

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF MUSICAL PLAY, JULIE WYLIE

**“Since the beginning of time, children have not liked to study. They would much rather play, and if you have their interest at heart you will let them learn while they play, and then eventually, they will find they have mastered child’s play. This is true of any skill, but particularly it is true of music”. Carl Orff**

Musical play is the essence of growth in early childhood. Within many cultures the language, cultural traditions and values are taught orally and through movement and dance. Babies experience the rhythms and intricacies of the songs and dances as they are cocooned on the mother’s back, held in the parents arms, or balanced on gyrating hips. Children learn how to imitate, to create and to play musically through their involvement in the rhythms, melodies and musical form of these cultural songs and dances.

Musical play activities are ones that involve the elements of music: Rhythm, Melody, Dynamics, Form, Texture, Timbre and Harmony. When parents play baby songs and games such as peek-a-boo with their infant, these help promote social, creative and musical competence. Just as a child learns to paint a picture using a sheet of paper and paints or crayons to create a picture, children can learn to use the elements of music creatively in every aspect of their daily world. Musical play involves:

- Listening and looking
- Movement, balance and coordination
- The inherent musicality of speech
- Memory storage and recall
- Humour and anticipation
- Emotional experience and expression
- Being solitary or social
- Being calm or being aroused
- Thinking, planning and reasoning.

(Wylie, Foster-Cohen 2007).

“Play” and “music” appear in all the world’s languages and cultures. Indeed the original meaning of the word “play” clearly appears to contain such musical elements as sound and movement. Bjorkvold, p.46. 1989). Social play allows passive experience to be turned into active mastery of social situations. Musical play is not only to learn actions, but also to practise emotions, such as surprise, anticipation, excitement and climax. Parents alter their play behaviour in accord with infant’s affective signals and their signs of attention or inattention. (Stern.p.146, 1985).

Children’s spontaneous play is often musical. When we play, our brains release dopamine, a chemical that induces elation and excitement and makes it possible for us to easily coordinate our actions. Musical play involves the whole brain. When a baby is born, unlike other organs, the baby’s brain is only partially developed. At birth the baby’s brain has 100 billion neurons. 15% of connections are made but there are still 85% yet to be connected. Musical play can contribute hugely to the development of healthy, learning brains. Each of the following involve different assemblies of brain cells: Pitch and pitch

movement, scale processing, chord processing, beat, rhythmic groupings, tune recognition, tune memory, emotional response. (Wylie, Foster-Cohen, 2007).

During the past three years I have been invited to share my philosophy of Musical Parenting in countries around the world, including Korea, Japan, Singapore, Lithuania, Finland, Estonia and the UK. This philosophy of musical play has always been shaped to a large degree by my work with children and their families. In every country I visited, I started working with course participants or families on the floor as we sat around the strong elastic rainbow ring shaking it in time to the rhythmic babbling of sounds such as Baa, baba baba baa, or da, da, dadada da as the basis for echo songs and musical play. In this way everyone could communicate without the need for words. Changing pitches, tempo, dynamics, dramatic pauses, shouts, whispers, facial expressions and gestures gave impetus to our play, thus adding to the drama of our musical expression. Body percussion and pitch games were played.

Children everywhere took great pride in singing me some of their own action songs especially during our spontaneous musical play. Children's play songs have universal features. I noticed similarities in gestures and movement. Children everywhere love to dance, jump, hop, skip and were captivated by games such as musical statues. Some words sounded similar especially between children's songs in Finland and Estonia. It was important for me to sing a simple greeting song using words from the language of each country. Children everywhere sang and played enjoying the opportunities for spontaneous musical expression.

In Estonia we were in a four-hundred-year old University with a high domed ceiling, wooden floors and superb acoustics. The participants were extremely skilled with body percussion echo games. A large group of parents and teachers and children took turns within the circle providing a rhythmic pattern using hands, feet, hips vocal sounds etc. Their sense of timing and intricate patterning made for an exhilarating musical experience. As we bounced a teddy on a large parachute and made it fly up into the dome of the ceiling, there was much laughter and a wonderful sense of unity.

I sang greeting and farewell songs using simple phrases in the language of each country I visited. Although everyone everywhere showed their delight, the children and parents in Korea were especially playful. When I sang a welcome song using just a few words of Korean, everyone joined in smiling and making me feel that my efforts to incorporate their language were valued. As they sang with me, my simple song developed, gaining a special Korean quality. Judging from their musical responses, music seemed to be functionally interwoven into these families' every day lives.

In Japan, the teachers and parents all joined the children in singing and dancing with lots of bowing and smiling as we finished each new activity. In Estonia, as we played an echo game on the floor, the children aged between 3-6 years quickly changed my echo game to one of their own, taking turns around the rainbow ring to sing or chant a short phrase in their own language for me to echo. Both ascending and descending thirds were widely

used in their sung improvisations. In all countries there was much use of dramatic pauses and actions to reinforce the element of humour of the participants' musical play.

In Lithuania and Estonia their rich music heritage incorporates intricate harmonies and beautiful modal melodies. I was inspired and moved by the complexity and beauty of their songs and chants. I worked with children and their parents in Estonia and they sang and imitated major, minor, modal and blues melodies with ease. I was deeply moved by the sense of history, the architecture, the beauty of the people and their countries and the way that the people of Lithuania and Estonia draw inspiration and strength from their own unique musical cultures, inspiring their children through musical play. Their music, their songs of freedom powerfully convey how they have triumphed over extreme adversity. Their music has created permanent changes in the official cultural policies of a powerful government.

After watching a group of young children march on and perform a complex song and dance under the watchful eye of their teacher, it was my turn to engage with a group of four-year-old children I had never met. Their joy was very evident as we bounced the ring in time to chants and echo games. Two boys went into the middle of the circle and created their own movement activities, with other children quickly following with their own increasingly complex actions. Musical play made it possible for us to make musical connections and to interact together. A teacher told me through an interpreter that their teaching under Russian rule had been very rigid and exacting, the strict discipline giving little opportunity for musical play. After watching and listening to the children as they gained confidence in leading me in our musical play, she hugged me with tears in her eyes. She told me that watching and listening to the children had helped her to see creative possibilities, learning from them, incorporating some of their own ideas, valuing and nurturing their musical imagination.

Musicians in Lithuania wore traditional costume for some of their performances. There were marked similarities between the woven patterns seen in traditional costume of Lithuania and those found in traditional weaving of the Maori. I couldn't help noticing the parallels of weaving and musical harmony. Like Lithuanians, the Maori incorporate wonderful harmony in their singing. The Lithuanian participants there were moved by some of the Maori waiata I shared, especially "*te Aroha*". When they joined in the singing, weaving their own rich harmony, there was a strong sense of oneness. I had come from New Zealand, the other side of the world to be at the conference and we were united in a special way through music.

In every country and with every group, the momentum of the musical play supported us moment by moment. Within the form of the music we were held and knew exactly where we were, because in every phrase there is context implied, by rhythm, dynamics, key and musical form. (Sacks, p.209, 2007). The music affirmed and helped us celebrate our cultural similarities. Through the songs, dances and musical play, the families, teachers and I experienced the diversity, richness and sense of belonging as we played together. Although our countries and languages differ, everyone everywhere is concerned with family, community, environment, our work and our play. As I followed the children's

sounds, gestures, rhythms, pitch and dynamics, our play was empathetic, joyful and full of laughter. Our musical play was powerful because it impacted on our attention, emotion, cognition, behaviour, and our communication. “Musical play is the warp and weft of well being, belonging, contribution, exploration and communication”. (Wylie, Foster-Cohen 2007).

References:

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