

Creating Meaningful Music Listening Experiences with Active Music Making

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Abstract

Of all musical activities, music listening is the most ubiquitous and essential to all other musical endeavors. In practice, however, music listening is often over-looked as a passive and prescribed activity. This article has a three-fold purpose: (1) to describe music listening as a thoughtful, creative, and purposeful activity; (2) to explore the connections among the four active music-making approaches in terms of music listening; and (3) to suggest ways teachers can incorporate meaningful and active music listening activities into their teaching practice. Topics in the first section include foundations of music listening as an activity and what research in related literature offers. The second section contains an exploration of links among the four active music-making pedagogies and their relationship to music listening as instruction, with an emphasis on Orff-Schulwerk and its connections to other active music-making pedagogies. Finally, the third section presents two practical applications of music listening instruction paired with active music-making tasks. Because the National Cultural Policy now links with the Australian Curriculum, implications for the Australian music and general classroom educators concludes this article.

Teachers encourage and enable students to respond to music in many ways – some prescribed and predictable, others creative and interpretive. In keeping with the Orff approach, this article addresses the latter set of responses to music and, in particular, music listening. This article also addresses other active music-making pedagogies and ways they overlap with regard to incorporating music listening activities and teaching music listening skills. The purpose of this article is three-fold: first to describe music listening as a thoughtful, creative, and purposeful activity; second, to explore the connections among the four active music-making approaches in terms of music listening; and third to suggest ways teachers can incorporate meaningful and active music listening activities into their teaching practice.

Music Listening

People throughout the world listen to music. In fact, music itself is one of the universal human pursuits in all known cultures, past and present (Etzkorn, 1989). As such, it plays powerful and meaningful roles in our lives (VanderArk & Ely, 1991). How is music meaningful? In a host of ways, as people the world over find meaning in music as it, “defines, represents, symbolizes, expresses, constructs, mobilizes, incites, controls, transforms, unites...” their lives (Wade, 2004, p. 15). In particular, listening to music is fundamental to all other musical activities because music is an auditory experience (Kerchner, 2009; Reimer, 2003). Perhaps, those who “just listen” are the most important audience members because they represent most of the world’s musically involved people (Wade, 2004). In other words, they constitute the largest audience for music educators on the planet. From jazz aficionados, to amateur trumpeters, to community choir singers, this group buys the bulk of concert tickets, downloads the most music files, and demonstrates the greatest use of listening skills through their passionate and lifelong involvement with music. In many pedagogical practices, however, teaching music listening skills is often not as prominent as performance or other demonstrable activities (Haack, 1992).

Although overlooked in many pedagogical traditions as a form of music-making, music listening is the one way in which all listeners (trained or untrained) can participate in musical experiences and create their own interpretations. Often listener responses focus on the traditional musical elements (such as melody, harmony, timbre, and form), while other responses highlight the emotional or affective experiences. Still other responses express extra-musical connections, as associated with their musical experience (Johnson, 2003). In any event, students are naturally inclined to create meaning and construct concepts from their experiences (Hunt, 1982). In music listening, for example, students grapple with unfamiliar sounds of a gamelan ensemble, struggle with the complexities of Romantic symphony orchestra, or reflect on the simplicity of Gregorian chant.

Even though their proclivity to understand these experiences is natural, how they make sense of these and other music listening is learned (Meyers, 1986).

Music listening is a difficult activity to assess – in part because it is a covert activity, requiring an overt action for true assessment (Boyle & Radocy, 1987). In addition, music listening demands a particular type of listening, often termed critical, perceptive, or active listening. In other words, instead of passively or simply hearing sound, both auditory attention and cognitive processing are required from the listener (Gromko & Poorman, 1998). Hearing disabilities notwithstanding, all students can hear music but they do not necessarily listen to it attentively or creatively. Part of our role as music teachers is to develop students' music listening skills so that they listen in more educated and engaged ways (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2013).

In their review of literature, Todd and Mishra (2013) reported that passive music listening was not as effective as listening with some kinesthetic or verbal component. Having students move to music (Fung & Gromko, 2001) or listen with a visual aide such as a listening map (Dunn, 2008) resulted in more effective instruction in terms of greater retention and comprehension. Although these are important outcomes, it is equally (or perhaps more) important to study what creative interpretations students might make during the listening experience. As Johnson (2003) reported, when listeners describe unfamiliar music, they naturally use extra-musical associations and affective responses in addition to the more common musical terminology. In this study, listeners grouped unfamiliar musical examples creatively, using any system or method they devised. Creative listening in this fashion results in original interpretations and may yield more meaningful listening experiences.

Connections with Active Music-Making Approaches

Active music-making and active listening naturally fit together. A survey of the existing literature on this topic suggests that active involvement of students during music listening results in more effective listening instruction (Todd & Mishra, 2013). As described by the Alliance for Active Music Making (Bond, n.d.), each of the four active music-making pedagogies (those developed by Carl Orff, Zoltan Kodály, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, and

Edwin Gordon) has a primary focus on high student engagement through active involvement in music-making activities (Moore, n.d). Those musical behaviors include singing, playing, improvising, and...yes...listening.



Figure 1. Students moving in response to music listening.

All the active music-making approaches promote direct experiences with various musical elements (e.g. melody, rhythm, timbre, texture, and form). The Orff approach in particular is directly related to active involvement through: its basis in speech play, its use of the special barred percussion instruments designed for children (known as Orff instruments), and its emphasis on improvisation that permeates the whole process. Students sing and play melody; they clap, play, and move to rhythm; they explore texture and timbre by playing interwoven contrapuntal lines on instruments, and experience other elements in a variety of carefully designed activities. While those hallmarks distinguish the Schulwerk from Music Learning Theory, and the pedagogies of Dalcroze and Kodály, some characteristics are shared. For example, other significant features of the Orff approach draw on aspects of other approaches: the vital importance of movement in music education which owes its origins to the teachings of Dalcroze; Orff's own historically-based elemental style found both in the Schulwerk volumes and in his major works; and the use of indigenous folk material as the basic repertoire for speech and song, an essential element of the Kodály method. In particular, the Orff approach has these characteristics: it is participatory, it is a means instead of an end, and it encourages personal as well as musical development (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987).

Orff-Schulwerk is more accurately an *approach* to music education, rather than a *method* of music education (Choksy,

Abramson, Gillespie, Woods, & York, 2001). That approach centers on elemental music and emphasizes creativity on the part of both teachers and students. While the Orff approach does not follow a prescribed format, there are some distinct priorities in lesson planning. Four common steps found in many Orff lessons are: preparation, synthesis, integration, and transfer. The preparation provides students with the necessary skills before they can synthesize or make sense of their experiences in structured and improvised tasks. Repetition of these skills and combination with other experiences allows for integration and eventual transfer of that understanding to other performance media or material.

The use of speech rhythms to teach rhythm patterns is frequently utilized in other active music-making approaches. For example, Gordon's approach in his Music Learning Theory begins with the fundamental aural/oral learning stage. In much the same way children learn language in their mother tongue, listening before playing is an approach also championed by Suzuki, Kodály, and Orff. From this level, students progress to synthesis, and verbal and symbolic association in discrimination learning (Runfola & Taggart, 2005). One application of this approach is the use of fundamental aural/oral teaching techniques in an instrumental setting (Liperote, 2006). This is accomplished by emphasizing students' aural skills through rich, listening experiences before introducing notation. As children develop their capacity for aural learning, they imitate after focusing intently on the listening experience and elements of music.

Curricular Applications

Teaching across the curriculum is one way of increasing the relevance of music to students, teachers, parents, and administrators. In fact, the Orff approach and hands-on learning knows no disciplinary bounds. Instead, the Orff approach encourages the following process:

Observe→Imitate→Experiment→Create (Choksy et al., 2001). Using movement, speech, singing, body percussion, and instrumental play, music teachers can successfully apply this process to teach a host of musical elements. The activities can include a range of higher-order thinking skills such as: exploring, analyzing, classifying, notating, improvising, and creating. In other disciplines, general classroom teachers may use the same process for different learning outcomes. For example, a teacher might

demonstrate or introduce material and ask the students to observe carefully, listening or watching for a particular element or aspect. The teacher would then activate the listening by having the students learn actions or responses by rote. To engage the students' imagination, the teacher would allow the students to experiment and explore as they addressed an open-ended question or task. Finally, the teacher would conclude this activity with sharing the products or solutions the students created. By integrating active music-making experiences across the curriculum, music educators can accomplish two important goals: to underscore the importance of hands-on music making, and to highlight the shared themes and processes expressed in both music and other disciplines. Two examples illustrated here are children's literature and critical thinking.



Figure 2. Students learning notation through active music-making.

Children's Literature and Active Music-Making

Using children's literature offers a way to make cross-curricular connections by exploring themes of the text from different disciplinary lenses or views. For example, the series of *Little House on the Prairie* (1935/1971) books by Laura Ingalls Wilder is regarded as a classic of American children's literature. The stories are about Wilder's pioneer family in nineteenth century America. Embedded in this literature are 127 songs and instrumental pieces that enhance the stories Wilder conveys. By using specific songs and instrumental pieces as inspiration, Johnson (2011a) developed a set of integrated lesson plans using active music-making strategies. Those lessons address musical elements and skills along with corresponding learning goals in other subjects. For example, to work with the popular American folk song, "Oh! Susanna," this lesson plan begins with the corresponding excerpt from *Little House in the Big Woods* (Wilder, 1932/1953).

When Laura and Mary had said their prayers and were tucked snugly under the trundle bed's covers, Pa was sitting in the firelight with the fiddle. Ma had blown out the lamp because she did not need its light. On the other side of the hearth she was swaying gently in her rocking chair and her knitting needles flashed in and out above the sock she was knitting. The long winter evenings of fire-light and music had come again. Pa's fiddle wailed while Pa was singing: "Oh, Susi-an-na, don't you cry for me, I'm going to Cal-i-for-ni-a, The gold dust for to see." (pp. 236 - 237)

Example lesson plan: Grades 3 – 5

Introduce this piece by reading passages from *Little House on the Prairie* literature and describing and/or showing period images from the California gold rush.

Listen to the recording multiple times, drawing students' attention to musical elements.

Move to show the beat and rhythm of this song, using non-locomotor and/or locomotor patterns – either improvised or choreographed.

Sing either the traditional or original verse/chorus of this song.

Play simplified melodic or harmonic parts on instruments.

Create original lyrics and write new verses for (or versions of) this song. With the teacher's guidance, themes should include travel, United States history, and adventure.

Share original verses and/or movements.

Connect the song with historical and literary themes by embedding this song into a scene or narrative from the *Little House on the Prairie* literature.

Reporting pilot study data, Johnson (2011a) found that seven year-old students responded well to these lessons, engaging in a variety of active music-making tasks. Specifically, they learned line and circle dances, played percussion instruments with recorded music, and sang "Oh Susanna" and other songs. They also answered this question, "Would you like to live in a log cabin?" A representative positive answer was:

"Yes, I would like to live in a log cabin for on a few days. I like the way they live. I don't live that way. I live at an

end of a street with woods on the side. I would want to camp out there with Laura and Mary and Jack, but I don't like the way they dress."

While a negative answer was: "I would not because I want to buy my food and the drinks, and there are wolves howling outside, and the store would be so so far away, and you have to make your food, and no because it will be dangerous because you are in the woods. You have to make your toys."



Figure 3. Students playing Orff-style, barred instruments.

These student examples offer readers a greater understanding of the breadth possible with cross-curricular music listening (Johnson & Haefeli, 2012). In addition, the reflective thinking involved with this last question encourages the students to listen intently and assume roles from the literature, singing these songs, dancing these dances, and living in the big woods. As Wilder indicated, the songs included in her books best capture the spirit of those times. By engaging in these kinds of extensions, teachers can offer students critical challenges (Bailin, 1998) to encourage critical thinking. Another cross-curricular approach, critical thinking instruction, includes a set of higher-order thinking skills which draw on resources of relevant knowledge, concepts, and experiences.

Instruction Combining Critical Thinking and Active Music-Making

As noted earlier in this article, it is important to activate students' music listening through movement, singing, instrumental playing, or other tasks. Pairing music listening with prescribed activities, however, is not enough to engage students' thinking (Johnson, 2011b). Instruction incorporating critical thinking, which is an important 21st-century learning skill (Trilling & Fadel, 2009), is necessary to

In this project, Johnson (2011b) capitalized on the importance of asking open-ended questions, a strategy central to higher-order thinking (Redfield & Rousseau, 1981). This technique is also key to the Orff approach (Choksy et al., 2001). As Orff himself asserted, "...the imagination must be stimulated; and opportunities for emotional development, which contains experience of the ability to feel, and the power to control the expression of that feeling, must also be provided" (p. 154, Orff, 1964/2011). This type of question is designed to encourage improvisation and student-discovery, rather than teacher-directed answers. The constant exchange of ideas between students and the teacher enhances and encourages student engagement as a characteristic of active music-making. The teacher directs the overall learning experience, carefully planning the lesson to allow students to experience musical concepts first. That way, students can better understand and contextualize explanations provided later about the musical concepts. As the legendary trumpeter Miles Davis once said, "I'll play it first, and tell you what it is later" (1963).



Figure 5. Students improvising on non-pitched percussion instruments.

Conclusion

In scholarly, interconnected, and practical ways, this discussion of music listening pedagogy focused on ways music educators promote students' musical responses to music listening through active music-making and meaningful interpretations of musical experiences. Because a musician of any age is a listener, analyst, performer, and composer, classroom music education for children must include all these areas (Choksy et al., 2001). To address these goals effectively, music instruction needs to be engaging and focused on active music-making. In other words, children need to experience listening, analyzing, performing, and composing through active participation in authentic musical situations in their music classrooms. Listening skills are an essential component to music education with broad applications to

performance, composition, arranging, improvisation, movement, and other classroom activities. Unfortunately, listening skills are often taught in schools with a didactic approach, without creativity or meaningful interactions. In fact, with a sample of British children, Boal-Palheiros and Hargreaves (2001) found that because of the way music was taught, it was among the most unpopular secondary subjects in school. Students were most often asked to identify musical elements and instruments instead of expressing how they felt or describing images associated with their listening experience. These researchers reported, "Enjoyment and emotion are neglected in school music listening, yet they are among the most important functions of music for children, and therefore deserve more attention at school" (p. 116).

Teachers and parents know that children enjoy listening to music. As outlined in this article, if teachers take a more reflective and student-centered approach to music listening instead of the didactic methods music teachers often use to teach listening skills at the knowledge level (Sheldon & DeNardo, 2005), they can facilitate listeners' personal and more meaningful responses to the music itself. More broadly, teachers can even stimulate critical and higher-order thinking skills such as inquiry and analysis (Bamberger, 2000) that may transfer to other disciplines. Such a learner-centered and active music-making approach to music listening and music education fits naturally with the Orff approach, offering many opportunities for the listener to create his or her own interpretations of the musical experience.

In conclusion, this article may also provide a timely opportunity for Australian teachers to make curricular connections, because the National Cultural Policy links with the Australian Curriculum and provides several potentially promising pathways for integrated instruction. As shown in Figure 2, a Wordle of the national Australian music curriculum (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2011), the music curriculum emphasizes an understanding of others cultures, pursuit of the learning process, and knowledge of inclusive musical practices. As the entrée to all other musical experiences, music listening occupies an essential place in the curriculum along with performing, understanding, and responding to musical experiences.



Figure 6. National Australian Music Curriculum

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