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An Exploration of Preschool Children's Spontaneous Songs and Chants

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An Exploration of Preschool Children's Spontaneous Songs and Chants explores the spontaneous, or improvised, songs and chants of preschool children. This study focused on: a) the environmental conditions that exist when young children spontaneously sing or chant, b) how young children manipulate musical elements when spontaneously singing or chanting, and c) their ability to verbalize a purpose for spontaneously singing and chanting.

Four preschool children (two boys and two girls), enrolled in early childhood music, participated in the study. Spontaneous singing and chanting was observed and audio-taped within the home context. Questionnaire data were collected regarding the environment in which the singing or chanting occurred, and for the children's verbalizations. Audio-recordings were analyzed by two independent judges in the form of a specimen description. Questionnaire data were analyzed by content analysis.

The results of this study are inconclusive due to the small sample size. However, it appears that young children's spontaneous songs and chants may be a reflection of how they organize musical information received from their environments. Further examination of the spontaneous singing and chanting of children may lead to a deeper understanding of what factors contribute to young children's musical development. Suggestions for future research are provided.

Many researchers have conducted studies on various aspects regarding the musical development of young children (Scott-Kassner, 1992; Zimmerman, 1993). However, the development of musical creativity within the young child is an area that has not received much attention. Some research on the musically creative development of children has focused on developing theories of creative thinking in music (Webster, 1988) and musically creative development (Moog, 1976; Swanwick & Tillman, 1989). Other research has addressed one, or a combination of the person, process, or product aspects of children's musical creativity (Flohr, 1985; Kratus, 1985, 1989; Moorhead & Pond, 1941; Reinhardt, 1990; and Swanwick & Tillman, 1989). When surveying the literature, there appears to be a paucity of research on the musical improvisations of young children. A clearer understanding of the development of musical thought and behavior in young children may be acquired through the study of their vocal improvisations.

Related Improvisation Studies

Moorhead and Pond (1941) observed children 2-6 years old engaged in chanting, singing, and playing instruments in a naturalistic environment. The children attended the Pillsbury Foundation School which was opened in 1937 in Santa Barbara, CA. The primary purpose was to develop musical understanding in young children within a free environment. Over the course of seven years, the children were observed as they spontaneously sang, chanted and played instruments. Moorhead and Pond found that: (a) Experimentation with vocalizations, and with songs was the norm and that children do not organize their music in conventional tonalities as adults do, (b) children's songs were plaintive compared to the songs adults would have them sing, (c) chant appeared under conditions of freedom-alone or in a group, (d) physical activity

was directly related to rhythmic chant, (e) solo chants were like heightened speech in which the music conformed to the words, group chants were in duple meter and the words conformed to the rhythmic structure, (f) children explored instruments first before melodic and rhythmic patterns emerged, (g) instrumental improvisation was characterized by asymmetrical meter, followed by duple and triple meters, then steady beat. Although this study is thorough in description, there are problematic areas. First of all, Moorhead and Pond observed a random number (somewhere between 15 and 20) of children. There is uncertainty as to how long the children were at the school and therefore how long individual children were observed. Furthermore, the children ranged in age from 2-6 years old. There is no account for at what age children engaged in the various forms of music making. Therefore, a chronologically developmental sequence of musical creativity cannot be ascertained from this study.

In an effort to identify a developmental sequence of preschool aged children's musical experiences, Moog (1976) went into the homes of 500 children, aged 6 months to 5.5 years old. He conducted individual tests, played recordings of different types and sounds of music, collected samples of young children's singing, and data from parental observations. He determined that between the ages of 3 and 4, children's songs may be spontaneous- narrative, imaginative, spontaneous, or imitative in nature. Moog suggested that from this age on the process of development cannot be described independently of the environment.

Issues raised from this study are: (a) The 1976 report doesn't describe the tests that were administered, (b) no account of the observations that were made is provided, and (c) no description of the analysis procedures that were used was given. Flohr (1985) conducted a study with ten children ages 2 to 6 years of age to examine the creative development of their

improvisations on an Orff pentatonic xylophone. Flohr recorded the children's improvisations once per year over a 4 year period. The musical content of each improvisation was analyzed. He observed that at age 2 children are driven by motor energy, at age 3 repetition of patterns was most prevalent, and at age 5 steady beat with melodic and rhythmic repetitions occurred most frequently. With such a small sample size results cannot be generalized.

A similar study was conducted by Reinhardt (1990). However, in this study 105 children between 3-5 years of age improvised a song on an alto xylophone. The researcher played a duple meter ostinato while the children improvised. The children's improvisations were analyzed for use of steady beat, meter, rhythmic patterns, and duration of pitches. All but one child were able to maintain steady beat and a steady meter. In addition, the use of varied pitch duration and rhythmic patterns increased with age. The effect of the researcher's ostinato on the outcome of this study is difficult to determine. Because of this, the possibility of the students being engaged in imitation of steady beat and meter exists. Swanwick and Tillman (1986) collected over 700 compositions which included brief improvisations to finished products. A small random sample was selected and analyzed by 2 judges who were teachers. Without knowing the subject's age, the judges were to listen to and categorize the pieces by age. There was high agreement between the judges, although the correlation coefficient was not reported. Using the pieces that were categorized as anchors, the researchers proceeded in making their own judgments on how the pieces were to be classified. The pieces in this study provided the base for a theoretical model of musical development. The model is a developmental spiral of four stages and eight levels. For the purposes of this study only the first two stages will be discussed. Young children from birth to 4 years of age are at the mastery stage of development. In this stage, children are most

concerned with exploration, experimentation and sound production. At the manipulative level of this stage, repetition on instruments, learning the techniques of handling and playing instruments, and the ability to organize music with a feeling of meter occur. As children between 4 and 9 years of age enter the second stage, the imitation stage, personal expression appears. First it is evident in sung music with changes of tempo and dynamics. About age 7, at the vernacular level, children gravitate toward conventional established music. Meter is established and phrasing becomes standard at this level. The method of categorizing the 700 compositions for this theory has raised skepticism of its reliability and validity, bringing the entire model into question.

Purpose and Research Questions

Of all of the studies presented, the Moorhead and Pond is closest in design of the present study. A concern rising out of that study was the range of ages of the children observed, with no account for individual ages. Also missing was important information such as how long the children were enrolled at the Pillsbury Foundation School and the musical nature of the children's home environments. However, the present study addresses the age of the children, and important background information of the children.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the spontaneous, or improvised, songs and chants of preschool children. More specifically, this study focused on three questions:

1. What environmental conditions exist when children sing or chant spontaneously?
2. How do young children manipulate musical elements while spontaneously singing or chanting?

3. Are young children able to verbalize a purpose for their spontaneous singing and chanting?

Method

Eight preschool children were to participate in the study. Four children were disqualified due to the inability of the parents to follow the data collection procedure. This left two boys and two girls to participate in the study. The ages of the children ranged from 3 years and 7 months to 4 years and 10 months with the mean being 4 years of age. All of the children have participated in early childhood music classes and are known as students by the researcher. The range of participation in early childhood music classes was from 7 months to 4 years and 10 months with a mean of 2 years and 11 months. To study the spontaneous singing and chanting of young children requires some form of observation in a non-intrusive way. Bredenkamp and Rosegrant (1992) note that observation is the most effective way to get to know children without transforming, invading or constraining children's behavior. Since children behave differently in one environment from another it is important that they are observed in their living environment so they may be viewed in context as fully as possible (Cohen, Stern, & Balaban, 1997). Therefore, children's spontaneous singing and chanting were observed and audio-taped within the context of their homes.

To collect the spontaneous music making of the four children, the researcher gave each parent a cassette tape to audio-record their child while he/she was singing or chanting. The researcher explained to each parent that it was important not to prompt their child so that the spontaneous nature could be preserved. In addition, the researcher gave each parent an

environmental questionnaire to fill out. Information obtained from the form included: (a) a description of the overall musical environment of the home; (b) where the child was and what the child was doing when the spontaneous singing, or chanting occurred; (c) what the child was thinking as he/she was singing, or chanting; and why he/she sang or chanted what they did. Parents had one week to collect the audio-tape data, fill out the questionnaire, and return all information to the researcher. Multiple perspectives of data collection were represented by: the audio-recordings, the environmental questionnaire, and the children's verbalizations about their spontaneous singing and chanting.

Data Analysis Procedure

The audio-tapes were analyzed in the form of a specimen description (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992) by two independent judges. The judges listened to each audio-cassette four times, once each for the categories of tonal, metrical, vocal and textual manipulation. The data were coded and categorized according to trends found between the judges preliminary analysis. The categories that emerged served as the basis for analysis of trends between the four children. The environmental questionnaire was coded and categorized according to each question asked. Triangulation of data analysis was represented through the preliminary analysis of the audio-recordings by two independent judges, the analysis of the environmental questionnaire and the analysis of the verbalizations of the children.

Results and Interpretation

The interpretation of the results are presented in relation to the research questions of the study. The results and interpretations apply only to the children who participated in this study

are not meant to be generalized due to the small sample size.

Research Question #1:

What environmental conditions exist when children sing, or chant spontaneously?

All four children who participated in this study have musically supportive homes. Each home has an instrumentalist, a vocalist or both living there, an array of musical instruments that each of the children are reported to have interaction with 2 to 3 times per week and purposeful exposure to a wide variety of musical styles. When all of the children's spontaneous singing or chanting occurred they were in the family room, in the middle of the floor, playing alone with some type of object. Both of the boys were reported to have been lying down. Objects that were used by the children at the time of their singing, or chanting were Legos, plastic turtles, a train, and videos in their boxes. Moorhead and Pond (1941) reported that the children they observed engaged in music making were surrounded by a musically rich environment, and often were playing with an object that sets up imaginative expression. Moog (1976) believes that at this age the process of musical development cannot be described independently of the environment.

Research Question #2:

How do young children manipulate musical elements while spontaneously singing or chanting?

Tonality

Only one child was consistent in the use of major tonality. This child was apparently singing a song that had been heard before. Another child sang songs that were familiar but without a stable sense of tonality. The third child also sang but had no sense of tonality. Finally, one

child's vocalizations had no reference to tonality as he/she was engaged in chant. Several possible reasons exist for the variance of tonality: (a) For children aged 3 to 4 years a sense of tonality is not always stable (Davidson, 1985; Moog, 1976; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986); (b) developmental music aptitudes of the children, the amount of time spent in early childhood music classes and the home environment may bear on how children perceive and use tonality in their songs (Gordon, 1997); and (c) tonality may have no relevance to what is sung due to the musical intent of the child (Kratus, 1991) or how the child may be playing and what a child may be playing with (Moorhead & Pond, 1941).

Meter

Three of the four children engaged in duple meter with two of those children occasionally changing the feeling of meter to suit their own purposes. Of the two that changed meter, one was engaged in chant, and the other had episodes of narrative between singing. There was no agreement between the judges on the fourth child. One judge perceived the child as singing in duple meter, while the other perceived the child singing in triple meter. Moorhead and Pond (1941) state that when children are engaged in chant the rhythm is typically molded to accommodate the words. This may account for the changing meter of the two examples that had included chant and narrative. Also, children at this age are developing a sense of meter (Flohr, 1985; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986) which may account for why only one child sang consistently in duple meter while two of the children had meter that changed. Developmental music aptitude and time spent in early childhood music classes may provide an explanation as to why certain children keep meter steady while spontaneously singing or chanting (Gordon, 1997). In addition, the music of the children's culture, which tends to be major in tonality and duple in meter, may

also have an effect on how the children perceive meter (Gordon, 1997).

Use of Voice

Three of the children used their singing voices, while one used a chant-like voice that bordered on singing at times. Two children explored vocal registers ranging from a low voice to a high head voice. Both girls, who solely used their singing voices, experimented with vibrato. For two children, the use of voice seemed to be related to the objects that they were playing with. Those children explored the full range of their voices. It could be that they did so because they were playing with objects that move: swimming turtles and trains (Moorhead & Pond, 1941). According to Moorhead and Pond (1941) the use of voice in speech and song is closely related and vocal exploration is the norm for children becoming familiar with the possibilities of vocal sounds that can be made. Also, children tend to sing and chant freely when moving or playing alone (Moorhead & Pond, 1941).

Use of Text

Three of the children used text, or syllables that were related to the activity they were engaged in. The child engaged with the train used "choo-choo", the child engaged with the plastic turtles used "swim, swimmy, swimmy swim". The child playing with the videos in their boxes sang words from the songs that were recalled from the actual videos. The one child who was singing a song that had been heard before used syllables such as "doo, di, da" which had no relation to the Lego castle that was being built. Moog (1976) suggests that at this age, children's music may be spontaneous-narrative, imaginative, spontaneous, or imitative in nature. The two children engaged with the turtles and train used text in a spontaneous-narrative nature. When

children engage in imaginative singing, pitch, rhythm and words become separate entities that children are able to discern between (Moog, 1976). One child used text in an imitative way. This child was able to grasp the words of a song, but lacked a consistent sense of meter and tonality. This follows a developmental progression of how children tend to learn songs (Davidson, 1985). The non- use of text may have been a contributing factor for the child who sang in major tonality and duple meter in a consistent fashion (Gordon, 1997).

Research Question # 3:

Are young children able to verbalize a purpose for their spontaneous singing and chanting?

When the children were asked what they were thinking when they sang, or chanted, three responded, "I don't know". One responded, "about eating jam" and asked his mother for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Each child had different responses for why they sang or chanted what they did. The child who sang a familiar song said, "What song? I don't know any more songs right now." The child playing with the train said, "Just for fun! I don't know why I was singing." The child playing with the videos in their boxes said, "...sing songs from the videos" and the child playing with the plastic turtles said, "They were swimming!" It could be that although these children were spontaneously singing and chanting they did not have a musical intent for their improvisations and were not thinking of their improvisations in musical terms. Although the children were unable to articulate a musical purpose for what they were thinking, and why they sang and chanted what they did, it appears that they were processing music and information from their environments.

Conclusion

Zimmerman (1993) states that a child's musical growth moves from receiver of information (perception), to imitator, and then to organizer of information (improvisation). A child's way of learning is inseparable from his/her environment (Cohen, Stern & Balaban, 1997; Moog, 1976; Moorhead & Pond, 1941; Zimmerman, 1993) and developmental sequences are reinforced through continuous interaction with the environment (Zimmerman, 1993). Young children's spontaneous songs and chants may be a reflection of how children organize musical information from their environments. In addition, those musical reflections may be indicative of how young children think and develop musically. There are no conclusions to report from the present study due to the small sample size. However, it appears that further study of the spontaneous songs and chants of young children will lead to a better understanding of what factors contribute to how young children develop musically.

Suggestions for Future Research

To enrich understanding of how children develop musically, music education should continue to examine the spontaneous songs and chants of children. Potential questions for future investigation are:

1. Listening to the spontaneous songs and chants of children may provide valuable information on the musical development of children. Is there a developmental music learning or creating sequence that can be recognized through young children's spontaneous songs and chants?
2. Different types of play may elicit different types of spontaneous singing and chanting.

What is the role of play on the spontaneous songs and chants of young children?

3. What variables exist that impact the spontaneous songs and chants of young children?
4. What influence does early childhood music instruction have on the spontaneous songs and chants of young children?
5. Is there a connection between musical perception and musical production as evidenced through the spontaneous songs and chants of young children?
6. Are there differences in the spontaneous singing and chanting of children with high, low, and moderate music aptitude?
7. What relationship exists between the music of a child's culture and his/her spontaneous songs and chants?
8. What role does environment play in the spontaneous songs and chants of children? (Such as home, school, child care, preschool)
9. As more is learned about the musical development of young children, alternative ways of analyzing young children's spontaneous songs and chants may need to be developed.
How can these songs and chants be analyzed in reference to the musical understanding of young children?

Moorhead and Pond (1941) believed that listening with the ears of a child is the key to understanding young children's music. Through listening to the spontaneous music of the young child, music educators may be better informed as to how young children acquire and develop musical knowledge. This information, when put into practice, will in turn serve to improve the musical instruction of young children at an important developmental period of their lives.

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