



SINGING WITH CHILDREN

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY JOHANN VAN DER SANDT

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FOREWORD

Emeritus Professor Caroline van Niekerk

As unambiguously indicated by its title, this compilation of nineteen essays deals with international perspectives on singing with children. The perspectives come from a wide range of authors from many places in the world, with different music practices. As director of the series, Johann van der Sandt has drawn together a myriad of threads, ranging from early childhood music education through the controversial topic of the adolescent voice, and also made significant contributions with three chapters himself. As van der Sandt indicates, this book targets not only singers and singing teachers, but musicians in general, musicologists, and music educators and educationists.

The Scientific Committee have ensured the quality of the contributions, which are both scientific and practical, reporting on different approaches and methodologies, and on work which is thought provoking and challenging to many typical views and stereotypes.

Different types of research are reported on, such as ethnographic and narrative, and they come from countries where the importance of arts-related activities such as music education and choral singing are differently valued, as are the expectations of what can be achieved therewith – such as transformative learning, the focus of one essay.

The view is often held that singing is natural, and something that everyone can just open their mouths and do. Yet enabling and instructing correct good singing is a field of such responsibility, that a book of this nature, containing a spectrum of useful and up-to-date material, is greatly to be welcomed.

December 2019

INTRODUCTION

Johann van der Sandt

Why singing with children, and why this publication? What is it in singing that makes it such a unique experience and an effective form of artistic expression? Singing is one of the oldest forms of expression, if not the oldest. Songs, being in turn one of the oldest forms of musical genre, primarily enhance the intended meaning of the text by musically reinforcing and enriching the emotional content of the written text.

The beauty of singing is that it cuts across all cultures and traditions; different cultures have different musical traditions and are characterized by a distinct style of singing and a combination of musical elements. Nonetheless, the essence of singing remains the same, whether in different cultures or even in different stylistic epochs, namely, to communicate feelings and emotions. Using music and songs to teach emotions can be a useful tool to lead children in understanding their feelings.

Songs to express joy, grief, loneliness, adoration and many more emotions can be found in virtually all musical cultures. Songs do not exclusively express personal feelings, but also have the power to express shared feelings of a broader community – they can unite people by igniting a shared expression of emotions, feelings, opinions and beliefs. Songs and the medium of singing are the vehicles for transmitting such messages. Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" brought the message of human rights and brotherhood to nineteenth-century audiences, and as recent as 1972 having been adopted by the Council of Europe as the Anthem of Europe. We have seen that famous artists have used songs in the past to unite people for humanistic reasons as well as global fundraising efforts to save lives or to increase the level of social responsibility. Singing seems to represent a universal language of emotions and is a very accessible form of artistic expression. Even musically untrained people can utilize it.

Singing also has the power to grant people – both singers and listeners – access to a long-lasting and deepening spiritual experience. Singing has since the beginning of time been the vehicle for people to express their feelings and accompany emotional ceremonial occasions like, for example, worshipping in church. Singing religious-inspired songs not only creates a special connection to God but to each other as well. Songs even have been endowed with transcendent powers: ethnographical and anthropological studies have shown that songs have historically

been used to evoke a particular response from nature (rainmaking songs) or on a spiritual level (a song to protect one from danger). Reimer (2009) refers to “the power of music to alter the reality of human experience and to alter humans’ way of being” (43). He continues to discuss this power as having the possibility to reach to the very roots of human condition: “[H]umans are conscious of their individual and collective existence in a world both including them and transcending them, on which they are dependent for life and meaning and to which they contribute life and meaning” (43).

Holstein (1997) mentions the *song of the soul* as the musical soul of each person. He refers to the song of the soul as that which is “most central to a person’s sense of wholeness and authenticity” (151). Each person’s soul is “a very personal integration of one’s own talents, positive memories, capacities and purpose of life, coming from some inner truth” (151). When this song is healthy and lovely in the soul of a person, then the song of others will be heard. The writings of Holstein, albeit in a therapeutic context, refer to songs as something special and unique to each individual, and the influence thereof on his/her personality. Fortunately, there is enough scientific research in recent years that have provided us with convincing results as to the health- and well-being benefits of singing.

In a study done by Barrett et al (2020), it is clear “that implementing music activities in early education settings can positively impact young children’s singing skills and attitudes to music” (1). The study further provides empirical evidence of the benefits accumulated by children through access to music education. Hallam (2014) alludes to “accruing evidence which indicates that actively making music can contribute to the enhancement of a range of non-musical skills and lead to other beneficial outcomes” (18). Clift and Hancox (2001) showed the following set of benefits of singing:

- benefits for well-being and relaxation;
- benefits for breathing and posture;
- social benefits;
- spiritual benefits;
- emotional benefits;
- benefits for heart and immune system (253).

Further benefits of active music participation for children shows the following benefits to have a direct relationship with actively engaging in music-making activities (Hallam 2014):

- aural perception, which in turn supports the development of language and literacy skills;
- enhanced verbal memory skills;
- spatial reasoning, which contributes to some elements of mathematics and constitutes part of measured intelligence;

- self-regulation, which is implicated in all forms of learning requiring extensive practice;
- creativity, particularly where the musical activities are themselves creative; and
- academic attainment (103).

The philosophy of the great Hungarian composer, educator, philosopher and ethnomusicologist, Zoltán Kodály rested firmly on active music-making. Kodály believed that children should be introduced to concepts of music through experiences such as singing, listening or movement. He found that music should be an integral part of an individual's life, placing the highest prominence on its role in education, just as the Greeks had done in the time of Pythagoras. The essence of his educational concepts is rooted in recognition of the importance of art and music education for children. Kodály regarded singing as the most influential tool in the method for teaching music to children. He believed that besides helping to express their own emotions and feelings and to give meaning to the communal consciousness, developing a sense of community through the collective singing of songs, children gradually acquire a rich vocabulary of rhythms, melodies and harmonic patterns that are later used as the foundation for conceptual learning of music. Through regular singing, children develop their inner hearing and perception of intonation and tuning.

Singing, being the most accessible form of active music-making, can assist young people in the acquisition of musical culture and the understanding of the language of music. Kodály believed in the power of singing folk songs. There are many reasons why he chose folk songs as the basis of music education: he believed that folk music, with its simplicity and aesthetic value, is the most potent vehicle for learning about one's culture. It is the most profound basis for musical communication between people and the basis for continuing tradition. Kodály believed that the study of folk songs is the basis for starting not only musical intelligence but for the general enrichment of the human soul, the formation of excellent musical taste and the shaping of an individual's musical consciousness. Kodály believed that, to begin with, folk songs and carefully composed pedagogical compositions can pave the way for children to understand and appreciate art music and multi-faceted contemporary musical culture of our age.

Research has delivered satisfactory evidence that music education has a positive influence on the child's development of intelligence, creativity, and emotional sensitivity. Those learning music from an early age are more capable of investing energy in the challenges requiring serious thinking and creativity than those that do not study music. Being aware of the scientific data that shows on all the emotional, social and cognitive benefits of singing, why are there not more children singing then?

Regardless of all the practical experiences and proof of the past decades brought to us by musical and psychological research proving that artistic skills, including singing abilities, can be successfully developed by appropriate training, most people still firmly believe that the skills of singing and musicianship are based on some special innate abilities – we are either born or not born with them. Atterbury (1984) states that “children in kindergarten who sing well usually come from musical environments. The reason the remainder of the kindergarten class cannot sing on pitch, however, is not that they are untalented. They simply have not ever been taught how to sing” (43). All children, all human beings can sing, every child can be taught to sing. Gordon (1971) wrote that “anyone can learn to sing, just as anyone can learn to talk” (272).

To try to answer the question of why not more children are singing, I pose the following possible problems:

- In many schools, the accumulation of music-theoretical information has replaced the beauty and joy of singing, of actively making music in the music classroom.
- Too many teachers are not adequately trained; too many adults in charge of children’s musical education do not have the necessary adequate skills to do so.
- The limited time apportioned for musical education in the national curriculum of many countries for teaching music in public schools is not adequate to deliver long term and long-lasting results and, also, does it not pose an attractive career option for many young musicians. In spite of considerable efforts invested in the struggle for more music time in many countries’ curricula, educational policies have failed to provide adequate weight and importance to the cause of singing in music education and, overall, in music education.
- Teachers have not kept up and adapted their teaching methods to the changing learning habits of the new generation, as well as changes in the cultural environment so strongly influenced by the entertainment industry and technological developments.

Our task as music educators who believe in the power of singing must be to provide our students with a wide range of musical experiences that will foster in them a lifelong interest and passion for singing and communal music-making. I hope that this publication will provide the reader insights into possible ways of inspiring children and the importance of singing in music education for us to help young people experience the beauty of music through singing. If we can succeed in motivating and inspiring children to keep on singing after their music classroom experience, we have already amply succeeded.

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