. When children could sing some of these little songs so beautifully, it was only right that they be granted the opportunity to sing them in performance—and, that they be able to sing them more than once through. A piano accompaniment was added to support their little voices tonally and rhythmically, while extending the piece to performance length with an introduction, interlude, and repeat of the song.

Song 10: Where are My Roses?

Some of you may be wondering how children would respond to singing about something as relevant in their lives as parsley. Children are distracted by the literal only when the song does not capture their musical imagination. If the text is well set musically, engaging children's musical imaginations—their audiation, the literal relevance of words is overshadowed by their consonance with melody and rhythm, and children receive the song and poetry as artists.

Song 11: Dance to Your Daddie

The mixolydian setting of “Dance to Your Daddie” reflects the Scottish origin of the folk rhyme, which is reinforced with a somewhat bagpipe-like accompaniment. Despite the simplicity of this rhyme and its implied triple meter, my sense of a parent's natural expression playing with a child in this rhyme resulted in a somewhat ambiguous triple meter. When young children are competent in triple meter, this greater challenge sends their musical imaginations soaring.

Song 12: When I See a Lady

“When I see a Lady” offers a little greater drama for children to “play” with in the context of unusual unpaired meter. With the addition of claves on macro beats and maracas on micro beats, we can support the South American flavor as well as the unusual unpaired meter, providing an interesting contrast to the lyricism of a song like “Where Are My Roses?”

Little children know art. They know that the artistic combination of words, melody and rhythm nurtures their very being. They know that a song doesn't come alive in one hearing. They have to play with it, taste it, dance with it, take it to bed with them. They have to become the song. If we give children the opportunity to be artists from the tender

age of three, in a few years Bach and Schubert will thrive in their lives. And, the children will thrive on Bach and Schubert.

To create a new genre of art songs for little children in each of our many countries, in each of our many languages, we need not be master composers. We need to be musicians, sensitive to the vocal/choral art. And, we need to be students of music learning—apprentices to the real masters—the children.

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