

Letters On Music Learning

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Art Songs for Young Children

Dear Colleagues,

Some of our finest authors have written stories and poems for very young children—literature that reaches the artist in both the child and the adult. Do we have a parallel resource of song literature for the very young child? We have a rich folk music heritage that deserves a place alongside nursery rhymes and fairy tales, but where are the art songs that parallel the poems of Walter de la Mare and the sensitive little stories of Beatrix Potter and Margaret Wise Brown? We have works of the masters for children's chorus, but where are the short, artistic little songs that enchant the preschooler and engage the artistry of the kindergartener and first grader?

The very young child is truly an artist. His sensitivity to beauty merits the finest of fine art. For generations, poets and story tellers have reached the very young with artistry. It is time that musicians do the same. Only recently have we begun to discover the potency of the young child's musicianship. The more we understand the musical needs of the young child, the more we can define what might be an art song for little children—one that captures the musical imagination of the young child and bathes him in fine art. Although the child may be too young to perform the song, he has the ability to absorb its every nuance.

We often think that songs for children need cute lyrics, gestures, or accompaniments to stimulate the child's musical imagination. The young child's attraction to such periphery does not begin to match his focused attention to tonality and meter, the magic that does capture the young child's musical imagination. Infants and toddlers, despite their intense interest and involvement in language, attend more to songs without words in dorian, phrygian, and mixolydian than they do to songs with words in major tonality. They are drawn to complex rhythms more than they are to those we assume to be appropriate for little children. The young child's musical imagination is a potential we have not begun to tap.

Recently children led me to greater understanding of the artistry of the young child. It became obvious that my three and four year old students were ready for another dimension. I had no idea what it could be. Their emerging musicianship was stunning, but they were too young for songs written for older children and too young for ensemble experience. Last year I had written a number of bug and animal songs in the various tonalities and meters for five and six year olds. Perhaps the three and four year old children needed something similar on their level. Songs for these children would have to be short, have very few words, and be in the audiation range. The

children would need a variety of styles, employing as many tonalities and meters as possible. Each song would have to stand on its own as a song without accompaniment.

Occasionally, I look to children's stories and poems to feed me in writing my own texts for children. While paging through a book of children's poetry, I happened upon a Japanese haiku poem that compelled me by its imagery, its brevity, and its sheer beauty. Might this be a model for a text for the new songs? I began to play with the text in song. The words themselves were so musical that the song nearly wrote itself. I was so moved by the lovely expression of words, melody, and rhythm, that I knew the song would be appropriate for little artists. Might there be more haiku that could so easily become songs? I went to the library and found volumes of haiku. The more I browsed, the more mesmerized I became by the sensitive little poems whose beauty could be likened only to that of a child.

While playing with the haiku in song, I entered another world—that of poets and children—as each little poem celebrated nature, expressing the wonder of the moment and singing its own song. I will no longer look at a butterfly or a drop of rain as I had before. Whether or not my songs would serve the children, they nourished me.

Three to six year old children were spellbound by the haiku songs. They understood the texts better than I did, without any explanation. They received each expression in song as a precious gift. They were so compelled by any given song that I had to sing it repeatedly—with words, without words—never breaking the spell with talking. Within each song, the tonality, meter, and text were woven into a tapestry that became a magic carpet.

Three and four year old children listened intently to any one of the songs for as long as five or six minutes. Five and six year old children were more ready to become involved in the songs. We sang them, we danced them, we dramatized them, we worked with meter, tonality, and text, without breaking the spell with talking. Each of these short songs grew to an intense ten or twelve minute experience in the tonality and meter. Five and six year olds were singing in dorian, lydian, mixolydian, phrygian, aeolian, major and minor—unaccompanied—and singing and moving in usual, unusual, and shifting meters. The sensitivity with which the children made these little songs come alive was that of true artists.

Reading through the collection of "[Cherry Blossoms](#)," as the volume of songs came to be known, I learned more about the difference between our adult perceptions and that of the child artist. Singing each song and turning to the next page did not begin to capture my musical imagination. The songs were so short I hardly began to get into any given tonality. I couldn't appreciate why so many of the short songs needed shifting meters to be expressed. The words were not necessarily relevant to the young child. The impact of each song could not be felt in one hearing. I could not sense by reading through the collection just how much music was packed into each of those few measures. Had I not experienced the songs in that world of poets and children, I might have passed by such a volume and not even considered it as a resource for little children. I wouldn't have dreamed that such little kernels of art could grow into such rich, musical experiences for children.

Little children are closer to art than we are. They know that a song doesn't come alive in one hearing. They have to play with it, taste it, dance with it, live with it, take it to bed with them. They know that the words speak to them through sound and imagery more than through literal meaning. They know that music speaks to them through tonality and meter. They know that the artistic combination of words, melody and rhythm nurtures their very being. Children know art.

To create a new genre of art songs for little children, we need not be master composers. We need to be students of music learning and apprentices to the real masters—the children.

Yours truly,

Mary Ellen Pinzino

THE FROG AND THE CHERRY PETAL

Haiku MARY ELLEN PINZINO

$\text{♩} = 56$

A pet - al light - ly dropped Up-on the mouth of Mis - ter Frog, And
 now _____ his song _____ has stopped.

The musical notation is written on two staves in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 56. The melody is simple and follows the lyrics. The first line of music ends with a fermata over the word 'And'. The second line of music ends with a double bar line.

NEVER IN A HURRY

Haiku MARY ELLEN PINZINO

$\text{♩} = 56$

Ah, the but - ter - fly! — E - ven when chased it nev - er seems In a hur - ry. _____

The musical notation is written on one staff in treble clef with a 2/2 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 56. The melody is simple and follows the lyrics. The piece ends with a double bar line.

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