

# ETHNOMUSICOLOGY IN EDUCATION

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## **Skills for Children's Liberation: An Applied Sociomusicology for Echologists**

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Children all over the “advanced” world, that is, the industrially and commercially “civilized” world, have been subjected to a massive and increasingly intensive pacification program in recent centuries, a program begun long before TV was invented to complete the job. Only those who submitted to the regimen of reading music, following scores, taking tempos from conductors, following the rules of teachers, etc., etc., could become real, respectable, serious musicians in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. Jazz, blues, country, and pop fostered and mediated by electronic media from the 1920s on inspired a few children to tune in, turn on, drop out, and burn through the mystifications of music-as-object; they became “stars” or “local legends.” But the vast majority of children bought records, radios, or tapes in order to participate vicariously in a musical popular culture that now seems amazingly various (most people in their late teens or early twenties can describe ten or twenty or more styles, stars, or kinds of music that they are “really into”), but which usually involves varieties of fantasizing, of seeking connection to the world via the pseudo-sociability of listening rather than more immediate participation.

Unless they dance, and dance a lot, most consumers of music as children become total or exclusively consumers of music as adults. Probably less than one percent of adults music publicly with instruments in the USA; maybe four or five percent of us sing a little in public, mostly on Sundays (Benzon 2001:280); and weddings aside,

the statistics on dancing with live music are probably becoming equally grim over time. Live music-dance-arts performance is more and more the realm of specialists, who are no longer a very small minority but a tiny percentage.

Is this major loss of musicking skills in the majority of the population the disaster, the crime against humanity, the powerful alienation from nature, from society, from our bodies, from our very own humanity, that I believe it is? Is this loss of musicking in almost all of our lives one of the reasons that we Americans don't vote, or vote for ultrasimplifying nationalist leaders who will give us a feeling of belonging at a terrible cost? Is this one of the reasons why we can't be happy with fewer possessions and elect people who promise only sustainable economics? If we were all very good at being alive and fully expressed would we have to have, own, control, possess, consume so much?

Every newborn infant wants to be possessed by polymeter and polyrhythm as he or she was possessed in the wombdrum. We are born to groove, born to participate fully and deeply and constantly in the life of prime communication by gestures, dandling and dancing, call and response songs, by participation in daily, weekly, and seasonal rituals and practices that satisfy our deepest needs for belonging to our fellow humans and the natural world. It takes ten or twelve years of schooling and thousands of hours of TV viewing to talk us out of the gifts we were given as little children.

The darker side is this: when we don't celebrate ourselves and our connections with interbeing regularly in sweaty music-dance, we tend to project grooviness on to others, usually darker or minority others, and we begin to feel inferior and fearful in relation to those who seem to have more energy, passion, style and grace. This inferiority complex coupled with fears can be fueled by demagogues who, in the worst scenarios, can and do incite a majority to massacre or "cleanse" a minority—for example, Hutu slaughtering Tutsi, Serbs slaughtering Bosnian Muslims, Germans slaughtering Gypsies, Jews, and gays, Turks slaughtering Armenians, etc., etc., and, in less than "final" solutions, China invading Tibet, Russia invading Chechnya, and Americans filling the biggest gulag in the world with disproportionately

large numbers of African-American, Latin-American, and Native-American prisoners.

In sum, there are many reasons why we should try our best to transmit the music-dance-performance skills of diverse cultures to children at the earliest possible ages: to insure that they can express themselves fully throughout the rest of their lives in participatory ways that connect their bodies-minds-souls to the natural world and connect their bodies-minds-souls to diverse sociocultural traditions from their locality, their region, and their wider world. To put it more negatively, aggressively, abstractly, and bluntly, we can use music-dance-performance skills to combat (1) alienation, (2) anthropocentrism and (3) racism (in that order and emphasis: dissolve alienation in deep participation and anthropocentrism will decrease until racism is no longer an issue).

I think we<sup>1</sup> need to hook up with Music Together<sup>2</sup> and similar operations,<sup>3</sup> or join along wherever parents and very young children are musicking together, and help to intensify and broaden (multiculturalize) the skills of everyone (kids, mentors, parents, teachers, teachers' aides) culture by culture, style by style, and list by list. We need skills-checklists of all kinds in our file drawers, in our computers, on clipboards, where we can check off which parents, teachers, mentors, and kids own which skills; which parents, teachers, mentors, and kids incorporate which muses; who have got their hands and feet on and into what:

- dandling songs checklist
- hamboning skills checklist
- patting and rhyming skills checklist
- simple salsa skills checklist
- contradancing skills checklist, etc.

In 1604, by age three, what was little Louis the Thirteenth hamboning on his own body from the more than eleven (eleven!) different drumming styles he was learning: Spanish, English, Walloon, Italian, Swiss, French, Piedmontese, Moorish, Scotch, Italian, Lombard, Turkish, etc.? Maybe we can't figure this out exactly, but the model is there (Crump 1929) and historically there are many dances, musics, whose foundations we can explore and reclaim, pass

on, and improvise upon—as in the contradancing movement. What do little kids in a Havana neighborhood learn and how do they learn it? Ethnomusicologists can distill the process and divide it up into skills lists and establish simple criteria for knowing when a child has gotten contradancing skill X or Y and skills A all the way through Z.

Numerous studies—including the Opies' and Knapps' classics on child cultures (1959; 1976), Bess Lomax Hawes's work (1972/1987), and Kyra Gaunt's recent thesis (1997)—provide a wealth of detail about dandling songs, handclapping games, hamboning, interactive-rhythmic-oral-poetry-processes of child cultures here in the USA and around the world. What can we extract from these works and many others?

(1) Put reminders of how to do each skill in a three ring binder and organize them by general order or levels of difficulty; teach these games, coach them, see them as part of the necessary prerequisites for singing/ dancing/ drumming/ performing/ synchronizing. These games also involve a lot of cognitive learning; for example, when a child exclaims "category is . . ." and inserts a name, color, insect, etc., the challenge is to keep the interactive handclap pattern going as new verbal material is traded back and forth. Encourage small competitions to see which kids can do how many repetitions at what speed without a mistake at age two, three, four—up to the early teens. Because some of these games can work at any age level from age one to one hundred, the possibilities for mentoring are easy and endless: three-year-olds teaching two-year-olds, older siblings teaching younger, elders in old age homes recalling the hand games and dandling songs of childhood and passing them on to whoever will learn them.

(2) Comb TV shows like "Sesame Street" and "Barney" and "Teletubbies," etc., etc., for moves, grooves, songs that children like to imitate that could put them in synch with each other if we trained them in terms of skills-lists.

(3) Polish and refine the techniques of teaching the basics of cultures that Musicians United for Superior Education, Inc. (MUSE) has some experience with (cf. <http://www.musekids.org> for information about what we have done with Afro-Latin, Senegalese, and African-American tradition-building techniques), and add music that represents more cultures (e.g., Celtic, Balkan, Gamelan, Zimbabwe marimba).

(4) Recruit ethnomusicological researchers from around the world and fund them to develop skill-lists and “how to” videos so that we have dozens of traditions to choose from in every school and library.

(5) Find a team of researchers in each locality where intensive and extensive performance skills acquisition is going on and fund them to follow up on three samples of children: (a) those getting the most performance experience; (b) those getting some of this; (c) those getting little or none of this. Interview them at intervals for five to fifteen years. We want to be able to say: “*This* is what happened for children who learned over 400 performance skills in six different traditions/cultures by the age of five. *This* is what happened for children who got over 200 performance skills in three different traditions/cultures by the age of six. *This* is what happened for or to children who got only thirty skills in two traditions/cultures by the age of six. *This* is what happened to children who got less than ten skills in one culture/tradition and who have no visible or reportable satisfactions from singing/dancing/drumming/performing in their lives.” And so forth.

What is really important and researchable about the MUSE mission, MUSE work, MUSE incorporating of skills—i.e., getting more and more inspiration into the muscles as motor habits—is that we can always know immediately, or very, very, quickly, who has what:

- Holding a part. “Can you hold this drum pattern? Can you dance this step in time?” I suppose it’s binary. Yes or No. Everyone can see and hear whether a skill is or isn’t in the muscles, in the unconscious, in the “primary communication” mode of synchrony, in the groove, or it is not.
- Linking up. Can other children link a different part to the part one child is “holding”?
- Happy learning. Are these skilled children happier, more eager to express themselves, more tuned in and turned on to genuine learning of all kinds? How many skills does a child need, on average, to keep from being “shut down” and “dumbed down” by schools? (Illich 1970) Does putting performance skills, synchronizing, and “primary communication” first really provide the foundation for superior and continuing lifetime education?

I think so. Maybe you do too. But I don't have much of a data base or a presentation to make right now that will totally convince a hardeyed, hardeared, hardnosed skeptic. This is precisely why further practice and research is necessary.

If we do intensive and extensive work on skills with the youngest children now, we can go to a child seven years later as a teenager or fifteen years later as an adult and ask, "Can you still do X, or Y, or Z?" and get an affirmative answer. "Do you still do X or Y or Z?" might prompt a disappointing answer. What difference has having these skills made in your life up till now? Do you still sing, drum, dance, dramatize, poeticize? Which traditions do you use as a basis for expression, improvisation? Have you been silenced or have you stopped playing? Why? What differences did becoming a highly skilled performer as a child make in the rest of your life?

Unless we have different kinds of *intensive* (the youngest children learning to sing/ dance/ drum/ dramatize at a very high and happy-making level of expertise) and *extensive* (being able to perform in at least three or four different traditions by age six or seven at the latest) programs going for some young children in diverse localities we will not be able to ask these questions in the future. I think we need to be able to tell people, especially parents, a few years from now that intensive and extensive multicultural training in performance traditions can make a major difference, perhaps a decisive difference, in the lives of their children. Bored/not bored. Attention deficated/not attention deficated. Drugged/not drugged. Depressed/happy. Alive spiritually. Alive intellectually. Alive physically. Deadened in one or two ways out of three. Or dead.

The little research I have done for a book called *Born to Groove* has made it abundantly clear that children are born wanting to get in synch during the first weeks out of the womb—suckling is certainly a groove!—and actively seek many more groove experiences at five and six months old. Children want to sing before they learn to speak, want to dance before they learn to walk, want to play much peekaboo very early on, want to sing and dance and dramatize all at the same time, want to be dandled a lot, want to be hooked up, in synch, in the groove, interacting more and more as they become more mobile at two and frolic more at three. By age four every child could be composing

many songs each day, choreographing ballets, directing psychodramas, facilitating drum circles on the weekends.

Because the vast and growing majority of children do not get enough of all this in the first months and years of life, just about everything that people are doing at Music Together sessions with three- and four-year-olds is probably remedial. Surely everything that MUSE Inc. has done the past twelve years in schools and after school and in community centers has been remedial. Remedial is good! Better than sitting in front of a TV five hours a day. Better to get the skills a year or two late or five to ten years late than never to learn them at all. But best of all, because the very structure or "hardwiring" of the brain is in process and therefore at risk during the first months and years of life, is meeting the need for skills, grooves, interactions, and interlocking synchronies at the earliest possible moments in each child's life and continuing to address that groove need as it gets stronger and stronger.

The "grooving brain," the multilingual/ multicultural/ multi-performance-tradition brain is shaped in the last three months of gestation and from day one out of the multimetered and polyrhythmed wombdrum and into the world. The brain/ nervous system/ body is shaped autocatalytically (the more it gets of X or Y the more it wants of X or Y), is "self organizing" and seeks "dynamic patterns" (Kelso 1995)—and so we are losing the few clues we might have as to how groovy kids can get! How many more grooving experiences would a child want at eight months old if she got all she wanted at six months? How groovy *can* kids get? How many drumming patterns can two-year-olds learn if they have wanted and gotten a lot of "drum-dance-dandling" between age nine months and eighteen months? How much "common glad impulse" (Hudson 1895) can they generate with other similarly experienced children at twenty months along? What does full "triune brain integration"—of lizard-bird "motion" brain, paleomammalian "limbic" or "emotion" brain, and supposedly "rational" neomammalian brain (MacLean 1990)—look like, sound like, feel like at age four? What happens to a society when many or most or almost all its members are active musicians, poets, dancers, dramatists playing out layered or nested identities<sup>4</sup> "self organized" during early childhood? We don't know—although we are beginning to know and

tally the costs of a society in which many or most of its members are passive consumers rather than active creators. In the Western civilized world we haven't had a society of many active creators since ancient Athens. That's the last time "arts" were all of early childhood education in a partially literate society. What would have happened in Athens, Corinth, Thebes, Miletus, etc., if wars, slavery, misogyny, had not destroyed the city states? We don't know. What would have happened in the Yoruba city states if they had gained partial literacy but hadn't warred on each other for 200 years sending slaves to the new world? We don't know. What would have happened in Africa or with indigenous peoples all over the world if imperialism and the global economy had not destroyed or distorted so many traditions and tradition bearers over the past few centuries, but especially over the past few decades? We don't know.

It is time we searched for answers, started generating this kind of knowledge. Because if we don't get this knowledge soon and apply it ever more effectively around the world we are all going to wind up deadened, or simply dead, from excess dumbing down, excess alienation and boredom, excess denial, excess cognition and ambition from the owning-class elite who have forgotten how to feel, how to connect to the natural world, how to express creatively, how to work and play for a long term human future.

It is tempting at this point to scan from crisis to crisis, looking at the USA and around the world at the results of a globalizing economy that rapidly depletes the world of species and cultural diversity. But you, dear reader, are receiving news of the ecocatastrophe each day and probably don't need reminding that we are in the midst of it. It is not impending, it has arrived. The wars for scarce oil, scarce water, scarce air, scarce resources, scarce living space, scarce carrying capacity, are upon us. And global climate change, ozone gaps, topsoil losses, pollution degradations, all will take generations to repair once we stop plundering and start collaborating on solving these problems.

What can echologists do? Echology aspires to be the cultural equivalent of ecology, the biological science of ecosystems. Just as we study how species form patterns of collaboration or symbiosis and patterns of competition in order to maintain a sustainable ecology, humans have to study ourselves as we reinvent the old co-evolutionary



cultural systems in a new echological form that is even more adapted, balanced, "echolocated" relative to a depleted environment in recovery. The idea that all sound is echo, reverberating, reflected sound coming back to us from nature, from reality, from context, should suggest to us that from now on we need to think of all our sounding/ musicking as locating/ grounding/ blending/ balancing our "dance" with the natural processes and life forces that surround us until "ecology" and "echology" become the same word/concept.

What can echologists/ecologists do? Help create ever more self-reliant and more easily sustainable local economies as we create ever more complex, subtle and ecstatic local cultures! "Ecstasy" has become the name of a drug, and one often used at "raves" of all night dancing to mediated music, but for millennia in all meridians humans celebrated to exhaustion without drugs (and sometimes with natural hallucinogens too, but these aren't required to get very high indeed); the human capacity for natural ecstasy via belief systems and drumming-dancing-ritualizing is unlimited (Rouget 1985). The challenge before applied ethnomusicologists and applied sociomusicologists is nothing less than restoring day to day and night to night and moment to moment happiness. The challenge is to restore the possibility, at least, of ecstatic experience for every child, every adult, every member of the local community.

The challenge of preserving life in all its diversity, of creating a livable world, of building sustainable economics, of supporting ecstatic local cultures, is in many ways an esthetic challenge. We echologists have to persuade people that big, powerful, shiny things like gas guzzling Suburban Utility Vehicles and 4x4s as well as costly-to-maintain "trophy" weekend homes are ugly, false, and bad. Who but echologists will persuade people that beauty, truth, the common good are found not in status symbols but in butterfly wings, in bird songs, in musicking that blends our sensibilities with natural interbeing, in homegrown foods and crafts, in eternal delights that don't cost a penny in electricity or depend on high technology? Currently the quests for higher status and the big or "bolshoi beautiful" are thoroughly intertwined—the big orchestra, the big stage, the big ticket price, the big car, the big home, the big screen TV, the big beat, the big anything and everything is still in demand. "Small is beautiful," "energy is eternal delight," "less is more," "here and now," "Buddhist economics," "an

economics of peace”: these are the slogans of and passwords to the sustainable future (Schumacher, Berry, and Witt 2001) that still need audible, visible, experiential, esthetically pleasing proof. We must supply that proof. Calling the suppliers “echologists” is a way of reminding ourselves that we have learned something from research, books, and recordings that can be used to reclaim and revitalize old traditions (“applied ethnomusicology”) and/or invent new traditions (“applied sociomusicology”), but name games must quickly give way to giving pleasing gifts that circulate.

I believe it is through the primary communication of songs, dances, drumming, playing, joking, poeticizing, recreating ourselves one by one and in small grooving, ritualizing groups that we can give our best selves to each other, exchange goods, circulate truths and beauties, and change the prevailing esthetic from Gaia-destroying bigness and power-over to Gaia-celebrating smallness and pleasure from within.

### Notes

1. By “we” I mean musician friends here in Lakeville, Connecticut; the MUSE Incorporated team in Buffalo, New York; Becky Liebman and South Sound Drum and Dance in Olympia, Washington; the Zumix team in Boston; Tracy Vernon and friends in the Springfield, Massachusetts area—anyone, anywhere, who wants to “music,” to enact, to perform a profound transformation of early childhood and education.

2. Music Together can be reached at Center for Music and Young Children, 66 Witherspoon Street, Princeton, N.J. 08542 (phone 1-800-728-2692). I don’t know their work firsthand yet, but the newsletters and program on paper seem excellent.

3. Kindermusik, Inc., Musikgarden, and other for-profit corporations are developing programs for preschool children in diverse situations, but I have never investigated what it is they do or how well they do it.

4. See Blau, Keil, Keil, and Feld 2002 for discussions of “layered identity” and how normal it once was in many parts of the world for children to grow up learning three or four languages and diverse music-dance styles.

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