Musical Matters in the Songs Children Sing[1]

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Abstract

Much research is dedicated to the assumption that children possess a distinct musical culture, which is transmitted orally and exists most obviously on the playground. The music created does not imitate adult music, but reflects the needs and values of children's society. Children engage in musical play both spontaneously (singing, moving rhythmically, and playing) and through singing games involving hand-clapping, jump-roping, counting-out practices, and a wide array of gestures and full-body movement. While many popular children's playground songs have survived hundreds of years in the oral tradition, many songs learned in the classroom for a Winter Concert will have been forgotten by spring. With the exception of patriotic song, which is mostly transmitted from teacher to student, children tend to retain and circulate songs that are learned from multiple sources in their environment. The purpose of this paper is to collect and contrast information on the musical content of fifty-five collected children's songs, including elements of tessitura, range, rhythm and form. Issues of text, thematic content, gender, social structure, and movement will also be addressed in relation to these musical elements. The paper provides curricular implications of the results of the song analysis, thus underscoring the importance of connecting children's musical culture and classroom culture.

Musical Matters in the Songs Children Sing

Megan M. Perdue and Patricia Shehan Campbell

The study of children's musical cultures is an emergent field of enquiry now under pursuit by ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and educators. Much of the research ascribes to the notion that children possess a musical culture that is distinctive from that of adults, which includes songs, rhythmickings (Campbell, 1998), and routines (Marsh, 2009) that are transmitted orally and that exists in places where children play and interact. The music that children create and recreate is seldom directly in imitation of adult music, but reflects "the needs and values of children's society" (Harwood, 1988, p. 2). These children form a community of practice with "identifiable newcomers, old-timers and adepts, and a host of participants placed somewhere along the continuum of participation from onlooker to… an informally designated game leader" (Harwood, 1998, p. 57). Children engage in musical play both spontaneously (as they sing, move and vocalize rhythmically, and engage in body percussion and/or on musical instruments and sound-making objects), and through singing games and routines that involve their "hand clapping, mimetic movement, skipping (or jumping), counting out or elimination, and ball bouncing… [usually occurring] in pair, ring, or line formations" (Marsh & Young, 2006). These games incorporate elements of text, melody, form, and movement, and although they occupy a large presence in children's lives, children's musical playsongs are given less attention by teachers than they deserve (Campbell, 1998; 2010).

Singing games are transmitted orally and variants proliferate worldwide. Emberly (2009) noted the presence of the same or similar songs and handclapping games in different South African villages in which Venda, Pedi, and Shangaan families reside. Arleo (2001) observed that variants of the clapping game, "When Susie Was a Baby," have been collected in Australia,

Britain, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Ireland, Israel, South Africa, Spain, and the United States. Certainly, the classic fieldwork of folklorists Peter and Iona Opie (1985—see The Singing Game) verified the migration of children's songs in much of the English-speaking world, with linguistic modifications to suit mother-tongue languages elsewhere.

The steady stream of research on children's musical culture has embraced a host of issues that spread from aspects of gender (Watts, 2009), ethnicity (Lew, 2005; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988), generational and developmental differences (Campbell, 2010; Lew, 2005; Watts, 2009), and the music-movement relationship (Addo, 1995; Riddell, 1990) to children's adherence to components of the oral transmission process (Harwood, 1987). Attention to children's music for its enculturative properties weaves a more anthropological perspective (Campbell, 2010; Lum and Campbell, 2008; Minks, 2002), while a focus on mediated influences embraces the music that seeps in from sources beyond home, family, friends, and schools. (Lum, 2007; Lum and Campbell, 2008; Campbell, 2010). Musical matter has received less attention, when in fact these elements and structures are useful to music educators who determine how and when in sequential instruction such songs might be featured.

Ahead is an examination of the musical content of children's songs that emanate from recent collections by Merill-Mirsky (1988), Riddell (1990), and Marsh (2009). These collections were selected due to the extent of documented songs they feature, and because of their placement chronologically as pillar-point publications near the start of contemporary study of children's musical culture (Merill-Mirsky, 1988; Riddell, 1990) and close to the time of this research (Marsh, 2009). Emphasis is directed to a repertoire of fifty-five children's songs, and a description follows of elemental facets that include the tessitura, range, tonality, and pitch patterns of these songs, the rhythmic features of their melodies, and their formal organization of

similar and contrasting phrases. Issues of text, thematic content, gender, and associated movements and gestures are also addressed. For those teachers who will feature children's songs in their lessons, or who are intent on connecting their curricular activity with children's informal musical engagement, the discussion to follow is particularly relevant.

Tessitura and Range

In the present review of fifty-five songs documented by Marsh (2009), Merrill-Mirsky (1998a), and Riddell (1990), most children's songs incorporate a range of approximately a perfect 4^{th} to a major 6^{th}, as documented in Table 1. Few songs feature 'one note' only (unison), or fall within the range of minor and major 3rds—or, at the other extreme, beyond an octave. The ranges of two songs of the fifty-five songs from the three collections could not be determined due to their notation. Both songs contained only indefinite pitches, designated with crossed-noteheads on a single space on the grand staff in the transcription, and so they are absent from the analysis. If a children's song or game was chanted (a rhythmic speaking or singing which incorporated one or more pitches), the approximate tessitura of the chant was accounted for. In transcriptions by Marsh (2009), children's musical performances were written at absolute pitch so that tessitura could be established. Semitones and vocal glissandi were accounted for with modified Western notation. Indefinite pitches were notated using a crossed-notehead. Neither Merrill-Mirsky (1988a) nor Riddell (1990) directly address the transcription process, yet they both employ Western notation of melody and rhythm. Both Merrill-Mirsky (1988a) and Riddell (1990) offer analysis of range and/or tessitura, leading to the assumption in this research that the transcriptions are not transposed. Unlike Marsh (2009), Merrill-Mirsky (1988a) and Riddell (1990) employ the use of time signatures in their transcriptions. As meter changes in the song, time signatures are used in the transcriptions to document these alterations. Due to frequent

ametrical sections and flexibility of meter, Marsh decided against the use of time signatures in her transcriptions.

Table 1

Pitch Range of Collected Songs

Range	Number of Songs
unison	2
m3	2
M3	2
P4	11
P5	11
m6	8
M6	8
m7	2
M7	2
P8	5
n/a	2

The tonal center of each of the children's songs in the three collections was determined by the tonic of the scale (if a tonality was noted in the transcription) or by the most frequently repeated tone of the musical song or chant. The ending pitch of each documented song did not necessarily correspond with the tonal center. In eleven of the fifty-five songs, the final pitch could not be determined due to the absence of a full transcription. Of the forty-four remaining songs, twenty-four had the same ending pitch and tonal center.

Table 2 shows that the overwhelming majority of songs analyzed in this research centered around G4 (G above middle C). The next most commonly referenced tonal centers were

D4 and A4. As a tonal center, G, for example, could then be conceived as midway in the total melodic compass of the song, with many songs extending down to D4 and up to B4 (the fifth and third pitches of the G-scale, respectively).

Table 2

Tonal Center of Collected Songs

Tonal Center	Number of Songs
G3	1
A3	2
Bb3	2
B3	4
C4	3
C#4	1
D4	8
D#4	1
E4	2
F4	5
G4	18
A4	7
n/a	1

Among teachers of music to children in elementary school programs, the issue of appropriate tessitura for children's voices is the focus of considerable debate. Two common, contrasting opinions arise: Most notes in a piece of music for elementary aged children "should fall in the octave from the D above middle C to top-line D" (Smith, 1987, p. 56) and in opposition, children's music should be in the range of a fifth or a sixth and should center around middle C, C#, or D; "songs including C or D on the treble clef [C4 or D4] should be transposed

or ignored" (Atterbury, 1984, p. 45). The standard methods book for use in music teacher education courses proposes a developmental schema that restricts the tessitura of song melodies to a major 6^{th} for children aged 5-7, and only gradually expands to an octave tessitura for children in the upper elementary grades (Campbell and Scott-Kassner, 2005).

Harwood (1996) argued that because most children's playground songs do not conform to the traditional Western diatonic scale, these pieces should not be regulated for classroom use. Addo (1995) defended the validity of a children's musical culture and the necessity to view the pitches of children's songs within their cultural context instead of from the culture of traditional music education. She vouched for the natural singing range of children, and suggested that it aligns well with their tessitura such that their songs are fitting choices for the development of their strong and accurate ensemble singing.

As comparison with the three song collections of Harwood, Riddell, and Marsh, it is intriguing to note the work of folklorists Peter and Iona Opie, who researched 133 singing games and chants, and attended to their origins, textual symbolism, and variants in English-speaking countries (1985). The singing games they collected and described incorporate both sung and spoken texts. The range of these pieces is limited, mostly focused on the interval of a sixth or smaller. The tessitura of these songs ranges from approximately B-below-middle-C to G-above-middle-C (B3-G4), with a tonal center modified as needed by the participants. A quarter of a century ago, the Opies observed children's pitch preference for the performance of their songs, noting that "the children seem inclined to choose a rather lower pitch than might be expected - sometimes a little too low for comfort. Possibly the lower pitch is due to the fact that they are also doing something and therefore do not want to be bothered with 'singing' as such - the tunes being a kind of heightened speech" (1985, p. vi-vii).

Although general pitch sets can be described and analyzed, most children's playground singing games do not focus on in-tune singing (Marsh, 2009). Both the environment and the child's comfort with singing and projection affected intonation. Marsh explained that one commonly collected song, "Sar Macka Dora," was repeatedly transmitted through classroom singing and the tessitura performed on the playground was "the same as that of the published version taught in the classroom" (2009, p. 309). It may be that if a strong vocal model is provided in the classroom over a period of time, it may affect children's healthy vocal performance practice of it outside school.

Tonality

Of the fifty-five collected songs, thirty-two were transcribed in major tonalities. Five were in minor with one in shifting major/minor tonality and one modal song (Phrygian mode). If approximate pitches were accounted for in transcriptions of chants, these were used to determine tonality. Riddell (1990) frequently listed melodic characteristics rather than employing transcription. In many of these instances, tonality could not be established. Of the fifty-five songs, the tonality of sixteen could not be accounted for due to lack of description, transcription, or frequent chromaticism.

Pitch-Sets

The majority of collected songs featured a three-tone, four-tone, pentatonic, or hexatonic scale (eight, eight, thirteen, and eight songs, respectively). The falling minor triad from *sol* to *mi* frequently occurred. The "universal chant" (Riddell, 1990; Hargreaves, 1986) of "*sol-mi-la-sol-mi*" or "*sol-sol-mi*" also appeared frequently in transcriptions or song descriptions. In songs with three or more pitches, the tones most frequently omitted were *re* and *fa*, emphasizing the

importance of the *do-mi-sol* triad. Of the forty-five songs from which pitch-sets were determined, thirteen omitted *re*, *fa*, or both *re* and *fa*.

Rhythm

Although Marsh (2009) avoided the use of traditional Western time signatures due to frequent ametrical sections, barlines were used in her transcription to note points of vocal stress so that metrical patterns were more clearly apparent. All of the fifty-five songs were in duple meter, except for one variant of "Say Say My Playmate," documented by Marsh (2009), in alternating duple and triple meter.

Thirty of the fifty-five songs were syncopated, either across-the bar or dotted within the beat as documented by Marsh (2009), Merrill-Mirsky (1988a), and Riddell (1990). These rhythmic elements lend themselves to movement, especially handclapping games, with most of the lyrics scanned in iambic feet, allowing performers to coordinate clapping on the first stressed beat (Grudgeon, 2000). In "My Sailor," a hand-clapping song in duple meter noted by Merrill-Mirsky (1998, p. 124), beats one and three of a four-beat pattern are emphasized by partners clapping right or left hands together. Handclapping games frequently involve mixed meter patterns, as the song or chant flows in duple meter while the assorted clapping movements fall into triple groupings. With mixed meter common on the playground, such maneuvers (and sensitivities) are rarely in evidence in classroom activities involving the clapping of two-against-three beats. Harwood observed that, "children who easily execute mixed meter patterns in hand clap games (singing in duple, clapping in triple groupings is quite common) would likely be unable to perform the abstract task of clapping two against three" (1998, p. 57-58).

In the current study of the fifty-five singing games, thirty were described by the collectors as employing syncopation while twenty-four analyses did not indicate of the use of

syncopation through description or notation. One song did not provide information through musical notation, analysis of movement, or discussion to ascertain whether it was syncopated or not.

Form

Merrill-Mirsky found that the most common form observed in her field research of children's songs in Los Angeles was strophic, followed by songs that appeared through-composed without repeating or recurring sections. The musical form of children's songs is strongly influenced by their texts, such as narrative and cumulative forms (Merrill-Mirsky, 1988a). Table 3 outlines the song forms documented by Merrill-Mirsky in her study of handclapping and ring games, or circle games, performed by school-aged girls in Los Angeles, California (1988a).

Table 3

Children's Song Forms (Merrill-Mirsky, 1988a, p. 134)

Form	% Collected
Strophic	58%
Through-composed	24%
Solo/Chorus	8%
Verse/refrain	4%
Narrative	4%
Cumulative	2%

Merrill-Mirsky also noted tendencies towards different forms as influenced by ethnicity. African-American, Latino, and Southeast Asian groups of children performed ring games to a greater extent than did Euro-American children. As well, Euro-American and Latino children

were more likely to perform longer songs, and songs that fell into strophic forms and verse-refrain forms than did African-American and Southeast Asian children. The largest variety of forms in singing games was evidenced in the repertoire of African-American children, mostly featuring solo/chorus form used in conjunction with many other forms. Interestingly, newly arriving children from Southeast Asian countries were playing forms that had passed out of common practice among other American groups of children, such as "London Bridge"-styled games and stone-passing games (Merrill-Mirsky, 1988a, p. 169).

Of the fifty-fifty songs under analysis, the two most common forms were through-composed and strophic. While there were fewer strophic forms documented in the current study of fifty-five songs than in Merrill-Mirsky's ethnographic study in Los Angeles (1988a), the two most popular forms, through-composed and strophic, are consistent across the collections (See Table 4).

Table 4

Formal Types of Collected Songs

Form	% Collected	# Collected (n=55)
Through-composed	49%	27
Strophic	40%	22
Chain (ABCD)	5%	3
Call & Response*	4%	2
n/a	2%	1

**Call & Response is designated as "Solo/Chorus" in Merrill-Mirsky, 1988a*

Melodic Musical Utterances

Melodic musical utterances are described by Lum and Campbell (2007) as "fleeting songs, chants, and melodic segments of musical play" (p. 37), while Swanwick (1988) described them as compositions in progress. These short, melodic segments include "sustained, sung pitches that run the gamut from very few notes to a full diatonic spread of pitches" (Campbell & Lum, 2007, p. 37). Children engage in these short musical experiences throughout the day, in groups or alone, at meals, at school, on the playground and at home. Campbell (1998) noted the pervasiveness of melodic musical utterances in several schools, noting "the natural connection of eating with socializing, music, and movement, and the coupling of singing with the rhythms of work" (p. 38).

Studies by Barrett (2003) and Lum and Campbell (2007) note how melodic musical utterances function in the lives of children at play. Barrett (2003) observed the melodic musical utterances of Chelsea, a four-year-old child attending a large semi-rural school, while socializing and playing. All of her songs were sung in duple (or quadruple) time. They draw on similar rhythmic material including steady quarter- and eighth-notes that are organized into two-bar phrases. The range of Chelsea's songs extended from a m6 to a m9. Movement accompanied only one of Chelsea's eight documented songs. The texts of Chelsea's songs include elements of traditional nursery rhymes and popular themes (e.g., the incorporation of Barbie, a popular doll).

In an ethnographic study of the melodic musical utterances recorded at an urban, public elementary school. Lum and Campbell noted that rhythmic activities "frequently (but not always) [were] accompanied by vocalization in the form of speech-inflected chant" (2007, p. 36). Melodically, these utterances mostly included intervals of a descending minor third and sometimes expanded to three pitches within the range of a fourth. There was a strong presence of syncopated rhythms within the song melodies. These songs rarely followed a set form of binary,

ternary, or four-bar phrases. Children incorporated and parodied melodies borrowed from popular movie, television, Broadway, and classical themes such as Star Wars, Beethoven's 5th Symphony, and "We Will Rock You" (by the 1970s rock group, Queen).

In her study of children on an elementary school playground, Campbell (1998) observed that the rhythms demonstrated by children during seemingly improvised musical play "were precise, crisp, and constant," mostly in duple meter and with some syncopation; "some were performed vocally with syllables, while others employed rhymed and unrhymed words" (p. 37). These utterances mirror the rhythmic patterns of children's play songs in meter and also complexity, with "straightforward quarter-note pulses [giving] way to eighth- and sixteenth-note patterns, irregular accents, interlocking patterns, and even a two-part progressive verse" (p. 37).

Teachers at the research site described by Lum and Campbell (2007) utilized rhythmic utterances in their attempts to develop children's linguistic skills. Words were read and repeated in rhythmic fashion by teachers as both a teaching and classroom management tool. Children often incorporated movement into the rhythmic repetition, solidifying the connections between body, speech, and rhythm. Lum and Campbell (2007) observed that "some of the musical grammar children may learn to read, write, and add into composition projects is already richly available to them outside of formal music instruction" (p. 45).

Thematic Content

While some singing games have been transmitted with few changes to their text, many evolve to incorporate themes of popular culture. Children's musical experiences as well as both a collective and individual identity are shaped by digital and electronic media culture (Barrett, 2003; Campbell, 2010; Lum, 2007). The culture manufactured by mass media *for* children reflects the playground musical culture created *by* children, and this meeting of mediated and

child-centered worlds creates an amalgamation of traditional and composed song. Emberly (2009) described the incorporation of a popular South African commercial melody entitled, "Sugar," into the musical culture of children. When asked about the meaning of children's handclapping songs and games, Venda adults directed the researcher to children for answers (Emberly, 2009). Similarly, Campbell (2010) observed that the melodic and rhythmic content of children's compositions in an elementary school music class reflected idiomatic nuances of popular song to which children had likely been conditioned, often since their earliest listening experiences.Harwood (1988) talked with parents of children whose music she studied. She reported that some parents discounted the influence of their children's listening preferences on the music they made. Eight of thirteen interviewed children she interviewed reported that tapes, radio, or television was their preferred method of learning new material.

Musical Play Structure as Social Structure

The extramusical elements of children's singing games, such as the incorporation of movement and methods of transmission, affect rhythmic grouping and melodic or rhythmic alterations over time (Marsh, 2009; Riddell (1990), Merrill-Mirsky (1988a). They may also affect retention of musical content (Klinger, Campbell, & Goolsby, 1998).

Children's hand clapping games are usually played by a group in a ring or circle. Their hands and arms extend to enclose the structure, both including those that are playing and excluding those outside of the group. Children from the same social unit tend to play together at the exclusion of others. The ring is representative of democracy and safety. As Jones and Hawes explained, "the strength of the ring is in its construction. Since it has neither beginning nor end, there can be no ranking of its parts - no strong or weak, big or little… no captains, no opposing ranks" (1987, p. 87). This ring formation is found not only among children but is also widely

evident in the sociomusical practices of sub-Saharan African societies and Native American groups, and among other communities where egalitarianism is prized.

While there is much musical variation of singing games from culture to culture and even from school to school, children playing a musical game are well attuned to the "correct" way to play and sing within their particular group (Riddell, 1990; Harwood, 1998; Emberly, 2009). Less skilled players usually observe from the periphery, practicing their handclapping moves while focusing intently on the performance, hoping to master the game. Observers acknowledge the "shared understanding that less skilled players are responsible for increasing their level of participation through practice with near-skill peers" (Harwood, 1998, p. 54). In the Venda culture of South Africa, Emberly (2009) describes the difficulty of playing singing games with Venda children: "Learning the songs and games was my way of understanding that these children were very particular about their musical culture - that there was a right and a wrong way to perform these songs" (p. 4).

Players of singing games participate in close proximity to one another. Younger children or less experienced players will also stand very close to older and more experienced players to observe their movements. In games of elimination, those players eliminated will not "withdraw or tune out until the next opportunity to play; they [will stand] very close, watching the play continue" (Harwood, 1998, pg. 55). The social roles children don on the playground are different from those they take on in the classroom. In the classroom, the teacher is thought to own the repertoire and is always the authority on "how a piece goes," where as on the playground, the songs and chants belong entirely to the children. Children's roles are fluid and may shift from player to critic to listener (Harwood, 1998; Dzansi, 2004).

Curricular Implications and Conclusions

Children's musical play is "expressive, rhythmic, pitched, and kinesthetically driven" and teachers who employ these characteristics in the learning environment, allowing "children to continue to be children," are typically successful (Lum & Campbell, 2007, p. 45). Care must be taken so that schools do not contribute to the process of "demusicalization" through well-intended educators who "too often regard themselves more as agents for the discovery and selection of talented potential professionals than as agents for the development of the musicality that lies within each child" (Small, 1998, p. 212).

A common practice and philosophical belief among some teachers is that songs are best received and learned through short sound bytes or chunks presented phrase-by-phrase. Although this approach is traditionally the most common means by which elementary teachers teach songs, the "whole-song" or "immersion" approach to learning was the commonly noted and preferred method of transmission in the research by Harwood (1988), (Klinger, Campbell, & Goolsby, 1998), Riddell (1990), and Marsh (2009). While popular children's playground songs have survived hundreds of years in the oral tradition, many songs learned in the classroom for a 'Winter Concert' will have been forgotten by the spring season. Harwood asserts that, "play rather than practice provides the necessary repetition to achieve mastery" (1998, p. 55). Ethnographic research along with interviews with children regarding their preferred mode of learning songs validate the whole-song method of teaching new material (Campbell, 1998; Emberly, 2009; Harwood, 1988; Harwood, 1998; Marsh, 2008). Despite formal constraints of musical pieces, children in the music classroom may more naturally learn from whole-song repetition.

Most of the fifty-five songs examined in this analysis feature melodies within the range of a P4-M6. Melodic steps and jumps of a minor third or perfect fifth are common. Atterbury

(1984) advocated for a limited singing range of a fifth or a sixth for most children's songs. Songs in the current study demonstrate a preference for these ranges on the playground. Children naturally sing playsongs centering around G4 (G above middle C), yet while chanting, the tonal center lowers. This result does not refute the opinions of either Smith (1987) or Atterbury (1984) in that the tonal center shifts depending on the type of song to include pitches centering from C4-A4.

As evidenced by the activities that accompany children's musical culture, movement is an integral part of children's songful experience. Integrating the kinesthetic in music class may improve engagement, retention, and pitch and rhythmic accuracy. Many handclapping games are multi-meter and integrate a duple singing or chanting pattern with a triple handclapping pattern. The concept of multi-meter songs can be discussed using demonstrations of handclapping games. Syncopation can also be explored and discussed in this matter due to its common occurrence in children's singing games.

The presentation of songs in the classroom climate undermines elements of social learning that are effective on the playground including proximity and freedom of movement (Harwood, 1998). In musical play, children can set the tempo and self-assess to participate actively in the game or passively as an observer. The invisible barrier between teacher and student may be broken down, allowing students to actively participate through proximity to the song leaders and vocal and physical exploration. In the music classroom, children may be allowed to demonstrate material in large or small groups. Others who are less comfortable with new material may be allowed to observe until they learn through the repetition.

Melodic musical utterances share many of the same musical traits as traditional children's singing games. These holistic musical expressions mirror common intervals of a third, simple

rhythmic patterns using eighth- and quarter-notes, and duple meters. Improvisation may occur more easily on the playground than in the classroom due to the child's association with music as play. Using simple melodies in a low tessitura to teach concepts through repetition may access children's natural inclination towards musical pattern.

The connection between children's musical play, melodic musical utterances, and thematic material drawn from popular culture is undeniable. Teachers who "refuse to acknowledge popular culture as a significant basis of knowledge often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have" (Giroux, 1992, p. 182). By encouraging children to share "their" music in class, connections between classroom music and playsong can be explored.

Through the study of songs already familiar to the students, definitions of rhythm, melody, meter, and texture can be discussed and more fully understood. Through musical play, children may exhibit proficiency in complex rhythmic patterns but also "have no vocabulary for describing their musical experiences" (Campbell, 1998, p. 216). A shared vocabulary opens a line of communication between adult and child, allowing for a mutual understanding of musical concepts. By acknowledging and validating children's musical culture, including their often rich repertoire of songs, music education moves beyond a "frill" subject into cultural necessity.

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