

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org>

ISBN 1529-8094

Volume 8 Review 6

November 8, 2007

Listen to their Voices: A Review Essay

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Smithrim, K. & Upitis, R. (Eds.). (2007) *Listen to their voices: Research and practice in early childhood music*. Vol. 3 Research to Practice: A Biennial Series. Lee Bartel, Ed. Canadian Music Educators Association.

Citation: Harwood, E. (2007). Listen to their voices: A review essay. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 8(Review 6). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v8r6/>.

Abstract

Listen to their Voices: Research and Practice in Early Childhood Music, edited by Katharine Smithrim and Rena Upitis, offers a collection of essays devoted to music and its place in the education of young children. Thirty authors from twenty-one countries reflect on their professional and personal experience observing children interact with music in various settings. These authors' voices vividly illustrate the diversity of opinions, theoretical frameworks and teaching traditions currently in circulation among early music practitioners and researchers.

Introduction

Listen to their Voices: Research and Practice in Early Childhood Music, edited by Katharine Smithrim and Rena Upitis, offers a collection of essays devoted to music and its place in the education of young children. Although the title refers to listening to the voices of children, one hears most clearly the voices of thirty authors as they reflect on their professional and personal experience observing children interact with music in various settings. These authors draw on their experience as researchers, teachers, and occasionally as parents, to describe aspects of young children's musical lives and learning. The book contains twenty-one chapters, loosely grouped into four sections: learning from young children, cultural and spiritual dimensions, approaches and connections, new directions. In many cases, specific chapters could have fit equally well under another heading, but the section titles provide an initial framing device for interpreting this very diverse set of essays.

Taken together the chapters illustrate the diversity of opinions, theoretical frameworks and teaching traditions currently in circulation among early music practitioners and researchers. As the editors note in their introduction, "our goals as early childhood music educators are diverse and contradictory¹."

In addition to differences of opinion about what constitutes desirable or optimal early music settings and instructional practice, the essays themselves differ greatly in nature. They run the gamut from personal testimony to analysis and presentation of systematic research, from commentary on theoretical frameworks to descriptions of specific early childhood curricula. Some chapters are accounts of original research from a single study, some summarize findings over a series of studies. A prime example of the latter is the chapter by Custodero and St. John, based on sustained studies of flow experiences in early childhood. Some essays are descriptions of well-established early childhood music programs such as Susan Kenney's fulsome description of Brigham Young University's Young Musicians. Others are author accounts of individual innovative curricula with children; an idiosyncratic and provocative example here is June Boyce Tillman's chapter on spirituality. Some provide a thorough review of research literature while others are armchair musings on the importance of music in early childhood, featuring highly personal anecdotes as evidence. For example, Lee Willingham bases the bulk of his chapter around observations of his twin daughters' interactions with music. He asserts that "these young girls are evidence that the human race is hard-wired for music." Without clarifying what counts as musicianship, he tells us that "these little people demonstrated a ravishing appetite for music from the very outset of their lives, and at the time of this writing are accomplished musicians at the ripe old age of forty months." Thus the reader has to navigate the different starting points and missions of these essays,

identifying the substance of each argument and what counts as evidence for each author. The reader also is left to judge the validity of the conclusions and to reconcile contradictions in recommendations across the chapters.

Research Issues

Rather than enumerate the content of each chapter, which is readily available in the table of contents and chapter abstracts, I have chosen in this review to highlight a few questions raised in multiple chapters and whose answers are problematic for the profession, particularly for teacher education. I draw on questions raised by specific authors, but the quotations below are emblematic of concerns tacitly or explicitly expressed in many essays. Consider the following:

“The question to ask is: Does this gap between children’s home and school experiences matter, does there need to be continuity?” (Young, Chapter 21)

“If musicality is part of our human nature and if it is inherent in all children when they are born, why are there big differences in the musical abilities and behavior of people across cultures?” (Chen Hafteck, Chapter 9)

“Do children approximate music—construct musical understandings and initiate music-based interactions? If so, how do adults recognize them? What constitutes adults’ sensitively crafted, music feedback?” (Reynolds, Long and Valerio, Chapter 13).

“Should free play, as utilized widely in other aspects of the early childhood curriculum, be extended into and become an integral part of young children’s music instruction?” (Smith and Montgomery, Chapter 19)

Such questions and the various answers offered are evidence of an evolution in our collective thinking about early childhood music ways and means, goals and methods. I suggest three trends are evident in the kind of research generated by the questions above.

First, research on young children’s interaction with music in and out of schools is growing apace. Bartel and Cameron frame the current reality pointedly: “By the time a child is age five, hundreds and possibly thousands of hours of music have been experienced in some form, usually unintentional. Contrast this with a child’s experience one hundred or even fifty years ago when music experience was infrequent and usually intentional.” (Chapter 5) While a substantial body of earlier research gave credence to the importance of parents and teachers in the musical lives of young children,

increasingly research is illuminating the ways that other forces influence how children experience music. These include siblings, families, community adult culture, television, CDs produced and marketed specifically to children and digital technology in all its forms. In particular, digital technology, from MP3 players to simple portable recorders for preschoolers and electronic sound toys have changed the ways children interact with music. Today's children have unprecedented individual control over what they hear, when and how often, and whether it is a solitary or communal listening/performing experience. We are still sorting out what such devices mean for curriculum design.

Second, the definition of what counts as meaningful musical behavior has broadened from observable, discrete skills such as beat keeping and pitch matching to include a much wider repertoire of responses. These include among others, solo vocable improvisations, free movements, play acting and story telling within the context of a music lesson, spoken chant, hand gestures, repetitive sound exploration on an instrument² and even silence (e.g. Hornbach, Chapter 13) as legitimate musical responses and evidence of developing musical competence.

Third, our understanding of how learners of any age make meaning has expanded from the Piagetian model offered by Marilyn Zimmerman's work for instance, to include ideas from Vygotsky and various versions of constructivism and flow theory. See Custodero and St. John (Chapter 1) for a helpful listing of hallmarks of flow experience in young children based on an extended line of research. At the same time we have maintained ideas from Dewey and others regarding the centrality of play as a framing structure for children's musical education. For those interested in this unwieldy topic, I recommend Smithrim and Montgomery's (Chapter 19) exceptionally lucid and helpful review of literature on play and early childhood education. Some authors in this volume have borrowed theories from other early childhood approaches and suggested how music curricula could be structured along similar lines. Examples here are chapters on the Reggio Emilio approach, and music in a Montessori school setting. Reynolds, Long and Valerio use language acquisition theoretical frameworks for a discussion of stages in musical acquisition while Hurtado explores parallels between music and a sub area of special education, language communication difficulties.

The result of such a plethora of research directions and possibilities is that early childhood educators are faced with an overwhelming, sometimes contradictory, amount of information on which to base curricular decisions. In brief, what are we to tell our prospective teachers about the 'ideal' early childhood music program? A close reading of *Listen to their Voices* leads me to conclude that we do not have a consensus, either as researchers or practitioners, at this point in the 21st century.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Nowhere is the lack of consensus more evident than in the many references to developmentally appropriate practice. Long a watchword for early childhood educators in all disciplines, where “the rubber hits the road” in this volume, is the very different pictures that emerge regarding what such practice looks like in music. Are there predictable stages for the developing singing voice, for emergent literacy, for composition? Does a general description of developmental stages hold up when we study individual children closely, when we study children in naturally occurring social learning contexts as opposed to researcher- controlled environments completing decontextualized researcher- designed tasks?

This volume offers as many answers explicitly and implicitly as there are writers. McCusker (chapter 4) takes as a given that “The goal of any music education program is, undeniably, musical literacy.” She defines emerging musical literacy as “a series of developmental processes, that is, the range of authentic musical behaviors and experiences on a continuum leading to musical understanding.” Her study identifies instances of such processes in what she considers authentic musical behaviors³. Chen Hafteck (Chapter 9) takes a very different starting point and cites Walsh’s conception of development as “the process of growing into culture,” rather than as progress through a series of discrete stages. Her chapter explores cross cultural differences in the responses of young learners, based on her experiences teaching music in North America, China and Africa. Miya (Chapter 10) also views musical development in the context of culture, in this case African indigenous knowledge systems, noting that in African practice “music” as a concept on its own does not exist. For her, the very concept of musical development and appropriate practice are not meaningful. On the other hand, Kenney (Chapter 3) takes as unproblematic the notion that there are identifiable developmental stages. She cites the theories of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky as guiding the design of the early childhood curriculum in the Young Musicians program at Brigham Young University. Statements from the NAEYC on developmentally appropriate practice and cognitive theories of how development occurs underlie the instructional design of this program, where there is relatively little teacher-led activity or direct instruction. Teachers “create environments that provide opportunities for children to choose, explore, and make sense of the musical materials in their space.”

Some authors frame their research questions within Edwin Gordon’s theory of music acquisition; it provides their model for cultivating and recognizing musical development. An example here is Reynolds, Long and Valerio’s analysis of language learning models that subscribes to a linear stage development theory for music (Chapter 13). Hornbach (Chapter 14) explicitly equates developmentally appropriate practice with the stage

identified by Gordon as preparatory audiation: “Early childhood educators and music educators must be knowledgeable about what is musically and developmentally appropriate in order to maximize learning in the classroom.” This statement is followed quickly by its operational use for her study: “Before they are able to audiate, infants and toddlers require informal music learning in the form of preparatory audiation.” For Hornbach, eliciting vocal responses from children is central to preparatory audiation, and the interaction with adults helps build the children’s musical vocabulary. She suggests that interactive play and a playful environment are developmentally appropriate but points out that this is far from what other researchers call free play (as described for instance in the Brigham Young program).

Some visions of appropriate practice include traditional circle time, where children learn songs and chants, and learn a tonal and rhythmic vocabulary in a playful way. Such designated circle time activity provides a space where playful musical interactions with adults are fostered and guided. Other visions of appropriate practice limit or question the value of teacher led singing games, no matter how playfully presented. Instead, appropriate practice includes providing a sonically rich environment including music from home and outside school culture. In such settings, teachers are seen as facilitators and respondents, while children are the initiators of musical interactions. Most of these authors come down somewhere in between, or with some combination of these elements.

But a more fundamental challenge is the question of whether developmentally appropriate practice is a useful or meaningful concept in the present age. Susan Young asserts, in a most thoughtfully written and carefully argued essay, that children’s experience of the contemporary music world is kaleidoscopic, rather than linear. Along with some others in this volume, she also notes that developmental theory in music research historically looked at musical behaviors in isolation, but in the world of music mediated by technology, music is never alone. Children encounter it in gaming, in literature, accompanied by visuals; and their responses are similarly multi modal. Young concludes: “The notion of linear and incremental progressive musical development might no longer be relevant to contemporary musical worlds, if it ever was relevant.”

Conclusion

Listen to their Voices offers a substantial contribution to the literature on early childhood. It is not a standard research reference such as *Musical Beginnings: Origins and Development of Musical Competence* (Deliege and Sloboda, 1996) or Gary McPherson’s (2006) *The Child as Musician*. Neither is it a methods text for practitioners and pre-service teachers such as Dorothy McDonald’s (1988) *Musical Growth and Development*. At its best, *Listen to their Voices* captures the visceral reality of studying children in

authentic contexts. We hear the voices of children quoted often and with respect. We read detailed descriptions of individual children and their musical behaviors and sense the close relationship between the authors and the children. These chapters give us a vivid picture of life in the settings under study.

Those looking for certainty in either “the way to teach” or “what we know about children’s musical development” will be frustrated by *Listen to their Voices*. The richness of this volume lies in the diversity of its offerings. The editors have allowed these authors to define their own terms and territory as it were. Depending on their individual expectations for scholarly writing, readers will likely find some outstanding examples and some that fail to meet the mark. But taken as a whole, this volume should spark animated conversations about the meaning children bring to their musical experiences in the early years. Susan Young’s comment regarding the appropriate use of digital technology in the classroom applies equally to early childhood music in general: “What is certain is that there are no easy answers and no tidy prescriptions for practice.”

Notes

¹ The review is based on a manuscript copy provided by the editors; therefore page numbers in the final publication are unavailable at the time of writing.

² “A young child in the sound corner externalising his own pulse by playing a shaker can often spend long periods in “flow” (Custodero, 2002, 2005) delighting in his/her newly found skill.” Quoted in Boyce-Tillman Chapter 7.

³ I would take exception to her use of the “Mitten Song”, one she composed after a discussion of lost mittens, as an authentic musical context. However, a student’s composition on the same topic, varying from her model, is an illuminating and authentic student voice.

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Eve Harwood has recently returned to full time faculty status as Associate Professor of Music Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. From 2000-2006 she served as Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs in the College of Fine and Applied Arts. Her research interests include children's informal music making and the development of preservice music teachers. She is author of numerous articles on girls' handclapping play and most recently authored a chapter on research in higher education in the arts, *Artists in the Academy: Curriculum and Instruction*, in *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Bresler, L. (Ed.), Springer Press, 2007).

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