



Interview with Susan Young, University of Exeter

Music in the Early Years: A View from the Northern Hemisphere

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CN: In New Zealand we do a lot of music making in early childhood education and for that reason it would be interesting to hear your account of your work and perhaps get some ideas of what's happening in Europe and the UK?

What would be good perhaps would be to go back and look at the three books that I've written. This allows me to map out what has happened over the last fifteen years or so and may give a good picture of what is happening on this side of the world. The first book (*Music in the Early Years*) was written with Jo Glover and was very much about children's musicality and children's musical activity as a form of play. These ideas were built upon general early childhood practice and its foundation of play. There is often, sadly, quite the opposite approach to play in early childhood music I find. What I mean is that often musical activity is dominated by adult led activity – the children all sit in a ring and sing songs together. The notion that children might *play* in musical terms is quite poorly developed and adult led sessions persist as the dominant model. The first book addressed this issue by focusing on young children's spontaneous musical activity.

The next book (*Music with the Under Fours*) in 2003 focused on birth to three year olds. This book reflected a new interest in this age phase current at that time. Babies and very young children were no longer seen as unthinking passive creatures and living in a kind of world of chaos and randomness. It was seen that they are very competent and that adult interaction, the communication between babies their adult carers, was vitally important. Not only that, but this communication is a kind of music. At the moment I am editing the proceedings for the European Early childhood music network conference (Eunet MERYC) and still see that interaction between adults and babies, and the musical qualities of that interaction, is a very strong theme that is coming through.

CN: Is that a strong field as it relates to a co-constructivist picture of learning and instruction?

No, this focus is coming through the work of Daniel Stern and in England Colwyn Trevarthen, who I think is originally from New Zealand and is very influential on UK theory and practice. In France there are other theorists such as Michel Imberty and in North America they draw on the work of Sandra Trehub and Laurel Trainor. The theoretical space is the interactive non-verbal communication between infants and babies and how that influences behaviour in musical interaction and then how that leads to the development of verbal communication.

My other more recent book (*Music 3-5*) focuses on music in the community – particularly diversity in local neighbourhoods and also the influence of digital technology on young children's musical practices. I'm currently carrying out



a study looking at the effect of karaoke equipment in the home on young children's singing activity. In another study I have looked more broadly at the digitally enabled musical practices in the home for young children – so the influence of technologies and diversity are my main themes at the moment. This work also comes through in an intercultural study focusing on long term and recently arrived ethnic minority populations. Multi ethnic populations have always been important to the UK and this is now across Europe. All countries really need to address the issue of children from a global perspective and linking work in the centres to the home.

CN: So does that mean you are looking at what happens in the home and bringing that into the centres?

Yes we are attempting to bring the home musical practices into the children's centres. What usually happens is the centres send pedagogical practice back to the home. This takes the form of 'you sing these songs at home' rather than the centres being interested in what happens among families at home. We learnt from New Zealand in that respect and its bi-culturalism is something of a model here but I think every country has different priorities. We are looking at intercultural competence and practice as we have wide diversity.

CN: This practice of bringing music and learning from the home puts so much responsibility onto the practitioner doesn't it? After all, how can early childhood teachers be skilled musically and in communication to achieve this?

We don't think about the musical practice in isolation. In the UK we now have children's centres that are '*one stop shops*' where all the services such as the home liaison person the language specialist and medical services all work together. We have thought, if it's a one-stop-shop for all types of services for families, it can also be the place where one of the team could be an artist or musician or some kind of creative person. This has given us the opportunity to develop a project between the different professionals and an arts activity. The model has been quite influential on practice elsewhere in the UK.

CN: How did you get funding for this project?

We got funding from the local education authority, the Arts Council and a charity, Paul Hamlyn, that was interested in supporting our research around this model. The Arts Council is interested as artists have to be seen as expanding their roles, working as community artists in the real community. The artist is now seen as someone that has to be very versatile as a practitioner in many different settings.

CN: So we are talking about creative practitioners who come from the 'immediate' community or from a wider range of cultures?

The project that I'm referring to here is being run in Somerset, a rural area in the South West. So the artists in these settings are white indigenous artists that are from the local community.

CN: Although when this project occurs in Bristol or London, would you want to use artists from the Bengali population or West Indian population for those communities?



Yes – but I think the idea of intercultural competence moves on one step further than that. This means we need to develop people not just from that community to work in those centres. After all that is still *isolationist* – what this initiative is saying is we need to be able to work in diverse contexts ourselves just as those who are immigrants to the UK have to! So for example working with Muslim families we had one Muslim worker but we also had three white middle aged women working with us learning about the Muslim culture with the worker. These three women found they had to look closely at themselves and their own identity. The challenge for them was to learn how to work in diverse contexts and remain flexible. We would like to see women and men of, say, Bengali or Somali heritage working in Somerset, so that we are not isolating communities.

CN: This kind of approach doesn't appear to be happening as much in New Zealand?

Of course one has to be careful in developing music even from the indigenous culture. You have to be careful in the kind of music that is introduced so that you do not convey a kind of static, romanticized view of that culture to children. They may want to sing pop tunes, for example, so we need to have a wide repertoire of all kinds of music. Musical multi-identities are the best way of looking at it. If you refer to one cultural tradition in a way that is locked in time, that isn't enough, you need lots of access to lots of different kinds of musical genres within that tradition.

CN: Could you explain your work in *My Place My Music*?

That project has just started. It is a very simple project. The idea grew out of the ISME (International Society of Music Education) commission on Early Childhood music. Several of us who met at the last ISME commission decided to each work with a seven-year-old child. We decided to visit the children at home and have a discussion with them about their everyday music – what they have for music at home, what they do musically. This is the common thread to all the participants in the research. There will only be one or two from each country and the only similarity is that all the children are seven years of age. We're not trying to hone the sample down and ensure any kind of similarity, except that they are seven. In September I have a Spanish student spending six months with me and she will tie all the data together.

This project reflects the expansion of interest with the slightly older children after having been neglected in recent years with the focus on the very young. This study on seven-year-olds puts the spotlight on the older children and evens up the balance of emphasis.

CN: I remember work in the methods such as Kodaly, Dalcroze and Orff being quite popular in the UK in the 1990's. What is your opinion on teaching early years children though these methods?

I know about the methods. I have studied Dalcroze Eurhythmics in Switzerland and taught it, and I've taught Kodaly quite rigorously and studied it in Hungary. They are very carefully worked out, these methods, in terms of pedagogy. The problem is that they tend to prevent information about children's musical development and musical behaviours being aligned to the learning. By that I mean that there is often a lack of empirical evidence to support the pedagogical approaches and so methods can become a bit dogmatic. This appeals of course to some people as there is a comfortable certainty about doing certain things at a certain stage in a certain way and that is reassuring. However as soon as you think you have found the answer



you haven't; if you've stopped having questions you can't answer, you've stopped developing your work.

CN: Can you tell us about your work in the Netherlands and its influence in your work?

Well actually the work in the Netherlands has not been that influential. I have a research student from the Netherlands and I have been there a few times to speak. They tend to look at the UK and think everything goes very well here. When I have spoken there it has been on my work with orchestral musicians.

CN: Why have you been asked to do that?

I often get asked to work with the orchestras in their community programmes as a freelance researcher. All the orchestras in the UK have to include educational work as a condition of their funding. One thing many of them do is have early childhood activities included in their community work: there has been quite a big, national project organised by the Association of British Orchestras (ABO) in early years music. As is often the case, the musicians tend to think that ECE work is easy to do: the music will be simple and the whole thing will be charming, motivating and positive. The reality is of course that it is far more complicated than they'd imagined, and more difficult than most of their other work – at least to do properly and not just superficially.

The trouble is that there is no training for ECE and music. The result is that musicians and artists go in too quickly and learn on the job. We have no prerequisite qualifications for working in music in early childhood education and this is a huge problem especially when standards in all the other areas of early childhood are increasing. The situation in terms of music has not changed. We need to improve training for the musicians and artists, not simply rely on their gaining experience as a way to learn what works! Usually the organisations just let musicians shadow and follow someone around. This training approach has been supported by Youth Music and other community music organisations. It is very much about picking up an activity as opposed to developing a theoretical understanding of children's learning and the arts. As a result we return to the arts becoming adult-centered. The assumption is that the adult needs to know a set of activities that children will join in, as opposed to understanding children's musical behaviours and how they engage with music and how they can be supported in learning musically. The whole switch is a huge one for musicians and it takes people a long time to understand it.

CN: That sounds like very important work but I wonder do you meet any resistance in putting these ideas into practice?

One of the difficulties for practitioners, adults, parents and those interested in learning in general in early childhood is valuing children's own spontaneous musical activity. In art, visual art or outdoor play or playing with bricks, say, they wouldn't dream of constructing a house out of bricks and then expect the children to copy and recreate this. Yet this model operates in musical terms. When children make their own music on their terms it is often not valued. It is thought to be noisy and chaotic and people can't see it as valuable in its own right. When they sing spontaneously, of their own accord - perhaps when they are playing, or just having to sit and wait - children are often told to be quiet!



CN: Another interesting area is one of refining ideas – how do you feel about children refining their ideas so to develop their own music making to the point of a performance of their music?

The lack of opportunity for performance of children's own music reflects a lack of faith that children can do anything on their own musically. Somehow they are seen as so lacking in basic skills that there is little belief that they can do anything of value without a lot of support. The idea still persists that we should praise the children enthusiastically and move on: so removing the opportunity to really stick at it, refine and make a performance of their own ideas.

CN: Is the problem with the kind of education that early years students receive?

It is possibly to do with the teachers' education and their experience of music. The student teachers need the experience of being musically enabled. In my experience students recognize from their own listening the value of music and the satisfaction that can be derived from music and musical listening. This is how I sometimes make a link to areas of practice. I have found student teachers very passionate about certain music they collect, music in their everyday life, and I feel we can make a parallel with their experiences and the curriculum. We can also make parallels with other areas of the curriculum – with understanding about the value of learning through play and child-initiated activity in general practice which can then be transferred back into new understandings of how to do music.

CN: Would you say music education is about getting into a new space to see what lies behind the experience?

Yes, the students will be carrying the baggage of their own musical identity. Exploration of yourself and what has happened to you musically - talking about yourself - that has to be a starting point. Working with the Muslim children and families has taught me that talking, reflecting, listening is the only way to change our way of doing things.

CN: Could you tell us a bit about your work at the University of Exeter?

At Exeter University I work part time and the rest of the time I run a consultancy as researcher in Early Years Arts. This enables me to bring another dimension to my work. At Exeter I am 40% research so the teaching at Exeter is not very much. I teach a general Early Childhood Studies module and the other course I teach is the International Perspectives on Early Childhood. This is where I engage in critical theory and theories linked with the social studies of childhood and bring those back into music education in early childhood. This is important as Early Childhood music education stays too much in its own frames of reference - deriving from developmental psychology, psychology of music, pedagogical theory - and does not engage with wider debates. When you are faced with planning lessons and the day-to-day business of teaching they are hugely relevant, all these issues about contemporary childhood, the experiences of children in daycare; encountering digital technologies; changing patterns of family life – all kinds of issues like that. Early childhood music education has to keep up with these changes. It can't stay in a time warp.

CN: Thank you Susan for a most stimulating interview.

Thanks – it's been fun!



References

Dr. Susan Young's Website

http://education.exeter.ac.uk/staff_details.php?user=sy204

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