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Next Time Won't You Sing with Me? The Role of Music Rooted in Oral Tradition as a Resource for Literacy Learning in the Twenty-First Century Classroom

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Abstract

Most children learn music by rote long before they begin to learn by note. Early music learning is often facilitated through the oral transmission of music – a practice that has existed since long before the emergence of standardized music notation. Orality has long been linked to literacy and the relationship between the two – both in the past and in the present – has been studied in depth by modern scholars. Although it could be supposed that the innovation of music notation has negated the necessity for oral music transmission, in reality the two music transmission methods work in tandem in modern-day music education. Oral tradition is far from dead, and this is illustrated in folk tunes, nursery rhymes, and traditional songs. Many of these songs, from “Mary Had A Little Lamb” to the “Alphabet Song” to “Ring Around the Rosie,” are rarely taught to children with the aid of sheet music. They are most commonly passed down from one generation to another simply by rote and have been kept alive solely by oral transmission. These timeless songs provide an excellent springboard for music educators, as they contain valuable teaching topics in the areas of language and literature, allude to various historical events and geographical locations, and provide meaningful instruction on how students are to interact with the world in which they live. Since there is such a strong link between orality and literacy, this article asserts that music rooted in the oral tradition should play a central role in the modern early childhood music classroom because it increases students’ language literacy, historical knowledge, and social awareness.

Keywords

Music, education, orality, literacy, oral Tradition, music education

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Next Time Won't You Sing with Me? The Role of Music Rooted in Oral Tradition as a Resource for Literacy Learning in the 21st Century Classroom

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Introduction

Now I've sung my ABC's, next time won't you sing with me? In many modern music classrooms, it is not unusual to hear the sound of a chorus of young voices loudly singing songs such as the aforementioned alphabet song, "Home on the Range," and "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean." Many of the songs that comprise modern music education curriculum find their roots in folk songs and traditional music. While it is true that many such songs have catchy tunes, easily remembered rhymes, and classroom appeal, there is more to that specific genre of music literature. Traditional songs are more than just simple, easy-to-teach crowd pleasers in the music classroom. Folk music, nursery rhymes and songs, and traditional music should play a central role in the modern early childhood music classroom because they are deeply rooted in the oral tradition of ages past. Orality is also linked to increased language literacy, historical knowledge, and social awareness.

Oral Tradition

Many traditional songs find their origin in the oral tradition, and the link between orality and literacy is highly intriguing. An excellent baseline definition for the word "literacy" was given when David Cooper observed that "literacy [must be viewed] as the ability to communicate in real-world situation[s], which involves the ability of individuals to read, write, speak, listen, view, and think."¹ However, that definition is almost too shallow to truly encompass the depth of the word's meaning for literacy is far more than reading and writing. It also encompasses all the skills needed for an individual to knowledgeably interact with the world in which they live. The basics of literacy include knowing how to

¹ Dee Hansen, Elaine Bernstorff, and Gayle M. Stuber, *The Music and Literacy Connection*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 3.

communicate verbally and in writing as well as knowing history and the world of the past and the present and an understanding societal norms and values.

The oral tradition is comprised of two primary things: music and words. Indeed, words are powerful, and words used well are rarely forgotten. Great thinkers and speakers of centuries past have penned and uttered words that have withstood the test of time and that continue to echo in the minds of humanity long after the ones who constructed those words are gone. The opening phrase to Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" is unforgettably iconic and is easily recognized within the first few words of the speech. Those words shaped the framework of our country and are embedded in the minds of many citizens.

That same literacy that cements the words of Lincoln's iconic speeches into the minds of Americans is the same literacy that extends to music. Like historical and iconic words, many traditional and folk songs are similarly interwoven into the tapestry of our country's history which bleeds into the present. Most children can sing "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain", and many adults instantly recognize the tune just as easily as they remember the iconic opening words of Lincoln's speech at the battlefield in Gettysburg. The question then becomes twofold: is there a connection between literacy and orality in the realm of music, and, if so, how does that correlate to folk songs and children's music?

The term "literacy" encompasses a few different ideas. Literacy, in one context, can refer to how the oral transmission of music changed and evolved into a notational process. It is commonly thought that in the early Middle Ages all music was transmitted orally from one person to another. All music was most likely taught and preserved aurally instead of being written down for there is no record of any standardized form of musical notation during that period. As time progressed, music notation entered the scene and allowed for the preservation of music in an exact form, leading to the point where almost all music in the Western, twenty-first century world is in notational form. In her article "Rethinking the Orality-Literacy Paradigm in Musicology," Francesca Lawson notes that the "concepts of literacy have changed over the centuries, showing us how deeply our contemporary ideas about memory, oral delivery, literacy, and creativity are rooted in a fundamentally different paradigm than they were in the Middle Ages."² Today, most assume that oral music transmission and written music transmission are seemingly at odds with each other, and notational music forms most assuredly have the upper hand. However, that is most certainly not the case today or in ages past as "historians have reached a broad consensus that oral and written traditions complemented one other to varying degrees from the ninth through the twelfth centuries [where] written documents supported or reinforced ongoing oral traditions without replacing them, and oral communication played a central role even

² Francesca R. S. Lawson, "Rethinking the Orality-Literacy Paradigm in Musicology," *Oral Tradition* 25, no. 2 (2010): 437, doi: 10.1353/ort.2010.0021.

in highly literate communities.”³ It is easy to assume that the days where oral and written communication went hand in hand are long gone; however, that is far from true. Ruth Finnegan asserts that “One needs only mention the continuing significance of oral communication in the modern world, or the increasing distribution of books and newspapers, to give the lie to facile predictions that radio and television would inevitably bring the end of book reading [for] in practice people switch from oral to written to electronic communication and back and from personally generated to mass-media forms, without any sense that there is some radical change involved or that they are somehow thereby moving in different kinds of ‘social space.’”⁴ Today’s society easily moves between written and aural communication as illustrated by Finnegan above, and today’s children are in a unique position where they have equal opportunities to learn music by note and by rote. If music was originally transmitted orally and then switched to notation, folk music (which mostly proceeds from an oral tradition) should therefore be a great starting point for music education. As children learn aurally, they should slowly and naturally begin to increase in their music literacy (in addition to their social, cultural, and historical literacy), similar to the Middle Ages.

For many young music learners studying in choirs and some general music programs, however, sometimes even folk music is notated. Typically, only young students are told to listen to a piece and mimic what they hear. Instead, more often, students learn by ear and by note simultaneously, relying mostly on the ear at the beginning. As they grow musically, especially in middle and high school, they begin to rely more and more strongly on written notation. This is exactly how the oral tradition can impact music literacy, something Albert Lord spent much time studying as he observed the impact of oral musical tradition in Yugoslavia. In his well-known book, *The Singer of Tales*, Lord states that “the use of writing in setting down oral texts does not *per se* have any effect on oral tradition [for] it is a means of recording [and] the texts thus obtained are in a sense special...they are purely oral.”⁵ This supports the theory that even if a song is now notated, it does not change the fact that it is deeply rooted in oral tradition and is therefore a great springboard for teaching music and cultural literacy in the music education classroom.

Folk songs and Nursery Rhymes

One of the best resources for teaching children music that was originally transmitted in oral form is the use of folk music, nursery rhymes, and traditional songs. Many of those songs were passed on from one generation to another simply by being sung around a

³ Susan Boynton, "Orality, Literacy, and the Early Notation of the Office Hymns," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56, no. 1 (2003): 100, doi: 10.1525/jams.2003.56.1.99.

⁴ Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*, (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 143.

⁵ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 129.

campfire during a shared meal, by being sung over cradles and at children's bedsides, and by being sung purely as entertainment and as a way to pass the time. These songs are already deeply ingrained in the framework of oral tradition, and many are still being passed on today in the same way. For example, very few people would ever think of teaching their child the alphabet song or "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" by looking up the sheet music corresponding to the songs and laboriously sight reading each note. Instead, parents teach these songs in the same way they learned them a generation earlier: by rote.

Similarly, many parents and educators turn to songs and rhymes over books when teaching valuable literacy skills at an early age. The reason why so many childhood concepts are taught through song is because "the use of rhythm and rhyme as an educational strategy provides young children with an easily remembered and nicely structured format for literacy learning."⁶ Books are a great way for children to learn; however, there is a unique benefit to education through music. Ask any child to tell you the alphabet, and chances are that they will sing it to you instead of simply reciting the letters in order for the human brain is able to remember concepts better when more of the brain is actively engaged in learning as in music. The book *The Music and Literacy Connection*, published in partnership with the National Association for Music Education, explains that "all aspects of music making, composition, attentive reading, and attentive listening require a fully engaged cerebral cortex [while] emotional and memory...portions of the brain also are activated by musical experiences, [which is why] truly music is a whole-brain experience."⁷ Music engages a child's whole brain in a way that books and worlds without rhythm and rhyme simply cannot. John Smith expounds upon the value of music as a vehicle for literacy learning, stating that "meta-analyses of arts education research studies suggest that music activities in particular are strongly associated with nonmusical curricular outcomes [and] can enhance students' academic performance, social skills, and content learning."⁸ He goes on further to detail that "music activities can also complement a wide range of literacy learning activities...[as] singing and songwriting...can support early literacy instruction in the areas of letter names and sounds, phonemic awareness, print conventions, background knowledge, vocabulary, decoding, and writing."⁹ Music is an invaluable teaching resource as it appeals to many different parts of students' brains. It crosses over into numerous other parts of the curriculum, and it teaches social and interpersonal skills that students will use both in and out of the classroom.

One question still stands: why folk music? The value in music as an educational tool for teaching literacy is highly evident; however, I would like to suggest that there is great value in a music curriculum with a strong core of traditional folk songs and nursery rhymes (in

⁶ Dee Hansen, Elaine Bernstorff, and Gayle M. Stuber, *The Music and Literacy Connection*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 32.

⁷ Ibid, 221.

⁸ John A. Smith, "Singing and Songwriting Support Early Literacy Instruction," *Reading Teacher* 53, no. 8 (2000): 646.

⁹ Ibid.

addition to a well-balanced and blended musical repertoire) that aids in young students' literacy learning and development.

One of the greatest benefits of a music curriculum centered around folk music and nursery rhymes is that such songs help to lay the foundation for language mastery in young learners. Shwetha R. asserts that the use of nursery rhymes and songs in the classroom is not a novel idea as "nursery rhymes have always remained a resourceful instructional material [and]...the nursery rhymes we learn as children remain fresh in our minds, even as we age...because of the foundation it lays in minds, of the language that we use almost every day."¹⁰ The value in folk music, traditional nursery rhymes, and songs stems from their strong background in the oral tradition. "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Hot Cross Buns" are common songs used in beginning instrumental curriculums. However, they are not chosen for their musical simplicity or their deeply meaningful texts. These songs are selected because they are songs that students already know by rote, making it easy for them to learn them by note on a new instrument since the song is already deeply ingrained in their memory. Many nursery songs are used in similar ways, and "the part played by nursery rhymes in forming the basis for language learning is integral...because rhymes are one of the most enthralling and culturally rich resources that can easily be used in a language classroom, and it offers a change from droning classroom activities."¹¹ Songs that students already know by rote are excellent springboards for learning in content areas outside of music as words to familiar folk tunes and traditional melodies can be replaced with new lyrics that teach multiplication, provide a memorable definition for the word "homonym," or help students recall South American geography. Even without changing the words, many traditional songs and nursery rhymes are vehicles for literacy across content areas, especially in the realms of language learning, historical cognizance, and social awareness within a larger community.

Influencing Language Literacy

It is of little surprise that language is at the core of every society. Without language, communication would be rendered impossible, nations and governments would fall, and humanity would forever be locked in place, never able to advance in knowledge. However, such a tragedy is not the case, and students daily learn how to better communicate as they learn both the language skills that they are taught and the ones that they pick up from the world around them. No one would ever deny that students learn valuable language skills in their literature and writing classes. However, many fail to realize that music also has extraordinary potential to teach language literacy. Language literacy is one of the greatest benefits from the literacy gained through the oral transmission of music, and there is much evidence to support that fact.

¹⁰Shwetha R., "Nursery Rhymes as an Effective Instructional Material for Young Language Learners," *Language in India* 13, no. 6 (2013): 773.

¹¹ Ibid.

In the collection *Music and Child Development*, C. Ray Graham studied the effect of music and musical styles on children who were learning English as a second language. He observed that at the foundation of music learning “there is a continuum of involvement ranging from the totally rote learning of material, such as when kindergarteners or first graders learn ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ and perform it while standing at attention during circle time, to the learning of songs and using them for manipulating the behavior of others, as exemplified in the performance of the song ‘Hokey Pokey.’”¹² He noticed that when students simply learned the music by rote, they lost much of the meaning behind the songs. However, not all value is completely lost by teaching music in that manner for “while the material may have some effect on the children’s development of such lower level speech phenomena as rhythm, syllable timing, and articulation of certain segmental features of the language, it is unlikely that any of the syntactic or morphological features of the language will be assimilated.”¹³ While some teachers simply taught music by rote, others worked to connect the foreign language terms with concrete ideas the students understood in their native language, doing so by using pictures, acting out ideas, and asking comprehensive questions of the students. Graham sought to discover the source of the children’s greater language comprehension by noting that “the key to...more in-depth processing of...linguistic material in [music] is the same as the key to language acquisition in general: comprehension of the text by the learner and interaction in which the learner has the opportunity to test his or her ‘hypotheses’ about the language.”¹⁴ Essentially, Graham’s observations led him to the conclusion that although any type of music learning can aid in growing a student’s language literacy, the acquisition of language skills is greatly improved when students can interact and learn along with the music. Graham cautions music educators that “an attractive melody contributes greatly to the memorability of the text of a song, but at the same time it makes it possible to perform the text in a holistic way without integrating the text into the productive linguistic system of the learner... [therefore] we must be careful to make the lyrics comprehensible and to provide plenty of opportunities for meaningful interaction using the text.”¹⁵

Connecting to the Past and the Culture

Not only does music aid in children’s ability to master language, it also gives them a better grasp on history as songs place them in the shoes of those who have walked the earth before them. Nick Page gives many examples of how music and history complement each other, but he notes that when trying to sing songs from ancient times, “it would be impossible to recreate exactly what they sang [for] the music of [many] cultures was

¹² C. Ray Graham, “Music and the Learning of Language in Early Childhood,” in *Music and Child Development*, ed. J. Craig Peery, Irene Weiss Perry, and Thomas W. Draper (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987), 180.

¹³ *Ibid*, 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

primarily folk music—music from the oral tradition, not written down.”¹⁶ The songs rooted in oral tradition are some of the best for teaching history to students as they are grounded in the raw, real emotions of factual events. That is why many of these valuable songs for teaching history are folk songs and traditional songs that not only convey historical information but also simultaneously increase students’ language literacy as mentioned earlier. Page illustrates this by sharing that many songs “coincide with historic events like the conquest of the American West, the Great Depression, and military conflicts like the Civil War...[and it is] easy to attach songs like ‘Home on the Range,’ ‘Pennies from Heaven,’ and ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ to their respective historical events.”¹⁷ These songs were often passed down orally but have since been notated for the sake of preservation for future generations. Just as students have the opportunity to study historical documents and writings, the chance to learn ancient tunes is an invaluable method for them to experience history in a meaningful and personal way for “each song says a lot about the historic event from which it originates.”¹⁸ The list of historical songs could go on and on—from Native American songs to African spirituals to songs from the civil rights movement to political battle hymns. Folk songs are incredibly valuable as resources for learning about times long gone because “songs are [effective] as historical records of how people behaved and thought...they help to reinforce cultural identity...[they] help to define who we are, and sometimes, it is the songs themselves that help to shape our history.”¹⁹

Finally, not only does music empower children to expand their language literacy and to explore cultures and events of ages past, but it empowers students to understand the world around them and how they fit into that world. Music helps the youngest members of our society to understand other cultures, but beyond that, it helps them to understand their own culture even better. Page expounds on this idea when he notes that “it would be impossible to understand a culture and the way the people in that culture think without first understanding how they identify themselves and what gives them power [and] music and the arts help provide a cultural identity which gives people a sense of belonging—a sense of power.”²⁰ Students gain a broader sense of social awareness when they understand their place within that society. When children are young, it is not uncommon to teach them songs about sharing, washing their hands, and picking up their toys. However, as children grow, through music they begin to learn about bravery and courage, kindness and humility, sacrifice and love. Those themes then translate over into students’ lives as they too seek to be brave and kind and sacrificial. Oftentimes, folk songs and traditional songs especially teach deep and rich values as those are typically the songs that have strengthened, encouraged, and inspired others for generations. Elliot W. Eisner offers that

¹⁶Nick Page, *Music as a Way of Knowing* (York: Stenhouse Publishers, 1995), 43.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 45.

²⁰ Ibid, 38-39.

“through the arts, students can learn how to discover not only the possibilities the world offers but also their own possibilities...[and both] expression and discovery are two major contributions the arts make to human development.”²¹ When students discover where they fit in the big world around them, they seek to better that world. Eisner continues on to say that “the arts also make discovery possible...as students learn through adventures in the arts something of the possibilities of human experience.”²² When children are surrounded by other students in a classroom, it is easy for them to feel as if they are simply another face in the crowd, and at times, it can be difficult for students to find their unique voice and skill that they can contribute to the world. However, Eisner asserts “the journeys they take through the patterned sound we call music...are means through which students can discover their potential to respond [or] in other words, the arts can help students find their individual capacity to feel and imagine.”²³ Students expand their social awareness as music helps them to grow through the exploration of the spacious world around them.

Conclusion

Folk music is far more than simply an easy way to fill the time in a general music classroom. It is a hidden treasure trove of wealth and riches waiting to be discovered by those who take the time to seek it out. It is true that traditional songs can be merely entertainment for the youngest members of society, and small students will be sent home from school singing catchy tunes that their parents will recognize during the car ride home. However, the value in folk songs is their rich heritage in the oral tradition of ages past that has for many centuries encouraged literacy in many different cultures around the world. Language learning, historical knowledge, and societal consciousness are at students’ fingertips, or perhaps more accurately, at the tips of their tongues. Traditional music has the power to continue to change the lives of students as the music educators of today ask them to join in the song with the voices of the generations before them, asking “Next time, won’t you sing with me?”

²¹ Elliot W. Eisner, “The Misunderstood Role of the Arts in Human Development,” *Education Digest* 58, no. 3 (1992): 595.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

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