

Music from Inside Out

Promoting Emergent Composition with Young Children

Jennifer Ohman-Rodriguez

Music has long been used to enhance the learning power of early childhood experiences for young children. Infants learn about relationships, love, and trust when loving adults share music with them (Jaffe 1992; MENC 2003). Toddlers and preschoolers learn the ins and outs of social interaction when playing rhythm instruments together. Teachers use songs and finger plays to ease young children's transitions and help develop language skills (Jaffe 1992).

Interwoven with these early childhood music experiences is music's capacity to communicate. Combinations of sounds convey, at the very least, concepts, emotions, ideas, and knowledge. Young children imitate these sounds to initiate and participate in music communication (McDonald 1979). Initially this communication is oral. But as with spoken language communication, teachers can lay the foundation for future music literacy by promoting emergent composition with young children.



The Importance of music literacy

In early childhood, music's importance as a written language can be diminished or promoted. When promoted, emergent music literacy creates a path toward enlightened musical knowledge for young children. As with learning to read and write a spoken language, learning to read and write music allows young children to be music insiders. Lucy Calkins writes, "When children are insiders, they make connections" (1986, 219). Inside the language of music, young children experience music in profoundly different ways. They see the moving gears of music and the nuts and bolts holding it together.

What begins as music "exploration, imitation, [and] experimentation" leads to the development of connections such as "discrimination, organization, and creation" (McDonald 1979, 8). Being allowed in strengthens young children's use of music as a language and leads to new heights of awareness, ability, understanding, and possibility of communication (McDonald 1979; Jaffe 1992).

Emergent composition and symbols

As young children grow, so does their interest and awareness in symbols (McDonald 1979). The environment and adult-child interactions fuel this interest (Dombro 1992). Early uses of symbols occur at the art easel when children begin to paint faces, houses, and other important items (Smith 1993). Interest in letter symbols emerges when young children pretend to write by scribbling (Dombro 1992). Eventually, through their

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interactions with symbols, young children discover that print symbols contain meaning (Dombro 1992).

In much the same way, emergent use of music symbols called *notation* develops. If the learning environment uses music symbols like it uses other written symbols, then young children begin to develop a budding music literacy. Playful experimentations with music symbols form a strong foundation for future music literacy, which will progress in similar stages to those observed in young children's use of invented spelling (Upitis 1991). Upitis describes the process:

Just as the child in the precommunicative stage who makes strings of letters that don't form words, the child who plays with music symbols creates combinations that don't make melodies. (1991, 149)

Sound is not important when young children first play with writing music. The sound picture is less important than the act of playfully writing music symbols. After experimenting with the medium of writing music, young children eventually stumble upon meaning in their compositions in similar fashion to their discovery of meaning in their artwork (Smith 1993). And with time, age, and experience, young children will decide before they begin what they will be composing, just like they will decide what to paint before they paint it (Upitis 1991, 1992; Smith 1993).

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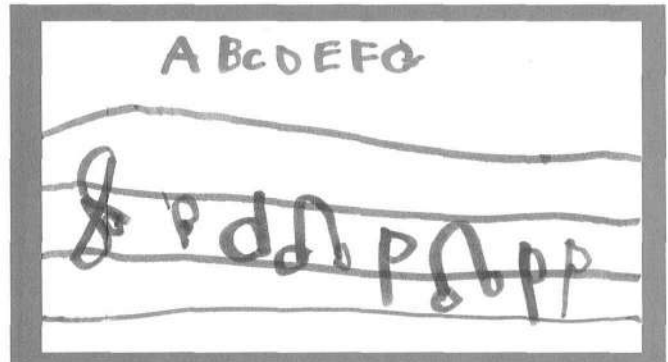
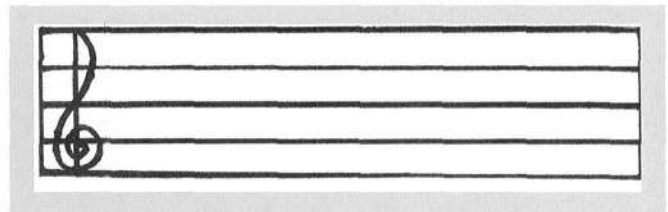
Music in the classroom

Young children need to be spoken to and read to long before they become readers (Dickinson & Tabors 2002). Young children also need to be exposed to music long before they become composers.

The foundation

Recorded music and rhythm instruments, as well as songs, chants, and finger plays, are staples in the early childhood classroom. Singing, improvising (banging around on the rhythm instruments), and appropriate background music provide a foundation for future music awareness (McDonald 1979). These early music experiences positively add to young children's sense of their musical selves.

Once a foundation level in music has been established, young children in their preschool and early



elementary years are ready for new levels of music awareness. Teachers can foster these new levels of music awareness by inviting young children into the inner workings (the nuts and bolts) of music. Once admitted, young children move from being singers and members of the rhythm band to becoming literate performers, composers, and critics in much the same way that children who listen to stories become writers and readers (Upitis 1991).

Becoming music insiders

To help young children become music insiders and emergent composers, teachers do not need to be

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musicians. Most teachers have already become, in a sense, biologists, anthropologists, and architects, not to mention paleontologists, so they can foster young children's curiosity, knowledge base, and investigations.

The nature of fine teaching enables teachers to still be learners and collectors of knowledge. Music, while out of the comfort zone for many, asks only that teachers have the desire to learn along with young children. One teacher suggests, "It's important for nonmusicians to remember that we are not expected to

teach music, but we need to learn better ways to teach with music" (Sharron Lucky, quoted in Gharavi 1993, 28).

Starting out: Improvisation and recording

Improvisation and recording are great places to start, both for teachers and young children. Improvisation is the basis of composition as well as creativity. And for teachers who have little or no musical training, improvisation and recording are easy to implement, although noisy at times. Improvisations can be vocal or instrumental and begin as soon as young children are able to shake an instrument.

For improvisation and recording to be successful, the instruments must be available during free play. Availability allows for active exploration of the instruments and the sounds they make. Making tape recordings can occur any time young children are improvising. Three concepts are important in recording young children's work: (1) children need to hear their work soon after it is recorded; (2) taped examples should be collected over time so that teachers, children, and families can

note the growth and changes; and (3) tape recorders should be permanent fixtures in the music corner so that children can ask for their work to be recorded and learn to record themselves.

Teachers can use children's books to support and extend the concept of improvisation for young children. For example, Eric Carle's *I See a Song* is a picture book in which children can make up a song of their own to accompany the pictures. Young children's first attempts at using a picture from which to improvise may be hesitant or imitative of already known songs. Given time and familiarity, however, young children will soon take off with their musical interpretations of this book.

Chris Raschka's use of pictures, history, words, and word sounds in *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* clearly depicts the improvisational nature of jazz for both young children and adults. This book explores jazz music and shows how jazz musicians improvise. In conjunction with improvisation activities and listening to jazz music, this book serves as a springboard to children's improvisational work.

The next step: Written music

Introducing written music to young children involves creating an environment in which examples of written music are accessible and experimenting with writing music is routine. It also involves promoting young children's discovery of music notation, the movement of music notation within a composition, and the understanding that music notation contains meaning.

Creating an emergent composition environment

Here are the first steps for teachers.

Create an environment full of printed music. It is a good idea to place books of music in the book area. Old and almost discarded books from piano lessons and the school band are good, plus books of children's songs. Children's books about music and music composers should also be available to spark further musical curiosity (see "Music Resources to Use with Children," p. 54).

Stock the writing area with beginner staff paper. Also include samples of real staff paper. Make sure to display large posters of familiar printed music on the wall. Posters can be either teacher made or copied and enlarged from existing music. When copying, choose a song in the public domain that is not copyrighted. (Copyright infringement fines are expensive.) Many children's songs are in the public domain. Public domain research can be done via the Internet or at a local library.

Set a music meeting time. Use one of the big music posters in the classroom to sing a well-known song, using a finger to help children follow along with the written music. Non-musicians can do this activity by following the words. Young children will in time begin to understand that music is read in a certain direction and a note or notes is connected to each word. They may even begin to understand that when music sounds high, the notes are higher on the music staff.

Show children how music composers write music. At the next music meeting, start with a large piece of music staff paper. Large readymade staff paper available through music education catalogs is not expensive. While children observe and help, copy a well-known, simple song such as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" to the staff paper. The important message for the children to receive during this activity is that composers write down their music on special paper (staff paper) and use special markings called music notation. Help the children to understand that they too can write their own songs using staff paper available in the writing area.

Bolster children's awareness of composers and their art. Reading Ann Rachlin's *Bach* at another music meeting will give young children an understanding of the experiences of real composers. Seeing pictures of the handwritten music manuscripts of famous composers helps children develop a knowledge of music notation and the process of composition. Music manuscript pictures of J.S. Bach, Mozart, and Bartók are found in Alike's *Ah, Music!*

Introduce and name music terms. As young children's emergent composing continues, they will need more information about musical symbols. The treble clef, quarter note, and quarter rest all are fun to draw, and they mimic the lines, curves, circles, and squiggles of young children's drawings. Teachers can model drawing these music notations on large staff paper during music meetings, give each notation its proper name, and later add more symbols as the children are ready or at their request.

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Why and How Composers Compose Music

What motivates a composer? Many factors! For me and probably many others, the motivation for creating a piece of music is an emotional response to an event. It can be a tragic event experienced by many, such as the events of 9/11, or a deeply personal one like the birth of a child.

The process of composing is often seen as a cognitive function, but the motivation more likely involves emotion. Composers build relationships between motivations that are discovered, investigated, and shaped during the composing process.

There are many techniques for writing music. Some composers, including myself, hear part or all of a piece of music in their heads and then try to capture it on paper. I find hearing the music the easy part—writing it down is the challenge. Other composers hear music in a dream and awaken nightly to write.

Some composers improvise on instruments or with their voices and build a piece of music from part or all of their improvisation. Still other composers experience a certain rhythm that they just have to build a work around. Sometimes composers will practice writing music in different styles to challenge themselves musically. Text of a poem or a story can be an initial building block. Still other composers receive commissions to write a work for a specific person or organization.

Once a composer creates the foundation for a piece of music, he or she begins building the rest of the work. This process can be painstakingly slow or come together very quickly. Composers may create at the piano or at the computer. From the foundation onward, the act of composing is much like the activity in the block corner. There is a lot of experimentation, revision, knocking down, starting over, walking away, frustration (at times I've wanted to hit the piano!), and triumph.

As young children continue to experiment, they begin to recognize and name music nomenclature. In children's emergent compositions, strings of music notes going any direction indicates their budding knowledge of music nomenclature. Notes mixed with pictures, letters, and words, and flagged notes with an overabundance of flags are also signs of this knowledge.

Schedule a performance. If they choose, young children can perform their own works as compositions emerge. Some may want a teacher to perform their works. Many times children make this request because they truly want to know what their compositions sound like. Nonmusician teachers may find a willing parent or fellow teacher to help play the new compositions. Making the extra effort to have an expert play the children's compositions is worthwhile because performance conveys a strong message to children that their works are being honored (Upitis 1991).

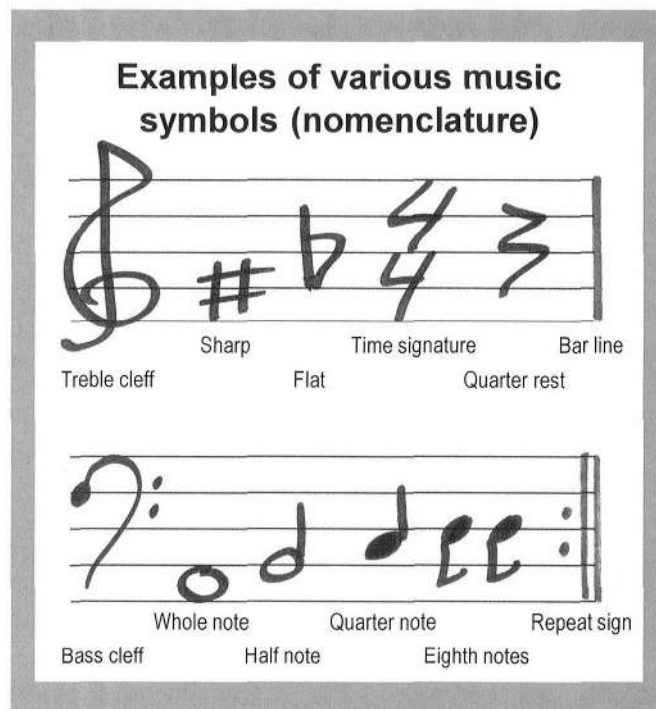
Young children's emergent notational skill and composition development grow and change over time. Children gain new knowledge and insights in their progress through the stages of notational and compositional awareness. Emergent composition can become a staple of the educational experience of young children. Children's compositions will go from being sporadic experimentations with music notation to being real songs if the environment permits (Upitis 1991).

Accommodating the needs of all children

In emergent composition there are many ways to accommodate children with special needs. Both auditory and tactile methods and mechanisms are available for working with children with sight impairments. Music

therapy catalogs provide an excellent resource for exploring these options. A number of early childhood music notation software packages are designed for children. Some allow hookup to a special electronic keyboard. When children press notes on the keyboard, the software records them in standard music notation. Music software varies greatly in cost. Interested teachers will want to seek professional advice or help from local music store staff.

Another adaptation, effective for curious toddlers as well as children with motor control issues, is punching



Music Resources to Use with Children

Picture books

Ah, Music! by Ailiki. 2003. New York: HarperCollins. A children's resource book on the many facets of music, including written music and composers.

Bach, by Ann Rachlin. 1992. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's. The story describes Bach's life as a child. Part of the Famous Children series. Other composers in the series include Brahms, Chopin, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Schumann, and Tchaikovsky.

Ben's Trumpet, by Rachele Isadora. 1979. New York:

Greenwillow. A little boy who pretends to play the trumpet all day meets a real trumpet player.

Charlie Parker Played Be Bop, by Chris Raschka. 1992. New York: Orchard. A book based on jazz improvisation.

Frederic Chopin, by Mike Venezia. 1999. New York: Children's Press. Part of the Getting to Know the World's Greatest Composers series.

I See a Song, by Eric Carte. 1973. New York: Scholastic. A book in pictures that can be used to foster vocal improvisation.

This Is Rhythm, by Ella Jenkins. 1993. Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out. A

book connecting rhythms to everyday life.

Software

MiDisaurus, produced by Town 4 Kids. Provides an animated introduction to music. Suggested for ages 4-12.

Music Ace, produced by Harmonic Vision. Introduces children to music basics. It also has composing activities. Suggested for ages 6 and up.

Super Duper Music Looper, produced by Sonic Foundry. Helps children create their own music. Suggested for ages 6 and up.

out notes. Using a sharpened pencil, children punch notes into staff paper taped to carpeting or a computer mouse pad. The resulting holes can be read as notes and then performed. Other adaptive methods include using a magnetic music staff with magnetic notes, placing (and later eating) O's cereal on staff paper, or working with a readymade music notation felt board. Calling upon the expertise of other practitioners, such as music therapists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists, helps ensure successful experiences for all children.

The value of being an insider

As young children are given freedom to explore and learn to compose, music's door opens and they are allowed in. The mystery of a beautiful language is dispelled and replaced with knowledge. Introductions to improvisation, nomenclature, and composition give young children new tools for making connections and forming opinions based on both preference and knowledge. Children connect many defining elements of music, such as melody, harmony, beat, and rhythm. In the process, they learn to value their budding abilities and their unique senses of self.

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Inside music, a pathway to music literacy is established and honored. For young children, to be literate in any form of language, including music, is to have access to what is possible.

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