

For the love of children: music, education and culture

Pelo amor das crianças: música, educação e cultura

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Abstract. This set of ruminations is intended as 'reflections' on musical children, our own identities as musicians and teachers, and the musical education we design and deliver for our children. As a thought-piece, it works from the premise that in our professional dedication to children's welfare, we seek to honor children's home-and-family music (and culture) even as we facilitate musical experiences that will grow their understandings, skills, and repertoire. Recognizing what children already know, and what their musical interests and needs may be, we accept the privilege of continuing their evolutionary path in music, leading them onward in the further progression of their musical thinking, listening, performing, and inventing. Because we live in a cultural democracy, we do well to consider the meaning of a musical democracy in our charge to open the ears and minds of our children to the multiple sonic possibilities there are in the world.

Keywords: children's musicality, musical meaning and values, musical identity

Resumo. Este artigo tem como objetivo propor algumas reflexões sobre a musicalidade das crianças, as nossas identidades como músicos e professores, bem como a educação musical que projetamos e oferecemos às nossas crianças. Isso pode ser pensado a partir da premissa de que em nossa dedicação profissional ao bem-estar das crianças procuramos valorizar a música (e a cultura) que as mesmas trazem do contexto familiar, facilitando as experiências musicais que aumentarão a compreensão, as habilidades e o repertório. Reconhecendo o que as crianças já sabem e seus possíveis interesses e necessidades musicais, nós aceitamos o privilégio de dar continuidade ao seu percurso na música, levando-as ao progresso do seu pensamento, audição, desempenho e criação musicais. Devido ao fato de vivermos em uma democracia cultural, consideramos o significado de uma democracia musical sob nossa responsabilidade para abrir os ouvidos e as mentes das nossas crianças às múltiplas possibilidades sonoras que existem no mundo.

Palavras-chave: musicalidade das crianças, significado e valores musicais, identidade musical

To my music education colleagues across the grand expanse of the vibrant and colorful nation of Brazil, I offer a gathering of musings concerning the confluence of matters relevant to music, education, and culture. We strive within our individual settings for ways of maximizing children's development in music and through music, and so it seems reasonable and relevant to share this garland of reflections concerning the world in which we work. Our engagement in the musical education of children runs like a river through our lives, flowing swiftly and with direction and purpose, from its beginnings in the earliest childhoods of our students to the eventual outpouring of young singers, players, dancers, and thoughtful listeners into their lifelong musical

involvement far beyond their school years. The ruminations herein emanate from observations and conversations both casual and highly systematic, from 'the literature' both technical and popular, from experienced musicians, teachers, and scholars, and from children with minds of their very own. Rather than crafting words for the sake of the words themselves, churning out yet another vapid scholarly paper (of which I've churned out my own share), these musings are meant to offer insights into various dimensions of our work. Like a garland of flowers, the individual images and ideas cluster and intertwine, and can be viewed as an integrated whole, a colorful aggregate that affords us with an opportunity to contemplate the meaning of our work as musicians and educators.

From the current U.S. president, Barack Obama, comes his support for the arts, including music, a fitting gateway to the ruminations ahead. His presidential platform just two years ago included a call to reinvest in arts education, so that children's ability to think creatively could be encouraged (in ways that differ from the thinking that transpires when one engages in math, science, language arts, the humanities, and the social sciences). Typical of Obama's approach, he coupled logic with literature (and a little of his own direct observation) in making the statement that 'Kids whose imaginations are sparked by the arts are more engaged in school' (2008), and asserted that music programs are 'not just extras – they are part of a well-rounded education'. We take to heart the clear-headed wisdom of our great statesmen, no matter what their national affiliation may be, particularly when they re-affirm what we know in our hearts (and through our growing research base). When Obama remarked that arts education 'teaches us to respect and understand those who are different from ourselves; it teaches us to see each other through each other's eyes', we who teach music smiled knowingly. We have watched children's transformation as they become enmeshed in the musical experience.

In order to provide effective musical learning practices for our children, it is only sensible that we know them. But have we considered lately who we are – then, as children, adolescents, university students making our way through our musical studies, and now, as professionals in the thick of teaching and facilitating the musical expressions of our students? It seems prime, that we take stock of ourselves, examining what we can (and cannot do), where we shine (and struggle some), how to make the most of our training and experience for the sakes of musically educating others. Understanding our own musical identity coincides with our earnest efforts to know the musical identities of our children.

What's your musical story? Me: I'm a mid-century (middle-aged!) woman, born and raised in a midwestern American gritty steel town in the 1950s of a 'blue collar' middle-class family. Dad worked as a truck driver, dropping newspapers to paperboys for delivery, and Mom stayed home with the kids (and neighbor kids). We were first- and second-generation Europeans, with grandparents from Austria and Ireland (even while our neighbors traced their family lines to Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Germany). We spent considerable amounts of time outdoors, rope-jumping, hop-skitching, roller-skating on sidewalks, sledding and ice-skating in the wintry weather. There was music, too. We

had a repertoire of a few hundred folk songs, camp songs, church songs, school songs, and the songs our family gave us; my parents never finished high school, but they sure knew how to sing! We danced to live wedding band music, especially polkas, and all the latest radio tunes, and we listened to a varied menu of recorded music by Mozart and Beethoven, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Mahalia Jackson, Xavier Cugat, and the Tijuana Brass. Once the piano lessons began, we sailed into the standard piano repertoire, but my 'other' family musical life continued to parallel the piano lessons we took. Later in my journey, I enthusiastically studied techniques and performance of Bulgarian choral song, South Indian Karnatic vocal style, Japanese koto, Javanese gamelan, Pakistani qawwali, and Irish harp. To this day, I admit finding great personal meaning in the music before and (in spite of) the lessons, although I have high regard for the technical and expressive beauty of a Chopin etude, a Haydn quartet, a Mahler symphony, and Bach chorale. Today, my personal ad might read like this: 'Loves children, loves music, loves making a difference in the world'. How about you and your musical identity?

Do I digress? In fact, this up-front and personal account is something we can all occasionally note, because we, as musicians and teachers, have musical treasures of our earlier years that we know so well and can readily pass on to others – with our eyes closed. It is also fascinating to recognize how far the life of a white, Euro-American woman like me is from the lives of many of the children who fill our classes today. It is a world away, in time and distance, a giant leap, from the students to whom we are responsible, and a recognition of this lacuna is an initial step towards understanding the bridge that must be crossed in reaching them.

In our responsibility of raising musical children who are skillful and expressive singers, players, dancers, inventors (and listeners and readers), we recognize what several visionary musicians, teachers, and scholars have offered us as support. John Blacking, anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, claimed that musicality belongs to everyone naturally, and that it is society's valuing (or not valuing) of music that affects how musically engaged an individual will become (1973). The father of music therapy, E. Thayer Gaston, who merged his understandings of educational psychology with medical and health sciences, postulated that all humans have need for musical expression (1968). Three decades later, Christopher Small, self-described as a 'thinking musician', studied the sociomusical dimensions of the human experience and wrote of 'musicking' as a social act shared by

people of many varied cultures (1998). Charles Keil recently turned his attention from anthropological studies of African Tiv song, African American blues, and midwestern American polka culture (among the various topics of his earnest interest) to support for the early musical nurturing of very young children in his 'born-to-groove' campaign (2010). Together, these visionaries set a solid foundation for justifying the presence of music and a rock-solid sequence for the musical education of our children and youth.

The title of this thought-piece, "For the Love of Children: Music, Education, and Culture" deserves attention, given that by specifying particular meanings and usages of these weighted words, I might better clarify the intent of our shared work. By "love", I mean the professional dedication to children's welfare and education that good teachers have, a commitment that is unconditional and continuing for as long as children need their teachers' guidance and nurturing attention. "Children" is an all-encompassing word that refers to little ones in their infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool years, as well as young people in their childhood and adolescence who comprise the student populations of elementary and secondary schools; under the age of eighteen years, they are children in various stages of intellectual, social-emotional, and physical development. The "music" to which I refer is broad-ranging, and includes *their* music as well as *our* music, and any other music that is deemed by professional teaching musicians as worthy of study and participation. The "education" that children receive may be formally organized for them in schools as well as informal and available through their experiences at home, on the playground, in church, and through the influences of family, communities, and the media, for we know that children learn through various experiences that they shape and from which they develop understandings. As "culture" is a term applied by anthropologists to people who share similar beliefs, values, folkways, and experiences, I use it to refer to the expressive communities from which particular musical practices arise anywhere in the world, including sophisticated adult (or "big") cultures and children's "little" cultures from any part of the world. Taken together, these five words embrace the principal facets of our professional work, in these contemporary times, whether we work in Sao Paulo or Seattle, Londrina or London, Porto Alegre or Paris.

The children for whom we are responsible come in many shapes, sizes, colors, and dispositions. We recognize early on in our careers that *they are not us*, certainly not in the way of age and

maturity, and we are often challenged to recall what it was like to be six, nine, twelve, or fifteen years old. Today's children are growing up in a world quite different from the one we knew, and they are products of the technological and mediated matrix of their time. They know experiences that we can only imagine, growing up in families who have enculturated them into a set of values all their own. They may speak different languages than the nationally mandated 'tongue', prefer an array of foods that might appear 'exotic' to the cultural outsider, celebrate holidays of which the mainstream may be ignorant and uninformed, and maintain artistic traditions that define their very identity. Today's children may be bicultural, code-switching between their home culture and the culture of school. They may be bimusical, too, finding meaning both in the music of their families and in the training they can receive on the piano, or vocally, or on dozens of orchestral, band, and other school music ensembles. The children of our classrooms comprise a complex cultural conglomerate, and we have our work cut out for us in teaching them a standard canon of knowledge, skills, and values while also honoring their treasured experiences outside school.

How musical are the children whom we teach? Since all children possess musical potential, and some realize this musicality by virtue of the families who nurture them and immerse them in the music from birth, many more achieve their full musical selves through the education and training of our school music programs. As effective educators, we direct our efforts to maximizing their musicianship collectively in our classes. We look also to the individual musical interests and strengths of the children. Who are the singers? The players? The dancers? What music do they value? How do they best learn music – by ear, by eye, through kinesthetic experiences, or in some combination of sensory channels? As the answers flow, we piece together our curricular experiences so that lesson by lesson and from one class to another, our children are skillfully singing, playing, and dancing, and learning to reproduce music they have heard while also gaining the wherewithal to create their very own expressive vocal, instrumental, and movement pieces.

The American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked on the value of 'music and dancing to affirm noble sentiments' and ruminated that the point of education was 'to untune nobody but to draw all into the truth, to keep all spiritual and sweet'. But teachers do so much more than to avoid untuning their children. They not only tune their children, but they provide the stepping stones and the full-fledged sequence of a musi-

cal education that meets the needs and to match their musical potential.

Children have their ways with music, and their own words to describe its role in their lives. In the Songs in Their Heads project (1998, 2010), children spoke their heart-felt sentiments of the meaning of music in their daily lives. There is nothing we could write or say that would get to the heart of music's magic in quite the same way that children themselves can thoughtfully express it. One nine-year girl enthusiastically gushed, at the close of her school's spring concert of songs and xylophone compositions, that 'Everything would not be anything without music.' She was joined by two friends who vigorously nodded their heads in agreement, even as they stuffed their mouths with the after-concert chocolate chip cookies.

Astonishing as it may initially seem, children care about music for its personal dimensions. Some of the comments that have flowed from 'the mouths of babes' include these from children: 'Music gets me going and gives me strength' (in times of one preadolescent's emotional strife), 'I love the feeling of music' (from a six-year-old boy who enjoys the visceral nature of music's sonic vibrations), 'Whistling and singing are close music' (another six-year-old's expression of music that he can make with his mouth – without the need for an instrument as an extension of himself), and "I'd be like a museum, keeping the songs' (an eight-year-old girl's expression of her earnest effort to learn the songs of her grandmother and to keep them for all posterity). In response to a question as to the origin of a song she had sung, another eight-year-old expressed it this way: 'I know it, I made it, me and only me, mostly', declaring that her music was a mix of her own musical sensibility and yet that there might be other influences that she has integrated into the music she calls her own.

Children are frequently aware of the social-familial matter of music. They are conscious of the fact that their mothers and fathers are prominent models of the music they know, and that they experience a kind of social bonding, a deeply meaningful connection with others through the act of making music. One ten-year-old girl observed that 'Whenever I sing, everyone seems to like me'. An eleven-year-old suggested that it would not be easy for an adult like me to learn the tunes and dances of her family repertoire, because 'you have to be brought up with it' as she was from infancy onward. In describing how he and his family band of guitars and drums functions to make music

that sets people to dancing, an eleven-year-old explained that "I try to concentrate on what I'm doing, and (to) relate to the others' – that is, the players in the band. One girl of eleven years was forthright in her description of the reason for her singing: 'My mom wants me to sing', and so she does, in all due respect to her mother.

The uses of music are not lost on children, either, and many children recognize that music's presence in their lives is linked to events and experiences they value. They speak to the essence of music as they view it: 'Music is about stuff you do' (one six-year-old boy's description of music as more than a passive experience, but rather an interactive and engaging encounter); 'Some music helps the stories along' (the recognition by a girl of six years that music is a powerful force in the plots of some of her favorite movies); 'Nobody should have to sit still when there's music. It moves, and it makes you move' (the mild frustration voiced by an eleven-year-old boy to a music teacher's requirement that children 'sit still and listen' rather than to 'move and groove'); 'Music is all right – in the right place, at the right time' (the rational comment of a ten-year-old boy who is open and receptive to many musical styles, depending upon context).

As children learn music, they are conscious of how they learn it. They learn music within school settings, in formal lessons paid for by their parents, and informal observations and trial-and-error practice sessions alone and with family or friends. Some children pride themselves on their independent discovery and development of musical skills, too, as the following comments suggest: 'I listen and figure it out' (a seven-year-old boy's explanation of how he developed his repertoire of recorder melodies and playing techniques); 'I challenge myself to play' (a nine-year-old's expression of his internal motivation to master some rhythmic flourishes on his drums); 'I'm thinking about how a violin would sound hooked up to speakers' (an eight-year-old's imagining of ways to extend or re-arrange the sonic timbre of his instrument); 'My inside-singing is my guide to playing' (a ten-year-old boy's clarification of how his singing, even a silent singing that is 'inside' of him, leads him to the music he eventually plays on his keyboard). These children pride themselves on their self-study of music, such that in lieu of instruction (or perhaps alongside it, too), they are motivated to grow their musical skills.

More than is typical of some subjects within the curriculum, children claim an active interest in the music they learn in school, and how they learn

it. Their frank opinions of music teachers and the content of their music classes speak to the ups-and-downs, and the joys and frustrations, of their young experiences in learning to perform and invent music. They understand that 'in school, we all sing and move and play together' (one eleven-year-old boy's definition of school music), and they appreciate such opportunity to do so. They yearn for active involvement in making music rather than listening to teachers talk about it, as the comment of one ten-year-old girl would indicate: 'I could play if only my teacher would let me'. They wonder whether the songs they will sing and play might be best learned aurally (and more directly), at least some of the time, as when one boy queried, 'Do too many notes get in the way of the music?'. They know what they like about music and music class, and can be sharply critical of ineffectual teachers and enthusiastically supportive of teachers who lead them directly into music-making that challenges and fulfills them, as in the case of this comment: 'I would miss music now, because Mrs. Phillips is so much better.' Many are surprisingly expert at determining how best to fill a music class, and teachers may learn fascinating aspects of their teaching trade from listening to what children say.

In consideration of music, education, and culture in the lives of our children, we cannot help but to note that they find music to be an integral part of their identities. They are not blank musical slates, either, but are already musically evolved as they enter our classes, and are evolving still through the instruction we offer them. We have the privilege of continuing their evolutionary path in music, of determining who they musically are and leading them onward in the further progression of their musical thinking, listening, performing, and inventing. As we listen to the children, and take the time to stand back and observe their own musical expressions on the playground, in free play, and at the perimeter of our formal instruction for them, we can learn more of what children know and value in order to piece together a more meaningful musical education for them. Scholars in anthropology, ethnomusicology, folklore, and education have begun to study children from their own perspective as children (and not 'fledging adults'), even as we teachers are also moving in the direction of crediting children for what they already know, what they hope to learn, and how they learn best. It is an important task to be reminded of, that teachers do well to facilitate rather than dictate learning, and to maintain a sensitivity to children's own perspective on music and the valued ideals (and 'things') of their cultural communities.

The world is changing, right before our very eyes. Those who share my eldering position (that is to say, who have the experience of a half-century or more of life on the planet) have watched the rapid disappearance of news-in-print to news-on-the-screen as technology has taken on various modes of high-speed communication. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the media has catapulted to its high-powered position of influence, and competes as an educational force alongside schools, families, and neighborhoods. The world of our children is replete with possibilities, and we teachers do well to keep the pace while maintaining a balance of tradition and change, of familiar (old) and innovative (new), in the content of our curricular work. We steep ourselves in musical knowledge of the past while also opening up to what technology and the media offer us as support to our classroom ventures. We recognize the influences of change, work to preserve and conserve aspects of our heritage in music, and maintain a flexibility for the newly emerging music and approaches to learning it. We have a foot in each of two worlds: that of our own history and training and that of the children to whom we have dedicated our professional lives. We provide the link between 'then' and 'now', between the valued music of our time (of our own musical education and training) – and of earlier historical times, and the music of now, of children's interest and contemporary cultural influences.

In coming to closure on these musings, I want to establish that despite my own Euro-American experience, I join you in the belief that 'white is not normal' and that we who live in a cultural democracy believe also in a musical democracy that honors the expressions of our children and the wider world in which they live. I maintain that a critical aim of our work is to teach music with a capitol 'M', all music, any music, with the intent of opening the ears and minds of our children to the multiple sonic possibilities there are in the world. We do well to pour our energy into figuring ways for offering our children experiences in a wide array of 'sonic dialects' that reflect the musical thoughts, behaviors, and values of people near to and far from themselves. Learning culture is a byproduct of the musical education that we can provide, so that by connecting the music our children know with the yet 'unkown' music, they can discover the essence of the wider world of musicians, listeners, and lovers of music. They can take their place within the spectrum of cultural understandings and expressions, holding to the music of their local surroundings even as they follow the intrigue of musical styles distant from them. We want our children to



know themselves as they musically are, even as we strive for them to be curious and receptive to the world at large – in music and through music. It is a hefty charge that we music teachers share,

to conscientiously attend to music, education, and culture in our daily work. Yet for the love of children, we fire up and refuel on a daily basis, doing our best in the time that we have with them.

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