

# Early Childhood Music: Materials and Activities

## Criteria and Guidelines for Selecting and Using Materials in Early Childhood Music Lessons

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In order to help young children gain better experiences through music making, early childhood educators need to know how to use appropriate materials that can be applied in early childhood music settings. What are appropriate and “good” early childhood music materials? Are there “bad” music materials? Will good and bad music enhance or impair the music growth of young children? In “Music in the Kindergarten,” Kodály (1974) raised the issue regarding the danger of “harm(ing) the child(ren) in his human and Hungarian character if they (teachers) nurture him (students) on poor songs” (pg. 147). Thus, choosing good and appropriate music materials is as critical in our teaching as the way the lesson is structured.

The purpose of this article is to provide guidelines for choosing good and appropriate early childhood music materials. The guidelines are (1) choosing repertoire that has lasted for a long period of time, (2) choosing repertoire that is authentic, (3) applying activities that can be spontaneously created and improvised by young children, (4) exploring music that represents the diverse backgrounds of our children, and (5) using music that can be integrated into other subjects.

### **Repertoire that has lasted for a long period of time**

Folk materials are songs and chants that have been sung from past centuries. These materials are enchanting to the young child’s ears and are natural in the world of young children (Feierabend, 1997). In addition, folk repertoire is closely related to activities of normal life such as ritual, work, child-rearing, and entertainment. “Folk traditions, first of all with their singing games and children’s songs, are the best foundations for subconscious national features” (Kodály 1974, pg. 131).

Singing games are excellent examples of the type of historic repertoire that is “natural” for the child. Singing games are the expression of a child’s daily life. Besides helping children understand the culture in which they live, singing games can offer children a glimpse of ways of life from the past, and how this life was different from their own. A singing game for young children includes singing and play with movements that can be imitated and repeated. According to Choksy (1981), singing games are divided into four categories; they are acting out games, partner-choosing games, chase games, and winding games. Examples for each of these categories respectively are “Ring around the rosie,” “Bow wow wow,” “Charlie over the ocean,” and “Snail, snail.”

Kodály (1974) believed folk materials play an essential role in educating children about their cultures and people and “are the treasure trove of the most beautiful melodies” (pg. 190). Folk song and chant repertoire is created from language and cultural practices and represents the social and artistic evolution of ethnic groups. Instrumental repertoire also evolves and is played on the folk instruments of the culture. By listening to and performing folk repertoire, one is better able to understand the cultures of the people.

Even though it is essential to use folk materials in teaching young children, in the late 1930s in Hungary Kodály (1974) found that “the folk tunes, nursery rhymes, jingles and singing games, which have a principal role in the initial stages of education with all cultures peoples, found their way to our kindergartens very late, or have actually not arrived there to this very day” (pg. 131). A similar situation can be found in this country. Why is this happening?

During the past century, the extended family in our society has been redefined into the nuclear family. Due to this lack of family

community, fast-paced daily life, and the development of technology, valuable time that used to be shared among family members—including grandparents and their grandchildren—is being lost. As a result, children have not had the opportunity to enjoy the wonderful music that has traditionally been passed down for hundreds of years (Feierabend, 1997). Folk music that is meant to be sung live is being replaced with recorded music on radio, CDs, and TV programs. Since the repertoire is often passed on aurally from one generation to another, if the repertoire of any given culture is not performed, it will be forgotten.

There is a body of folk repertoire, repertoire that has stood the test of time, that can be used in teaching young children. As music teachers of young children we have the responsibility to use developmentally appropriate folk repertoire in our teaching as a way of bringing this historic music to our students. Teaching folk music is also a way of preserving our students’ musical heritage, preserving ethnic music for the world at large, and, at the same time, enchanting the child. By sequentially building our curriculum around musical concepts that can be taught by the folk repertoire, this repertoire from our past can provide a basic foundation for constructing an early childhood music curriculum.

### **Repertoire that is authentic**

When using folk materials in the classroom, maintaining the authenticity of the repertoire is also essential in our teaching. We need to do research and study in some depth to make sure the materials we choose are true to the culture. Getting materials only from a book without researching for authenticity or cultural background is not sufficient preparation for providing accurate information to children. As Kodály (1974)

was analyzing the songs that were used in the Hungarian primary schools, he noticed that “bad texts were sung to folksong tunes” (pg. 137) and texts from Hungarian folk tradition were composed with “bad and un-Hungarian melodies” (pg. 137). Kodály strongly criticized these kinds of irresponsible arrangements. He felt that adaptations of Hungarian materials took away the authenticity of the music and made them unusable as teaching tools. Thus, replacing “This old man” with “I love you” is not the best way to teach children about folk music.

The repertoire we use should be as true to the original source as possible. By presenting the songs in their original forms, we are teaching authentic pieces of culture (Trinka, 1995). Since no notation is recorded, many variations evolve from this transmission (Nettl, 1990). For example, when children’s folk songs were brought across the Atlantic, the colonial people continued to sing the songs that they knew from their homelands. New versions and variants arose as the songs were passed on by word of mouth. A children’s ballad or song tale that originated in London during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “Frog went a-courting,” is still commonly heard in the United States. Highland (2003, para. 1) collected this song from 29 different resources. The titles, lyrics, and rhythmic and melodic patterns were different from one variation to another. As music educators, it is important to sing different variants of songs. By doing this, we are preserving the importance of oral tradition in the culture.

On the other hand, when we perform folk repertoire we must also try to use authentic tone color. Kodály (1974) believed the best Hungarian singers should not imitate German and Italian singing styles; they should interpret and sing Hungarian folk songs based on peasants’ singing styles. The vocal technique that is used for authentic folk singing is quite different from the head voice singing that is used for Western art music. Even though head voice singing should be emphasized in the classroom, children can still explore different singing voices, including head and chest. Ultimately, the repertoire of each culture should be sung with its authentic vocal timbre (Loong, 1996).

The same principle should be applied to recordings of instrumental music—when choosing folk, art, and world music recordings of instrumental music, early childhood music educators have to make sure the recordings are played on authentic instruments by skilled musicians. In this age of technology, all recordings must be carefully screened to make sure traditional instrumental sounds are true and not synthesized.

### **Music that is spontaneously created**

Besides learning how to sing, chant, and perform authentic folk materials, children also need to create music spontaneously. Improvised music is under this category. Children are encouraged to create music spontaneously by using found sounds materials, music instruments, voice (singing, chanting), and movements. Materials that are commonly found around any house can be used to make music. Pans, wooden objects, plastic bottles, and so on can be collected for a “found sounds” center. Children should be encouraged to make music with these materials as well as small percussion instruments (drums, triangles, maracas). According to Nye (1983), at the beginning stage it is important that the child be free to manipulate instruments and experiment with them, exploring their sounds and ways to produce them. Children should not be told how to hold the instrument at this exploratory stage. Soon, however, they can be helped to discover how to hold and play each instrument to produce the best sound. The body also can be viewed as a primary source of musical sounds. Children should be encouraged to produce different sounds from their bodies, for example, clapping, tapping, snapping, stepping, patting, or stamping.

If instruments are provided in the classroom, it is important to allow ample time, probably at the beginning of the session, for each child to explore the variety of timbres and textures and develop his or her own vocabulary of sounds. Small percussion instruments such as hand drums, triangles, tambourines, and wood blocks are often found in early childhood schools. Children love to play these instruments. They can be used to create sound compositions (make the sound of thunder, raindrops, wind, and so on) and also to accompany songs. This exploration

will provide a foundation for the development of structured music ideas and concepts that will be taught later.

Early childhood music educators can also encourage young children to sing by asking them to respond to a short verse of music. Young children can improvise in simple melodic patterns, starting with one note “do,” or two notes “mi-so,” or even three notes “mi-so-la,” when improvising simple patterns. One of the best ways of introducing classroom improvised music is by using young children’s imaginations. For example, children are always fascinated with storytelling. By using the story of “Three little pigs,” children can improvise by singing “Not by the hair of my chinney, chin chin” when the wolf knocks on the door.

Creative movement generated by stories gives children the opportunity to discover the joy and satisfaction of moving in rhythmic and expressive ways. “The benefits of expressive movement exploration activities involved evoking body awareness and creating a kinesthetic experience with music” (Loong, 2006, pg. 5). One of the main goals of creative movement is to encourage children to move spontaneously with improvised music that is suggested by different stories. Improvised creative movements can be accompanied with instruments and singing. The repertoire of stories for young children is large. For example, in the story of “Tortoise and the hare,” children can act out the following movements according to the different characters in the story: walking and running steps for the hare, long steps for the tortoise. Children can pretend they are climbing up and down the hill when the teacher plays ascending and descending music. These rhythmic and melodic patterns can be accompanied with piano or pitched or unpitched instruments. By providing basic guidelines, music educators can help children choreograph movements and orchestrate stories with instruments.

### **Music that represents the diverse background of our children**

As our society is getting more diverse, and every region in this country is unique in its own way—geographically, historically, and socially—we, as music educators, must be sensitive to the family backgrounds of

our children and the communities around them. By helping children become familiar with music of different cultures, we can provide a safe and comfortable environment for children to express their ethnicity and build a close relationship among the school, parents, and children.

American culture is based on diverse ethnic backgrounds falling into five general categories: (1) Native American, based on different tribes in North America, influenced by migration, war, and European and African cultures; (2) Caucasian, rooted in Western and Eastern European folk and art music that evolves into American music; (3) African, rooted mainly in West African music, influenced by Native American and Caucasian music over the past two hundred years; (4) Hispanic, rooted in Mexico and the Southwestern states of the United States; and (5) Asian and Asian Pacific music, comprising—among others—Hawaiian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures.

Folk repertoire of the above ethnic groups is culturally based. It is the music that has stood the test of time for each ethnic group and is usually transmitted anonymously orally from one generation to another. Often only people who belong to a particular ethnic group can fully understand the true meaning of their own folk repertoire. Kodály (1971) stated that “folk-tradition is not to be thought of as one uniform, homogenous whole. It varies fundamentally according to age, social and material conditions, religion, education, district and sex” (pg. 20). Thus, it is essential to start the teaching of multicultural music that represents the background of the majority children in the community. For example, it makes more sense to start a curriculum by introducing a play-party, such as “Skip to my lou” in the Midwest, keiki (children) mele in Hawaii, “Bate-bate” in a Hispanic community, and “Jasmine flower” among Chinese children. There is no one standard sequence in presenting multicultural curriculum in the United States; it is solely based on the location, culture, and social background of our children.

When bringing these diverse materials into the early childhood music classroom, the issue of “breadth” and “depth” should be handled sensitively. Attempting to introduce

music of a different genre each week, or covering too many different cultures in one semester—in other words, covering the materials in too much breadth—can only confuse children and diminish their retention (Steiner, 2000). According to McCollough-Brabson (1992), teachers are encouraged “to start with a few selected materials and then gradually expand their repertoire” (pg. 79). A “tourist” curriculum, where only a few selective multicultural songs are introduced during the holiday seasons, should be avoided.

In addition to folk materials, introducing masterpieces from the art music repertoire is also as important as introducing music from different cultures. Art repertoire includes songs and instrumental music; Western art music written mostly by Europeans, Americans, and Latin Americans; and world music that is not considered folk music. Some of this world music may be improvised, as in, for example, jazz music performed by a skilled saxophone player, or Indian sitar music performed by a classical sitar musician. For composed classical music, an example would be Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata No. 8* in C minor (“Pathétique”), Op. 13, performed by a classical pianist. All this music must be performed by skilled musicians, in other words, the master musicians of a given music.

Children from preschool through the age of eight are usually open to all kinds of music, including recorded music (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 1995). Children can be helped to understand a wide range of music from many styles, genres, and cultures through active involvement in listening and participating. Children’s books can be read to recorded music. Moving to recorded music is also an important area of instruction. Young children can accompany art music with simple actions like walking, running, or jumping, or using body gestures (knee slapping, clapping, patting, and bending) to emphasize the rhythmic quality of a song. These experiences can help develop the sense of beat. Dance is another way to develop the sense of beat in children and provide an enjoyable way for them to interact with composed and art music. Dance can take the form of folk dances from around the world as well as formal dances such as the waltz. Free movement to recorded music

is also an appropriate activity for children. By introducing a variety of masterpieces from art music, teachers are able to nurture future audiences of fine music.

### **Music that can be integrated into other subjects**

Lastly, in order to teach children as a whole, learning can be enhanced by finding relationships among music and other subject areas. According to Healy’s work on brain development, and Hart’s observations, Snyder (1996) suggested that there is a need “for curricular designs that are less fragmented, and more holistic” (Snyder, pg. 19). Furthermore, a number of experimental research projects have indicated the positive effects of arts infusion on achievement in other subjects (Catterall, 1995; The Greater Augusta Arts Council, 1995; Miller, 1996; Welch & Greene, 1995; Omniewski, R., 1999). As Omniewski concluded in her dissertation, music or arts should not be separated from the core curriculum; they play an important role in constructing the curriculum for each of the disciplinary areas.

Based on Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983), music intelligence is not an intelligence that stands on its own. Linguistic intelligence can be enhanced by singing and chanting. We can help children cultivate their logical intelligence by guiding them through explorations of basic musical concepts such as soft and loud, fast and slow, high and low, long and short, and same and different. By encouraging children to move and dance, we are helping them explore the space around them, developing their spatial intelligence. Introducing music from diverse cultures can help children understand themselves and the people around them, developing their interpersonal intelligence. Finally, guiding children to create music can increase self-esteem, developing their intrapersonal intelligence.

Early childhood music educators should collaborate with classroom teachers in developing a repertoire of materials that can be integrated into various subjects such as language arts, mathematics, physical education, science, social studies, geography, history, and civics. Materials should be chosen from a wide range of repertoire sources including the folk and art repertoires of the world.

## Conclusion

As early childhood music educators, we must consider carefully our own musicianship and love of music before teaching young children. By introducing our students to fine music repertoire, we are providing the foundation to music literacy and innate musicality. A rich mixture of folk and traditional repertoires from different cultures, composed and art music, and classroom improvised activities all help develop the musicianship of the whole child.

### Some suggested books:

Trinka, J. (1996). Dripping Springs: Folk Music Works.

- *Book I: Bought me a cat*, ISBN 1-888-89521-7
- *Book II: John the rabbit*, ISBN 1-888-89531-4
- *Book III: My little rooster*, ISBN 1-888-89511-X
- *Book IV: The little black bull*, ISBN 1-888-89541-1

Feierabend, J. M. (2000). Chicago: GIA.

- *First Steps to Music: Infant and Toddlers*, ISBN 1-579-99072-X
- *First Steps to Music: Nursery and Preschool*, ISBN 1-579-99073-8
- *First Steps to Music: Early Elementary*, ISBN 1-579-99074-6
- *Book of Lullabies*, ISBN 1-579990568; *Bounces*, ISBN 1-579-99055-X; *Tapping and Clapping*, ISBN 1-579-99054-1; *Simple Songs and Circles*, ISBN 1-579-99057-6; *Wiggles and Tickles*, ISBN 1-579-99053-3

The Basal Series:

- Macmillan/McGraw-Hill: [www.mhschool.com](http://www.mhschool.com)
- Pearson/Scott Foresman/Silver-Burdett: [www.sbgmusic.com](http://www.sbgmusic.com)
- Warner Brothers: [www.music-expressions.com/default.aspx](http://www.music-expressions.com/default.aspx)

Adzenya, A. K., Maraire, D. & Turker, J. C. (1997). *Let your voice be heard! Songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe*. Danbury: World Music (ISBN 0-937-20300-9).

Amoaku, W.K. (1971). *African songs and rhythms for children*, Mainz: Schott (ISBN 5-555-93634-6).

Anderson, S. (1991). *Teaching music with a multicultural approach*. Reston: MENC

(ISBN 0-940-79691-0).

Davidson, M. (2000) *Music for fun! For pre-K through 2nd grade classes*. Miami: Warner Brothers (ISBN 0-769-29483-9).

Erdei, P. & Komlos, K. (1989). *150 American folk songs to sing, read, and play*, 9th printing. New York: Boosey & Hawkes (ISBN 0-913-93204-3).

Horpole, P. (1990). *Los Mariachis*. Danbury: World Music Press (ISBN 1-566-89104-3).

Jones, J. & Hawes, B. L. (1972). *Step it down; games, plays, songs, and stories from the Afro-American heritage*. New York: Harper & Row (ISBN 0-820-30960-5).

Locke, E. G. (1989). *Sail Away: 155 American folk songs to sing, read, and play*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes (ISBN 0-913-93224-8).

Patricia, S. C. (1994) *Roots and branches*. Danbury: World Music Press (ISBN 0-937-20355-6).

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Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind*. New York: Basic Books.

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*Zoltán Kodály* (pp. 182-200). New York: Boosey & Hawkes.

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Miller, B. (1996). Integrating elementary general music: A collaborative action research study. *Bulletin of the council for research in music education* 130, 100-15.

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