



music
with the
under-fours

Susan Young



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Music with the Under-fours

The importance and value of music in the care and education of very young children is increasingly being recognised. This book looks closely at early musical development and how this translates into ways of supporting the musical activity of babies, toddlers and young children, keeping in mind the diversity of pre-school work.

The following topics are included:

- Pre- and postnatal musical experience;
- Musical parenting;
- Lullabies and play-songs;
- Baby music sessions;
- Toddlers' music play;
- Songs, musical games and other activities;
- Young children's singing—spontaneous and joining in;
- Music play with instruments;
- Listening;
- Working with adults to develop musical opportunities.

The text provides a valuable synthesis of recent thinking in this area, as well as practical suggestions for fostering creativity through musical activities. This original and inspiring book will be welcomed by anyone responsible for the care and education of pre-school children.

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To Michael, Ellen and Laura

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book is the outcome of two research projects in early years music. The first focused on three- and four-year-olds in nursery settings playing with educational percussion instruments. In this first project my aim was to understand some of the processes which drive children's spontaneous musical activity and to look for ways adults might play creatively with children. This work mostly focused on instruments, as I had noticed that, while these are provided in early years settings, practitioners often feel unsure about how best they might be used. The second has been a broader project which was concerned with both research and development. It aimed to develop approaches to practice in music with under-four-year-olds in a range of early childhood settings.

It is the second project which mostly informs the book. The project was guided by questions such as: what spontaneous musical abilities do children reveal in early childhood contexts, how do they engage with musical activities which are presented to them by adults and how might adults best foster children's musicality? In order to investigate those questions I visited three early childhood settings over the course of a year for about two hours each per week. The settings were chosen to be varied yet representative. One was a nursery run as part of a family centre by social services, another was a privately funded daycare providing all-day care for babies to school-age children and the third was an Early Excellence Centre encompassing nursery education, units for children with special needs and a toy library. Kim Bloomfield, co-worker on the project, worked in music within a voluntary playgroup, in a toy library for children with special needs and at a hostel for homeless mothers.

To begin to answer the questions I started by observing, listening and writing unstructured field notes. The aim of the observations was to collect information about the settings themselves, the people who worked in them, the spontaneous musical behaviours of the children and the kinds of musical activities between adults

and children which took place in these settings. It was intended to be the kind of observational information which raises questions and leads to the search for more information. After each session of observing I read back through the notebooks and used the blank pages opposite to write notes and further reflections. Through this process ideas and issues began to surface. In this way I was trying to critically analyse current practices in early childhood settings, above all my own, and to move on to produce improved versions of practice.

An important strand of this project was the observation and documentation of children's spontaneous musical behaviours. This work was underpinned by the conviction that we need to learn how to listen, to recognise and to value young children's own ways of being musical and to see these as the starting points for adults to connect with, follow and respond to. In contrast to other areas of early years practice, particularly the visual and language arts, I consider music lags behind in its collection, analysis and interpretation of young children's self-initiated activity. As a consequence, adult-led models of music practice predominate which are often, in my view, poorly connected with children's current abilities, competences and inclinations.

An outcome of the project was the making of a video which is intended to be used for training. However this also provided an unexpected, additional source of information for research as a quantity of sensitive filming of high audio and visual quality was collected by the film crew. The perceptive eyes and ears of cameraman and sound-recordist often picked out children singing in the general melee of play which I had not heard.

Central to the project was the importance of spending continuous and long periods of time in a few places in order to get to know the children and staff well, and to think about the way music might operate within the whole environment. The criteria for funding often emphasise the number of children the project will benefit, leading to the temptation for workers to scoot from setting to setting. As a result of staying long-term in a few settings, I think the project was able to evolve approaches to practice which are embedded in current practices and accord with the ways of working in those settings. For example, noticing and thinking about the very different kinds of ways coffee breaks are provided for in different settings (and the one setting with no break) may on the surface have nothing to do with the music but say much about the professional lives of the different workers and how they are viewed and view themselves. However, at the same time I am aware that what arises from and fits these settings may not transfer well to

others. I would like to think, however, that it is possible to launch into more general propositions about music with under-fours from the footing of these few case studies.

An extension of the rethinking process was to spend time visiting, observing and talking to other early childhood professionals, in music and beyond. I explored a number of other projects, visited other professionals, talked to people on the phone and spent time gathering and reading descriptions and reports from other early years music projects (of which there are plenty now). I spent time in stores specialising in early childhood toys, observing parents with small children selecting and buying musical instruments, CDs and cassette players. I watched children's television shows, read the accompanying magazines and listened to CDs produced with very young children in mind.

How this book is organised

This book aims to keep in mind diverse children, diverse childhoods, diverse families, diverse settings and the diverse range of adults working with children. Yet, at the same time, it is distinctive to the area of south-west London in which I have worked and developed my ideas. While it describes practice which evolved from these contexts, I am aware that the perspectives are based on certain values and priorities which reflect my own cultural background and experiences.

The book tries not to assume that there is a 'one size fits all' approach which can transfer from setting to setting. Nor does it arrive at conclusions, or prescriptive suggestions. It aims to show how complex it all is and how thoughtful, sensitive and skilful the adults need to be. It also aims to show the wide range of skills required to work in music with under-fours and that musical skills count for only one small part in this. Indeed, it is so much part of the caring role to sing and play musically with the smallest children that formal musical skills may even get in the way by inhibiting what seems to be intuitive adult-to-child music-making.

The chapters move developmentally from pre-birth babies through to four-year-olds but dwell on key areas during individual chapters. This organisation of the chapters was chosen as much to capture the move from interdependence between infants and carers to independence and the changes in the kinds of settings within which under-fours are cared for as to emphasise developmental changes. Another natural division seems to fall between the babies and toddlers who are paired with an adult carer

and the older pre-school children who are beginning to move independently into early childhood settings. Music in baby- and toddlerhood is duet music with and between adult-child pairs in many different constellations. Throughout the chapters, however, some of the key activity areas, such as singing, using instruments, media influences and so on, are common to each age phase, and to discuss them in relation to each would have become repetitive. They have either been located in the chapters where they seem to have the most relevance or, in the final two chapters, separated out into two strands.

The cut-off age for this book of around four years may seem out of step with official curriculum materials which are mostly taking the age of three as the boundary between under-threes and the Foundation Stage, three-to-fives. But this is a book which started with children and settings catering for the under-fours and is less concerned to fit in with official documentation. The rising fives move into reception classes marking a major transition point. The book's main message is music as play and adults being musically playful with children, and this version of music is so at odds with the way most reception classes are organised that there would have been few connecting points.

Real-life examples and descriptions drawn from observations pepper the text. They aim to ground the book and provide illustrations. They describe the embedded nature of musical activity, with toys and with other people, and model different kinds of interactions with adults, and sometimes other children. I wanted to avoid giving lists of ideas and recommendations which can be difficult to visualise in practice. They also serve to model observation and listening as fundamental to working in music with under-fours. All these descriptions are limited by the range of experiences I could gain from the project. They are primarily taken from a daycare setting because this provided the majority of the observations. Daycare also usefully gave me the opportunity to observe babies and toddlers more easily than it would have been if I had visited their homes. Some of the descriptions are drawn from the observational work of research students studying aspects of music with babies, Carolyn Spencer and Alison Street, and from the work carried out by Kim Bloomfield as part of the RRiF project. Kim's contribution of ideas, in particular her discussion and modelling of music play with her daughter Lucy at home, has been invaluable.

The examples and descriptions are then commented on and lead, finally, into suggestions for practice. These practical approaches are discussed, often at some length. At the same time, background

and theoretical information to inform and support practice has been provided where I thought it useful. In this way, it has been my aim to provide the deeper rationale and principles of practice rather than just the activity ideas at surface level.

Terminology

Terminology caused some problems. To refer to ‘babies, toddlers and young children’ may be more precise in many places than the catch-all ‘children’ but risked clogging up the text. Equally, ‘parents, childminders, nannies, keyworkers’ may be more fine-grained than ‘carers’ but for the same reason I chose the single term ‘carers’, or in other places ‘practitioners’, as appropriate. I hope readers will allow me some leeway with the more general terms selected for easier reading and accept that I tried to be as alert as possible to the dangers of unhelpful assumptions and divisions carried inadvertently in the choice of terms.

Chapter 2

Issues and contexts

Young children's lives are shot through with music: music in the quiet cooing of a baby in her cot; the rhythmical banging of spoon on plate; the running around singing 'Bob the Builder' more times than can be possible and tolerable; the anticipation of the 'Tickly, tickly' in a play rhyme with adults; the locked-in focus on the tinkling glass-piece mobile or boisterous dancing to a television theme tune. The sensitivity, energy and inventiveness of children's own music, and the ways they participate in and exploit the musical opportunities around them, are the starting points of this book. It is entitled, quite clearly, 'Music *with* the Under-fours' to convey the idea that music is something which happens between adults and children, and that within close and caring relationships meaningful musical development can unfold.

As more is discovered about the abilities of very young children and their positive motivation to learn, the more we realise how important it is to provide them with the best to ensure their 'well-being' now and their 'well-becoming' into the future. The purpose of this book is to contribute to an understanding of what is best, where music is concerned, for very young children. It starts from the conviction that an understanding of the processes and content of children's own musicality and music is the first priority. Then, on the basis of what we know of children's own ways of being musical and participating in music, we can think out, explore and develop models of practice. In this process I hope to be able to shift and expand notions of what music with young children might be, what it might sound like and what we might expect and aim for. There are traditions and beliefs that complicate approaches to music, and, in this process, some of these will need to be challenged.

We are in a new era of exploration and understanding of babies and toddlers. Where perhaps it was thought that babies arrived in the world with everything to learn, this idea is being turned on its

head by discoveries of just how capable they are, even as newborns. Cleverly devised research is able to show that babies have early musical abilities and capacities for musical learning of which we were unaware until relatively recently. Working with children in their first years can be positively viewed as support to reinforce and extend what they can already do, rather than starting from scratch. This represents a complete turn-about from the long-held conception of the very young as incapable and with everything yet to learn.

Most of the striking achievements of the period from pre-birth to four years occur naturally when parents and caregivers play, talk, sing and dance with their children and respond well to the cues they give. Much of this book is simply about encouraging musical play among young children, and between young children and the adults who care for them. While playing together musically is natural to home and much daycare life—a majority of carers sing and jiggle with their babies and toddlers, play music in the home, in the car, buy musical toys and playthings which sound—musical play can become narrowed in pre-school settings to the more formal ‘circle times’. This more formal way of including music has persisted even though it is out of keeping with the playful and interactive contexts for learning provided in most other curriculum areas.

Current contexts

In this section I will consider current contexts for early years music and how they have recently changed.

The social and economic circumstances of families with young children are changing rapidly. Demands for high-quality early years care and education for all children and for accessibility, particularly for those at risk owing to factors associated with low socioeconomic status, have become key political issues in England. A spate of government initiatives has resulted. This is a time of rapid growth in all forms of provision for early years, both in the range of opportunities for young children and in public awareness. It is an expansion, for early years music certainly, within which there are few ‘benchmarks’.

The expansion is driven by awareness of the critical importance of the first years of life for all aspects of later development. Parents and carers have always instinctively used music in its many forms in children’s upbringing and know how it blends across aspects of the care and education of the very young, how it envelops and