

# MUSICWORKS



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## **CREATIVE MUSIC EDUCATION**

Promoting teaching

And learning excellence

Through the Orff approach

# How Orff is your Schulwerk?

DANIEL JOHNSON

*The focus of this article is the authenticity of Orff-Schulwerk practices, particularly in American music teaching. Since its adoption in American schools nearly 50 years ago, Orff Schulwerk has enjoyed an enthusiastic following. With the assistance of the national American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA), teachers and children alike have learned by making music creatively in thousands of schools across the country. While this approach is most obviously associated with the barred instruments (xylophone, metalophone, and glockenspiel), its true identity transcends these instruments and other media. Instead, the actual nature of the Schulwerk is creativity as embodied by the Orff Process. Beginning with observation and imitation, this process encourages exploration and improvisation before creating in sound and movement. Only when needed to record a musical creation does the process include notation as a final and less important step. Since its growth in popularity, Schulwerk teachers have access to abundant published and recorded resources. They include arrangements, lesson plans, songbooks, and curriculum guides. The tendency of some American music teachers to use these pre-packaged materials as fixed musical experiences to produce well-rehearsed performances is actually antithetical to the Schulwerk. Instead, the Schulwerk celebrates organically created performances and thrives on improvisation. From its historical foundations and later developments, this article explores questions of authenticity in Orff-Schulwerk practices. Concluding with implications for music teachers and music teacher educators, the critical discussion question is: How Orff is your Schulwerk?*

As with any particular approach or methodology, practitioners benefit from understanding the original or authentic form before modifying or adapting it. Such is the case with Orff Schulwerk. At its inception in the 1920's, the Schulwerk was an outgrowth of Carl Orff's work with Dorothee Gunther at the Guntherschule in Munich, Germany. It was in this setting that they began to combine movement and speech along with singing and instrumental music to explore elemental music. Those beginnings laid the groundwork for the Orff process that defined and continues to characterize creativity as the heart of the Schulwerk.

Being a creative approach to movement and music education, Orff Schulwerk centers on exploration and improvisation. Those fundamental practices provided the essential basis during its development at the experimental Güntherschule school. As music teachers in the United States, Canada, and other countries began to adapt Orff's original material in the 1960's, they substituted their own folksongs and rhymes. Establishing itself as one of the most widely-practiced and professionally relevant approaches to music education (Hoffer, 1981), Orff Schulwerk has emerged as one of the standard active music-making pedagogies. Currently, tens of thousands of educators worldwide subscribe to this well-established yet innovative pedagogy for effective music and instruction (Frego & Abril, 2003; Johnson & Rack, 2004). During

that expansion and wider adoption, however, some educators have shifted their emphasis from creativity to other priorities, inspiring the question: How Orff is your Schulwerk?

## **American Adaptations of Orff Schulwerk**

Beginning in the 1960's, American music teachers and teacher-educators began to adapt and adopt the Schulwerk in music education curricula. As interest and momentum grew, proponents of Orff-based instruction established the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) in 1968. That year, the *Orff Echo* first appeared as the organization's professional journal to offer members on-going explorations of the Schulwerk. The following year, annual professional development conferences began with the goals of learning, sharing, and celebrating Orff-based music and movement education (Frazee, 2013). An increasing number of teachers throughout the United States soon explored Orff Schulwerk as a practical pedagogy for music education. By the end of the 1970's, an American edition of the original five volumes of *Musik für Kinder* appeared in translation (Regner, 1977). Since then, dozens of resource books offer teachers a wealth of material based on authentic, American sources. After nearly fifty years, Orff Schulwerk is now one of the two leading active music-making approaches in the United States. Together with the Kodály Philosophy, teachers use the Orff approach more frequently than any other pedagogy in teaching general music (Frego & Abril, 2003).

### The Orff Philosophy

To ensure their interpretation and practice of the Schulwerk is really Orff-based, teachers need to appreciate the philosophical and corresponding pedagogical practices of Orff Schulwerk before developing lessons and designing assessment measures.

Philosophically, Orff Schulwerk is based on three characteristics: interdisciplinary creativity, elemental music, and humanism. As a form of interdisciplinary aesthetic education (Frazee, 1977) that combines three art forms: music, movement, and speech. Termed “Musica Poetica” by Carl Orff (Kugler, 2001), this interdisciplinary approach gives rise to a multitude of interpretive activities. Reaching beyond easily assessed skills or knowledge, the combined art forms celebrate the creative nexus of music, movement, and speech. Taking his cue from educational theorists and developmental psychology, Orff conceptualized the Schulwerk as incorporating music, speech, and movement in a unified whole.

A second characteristic of Orff Schulwerk is its focus on elemental music. By concentrating on fundamental elements of music, Orff conceptualized his approach as preceding traditional music instruction. By making music with the body (i.e. in movement and body percussion), using speech (e.g. the rhythmic patterns in spoken words), singing folk songs, and playing specialized classroom instruments (e.g. xylophones, glockenspiels, and metallophones), the Orff approach emphasizes the fundamental elements of music and movement. This pedagogy initially avoids studying established vocal or instrumental repertoire, in favor of organically created arrangement and interpretations of folk songs. As a consequence, the Schulwerk de-emphasizes music notation while highlighting active music-making.

A third important but less obvious feature of the Schulwerk is its humanizing effect. By sharing, exploring, discovering, and creating in sound and movement, the Schulwerk promotes a sense of community that often results in a profoundly humanizing effect (Orff, 1963/1977). Beyond imparting knowledge and skills, Orff-Schulwerk activities foster this experience by creating music and movement in a socially mediated and interdependent context (Johnson, 2006). The resulting learning includes critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and self-confidence as well as the more obvious musical knowledge and skills (Wang, 2013a)

### Creativity and Assessment in Orff Schulwerk

Creativity is one of the most important, if not the most important core value of Orff Schulwerk. Orff-based pedagogy therefore routinely emphasizes the teaching and learning processes over products or performances. Instead of training students to perform tightly prescribed, set pieces, teachers using this approach should demonstrate and foster musical creativity. In other words, the process of improvising, of engaging by actively making music, and of creating collaborative pieces defines the Orff process and distinguishes it from other approaches (Walter, 1969/1977). Similarly, in twenty-first century education, creativity plays an important role in preparing students to develop transdisciplinary skills (P21, n.d.). Not only in music education, but also in other fields, creativity has wide-ranging importance as a broadly applicable learning outcome (Webster, 2002). While this is a fundamental feature of the Schulwerk and an effective opportunity for advocacy, it presents a challenge for teachers in terms of assessment.

Although teachers and administrators often overlook creativity when assessing student work (Richardson & Saffle, 1983), creativity remains central to the Orff process. Since then, music education scholars and pedagogues have conducted successful research in this area. In general, however accurately and authentically assessing musical creativity, and particularly improvisation in the Schulwerk, remains an underdeveloped area of scholarship with implications for teachers’ daily practice (Wang, 2013b). Perhaps because of the assessment challenges, Orff-based teachers may de-emphasize creativity as a learning outcome in favor of more easily tested knowledge and skills.

Assessment is a critical element to successful and thoughtful music teaching. Both formative and summative assessments inform teachers on student progress as they reflect on instructional practice (Shuler, 1996). In the United States, this is particularly true with an increased emphasis on student and teacher evaluations. Assessment of Orff-based teaching is limited by:

- (a) a lack of clearly defined research studies focused on assessing student learning;
- (b) a de-emphasis of evaluation in the Orff process itself; and

(c) inherent challenges related to the assessment of creativity with respect to student learning.

With a lack of research literature using a clear definition of Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy (Wang, 2013b), one issue may be defining the Orff approach itself. In addition, improvisation has received little attention from researchers – a topic that is directly linked with creativity in music, one of the hallmarks of the Schulwerk. Fundamentally, in-service and pre-service teachers could benefit from a clear and authentic definition of the Orff process, as distinct from an eclectic approach or Orff-based instruction blended with other approaches. Such clarity would let them determine how Orff their Schulwerk teaching practice is.

#### Process vs. Product

The process-driven and creatively focused approach of the Schulwerk presents a process-product dilemma. One helpful frame of reference is Webster's (2002) definition of creativity in music as, "the engagement of the mind in the active, structured process of thinking in sound for the purpose of producing some product that is new for the creator" (p. 26). This process-oriented understanding offers a more operational definition of creative thinking than abstract creativity. As such, it fits well with the philosophical foundations of the Schulwerk and allows for both processes and products in the teaching and learning of music. While the iconic barred percussion instruments are the most obvious indicators of Orff-based teaching, they are not necessary to successful interpretation of the Schulwerk. What is necessary, however, is a focus on the Orff process.

#### The Orff Process

The Orff process consists of four stages: imitation, exploration, improvisation, and creation (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987). A fifth stage, notation, follows creation when needed to remember or compose an improvisation. Because it is not prescriptive, this process is not a methodology and allows for flexibility among instructional activities. Essentially, the process describes ways the teacher guides

student learning in a creative and student-centered manner.

In 2005, O'Hehir collected data from 186 certified American music teacher-educators about statements that would solidify a shared understanding of the Orff process, both in theory and in practice. She reported that the teacher-educators agreed on 94 statements outlining a comprehensive operational definition of Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy. This was an important step in identifying how the Orff process could look, with implications to promote authentic Orff-Schulwerk practices. At this time, more work needs to be done to defining the Orff process more clearly in both theory and in practice (Wang, 2013b).

One more descriptive resource for framing the Orff process is the graphic below from the AOSA Teacher Education Curriculum Standards. This illustrates the experiential, conceptual, and pedagogical elements of the Orff approach as used in AOSA endorsed professional development or levels courses. The particular teacher-educator standards apply to three areas: basic or pedagogy, movement, and recorder.



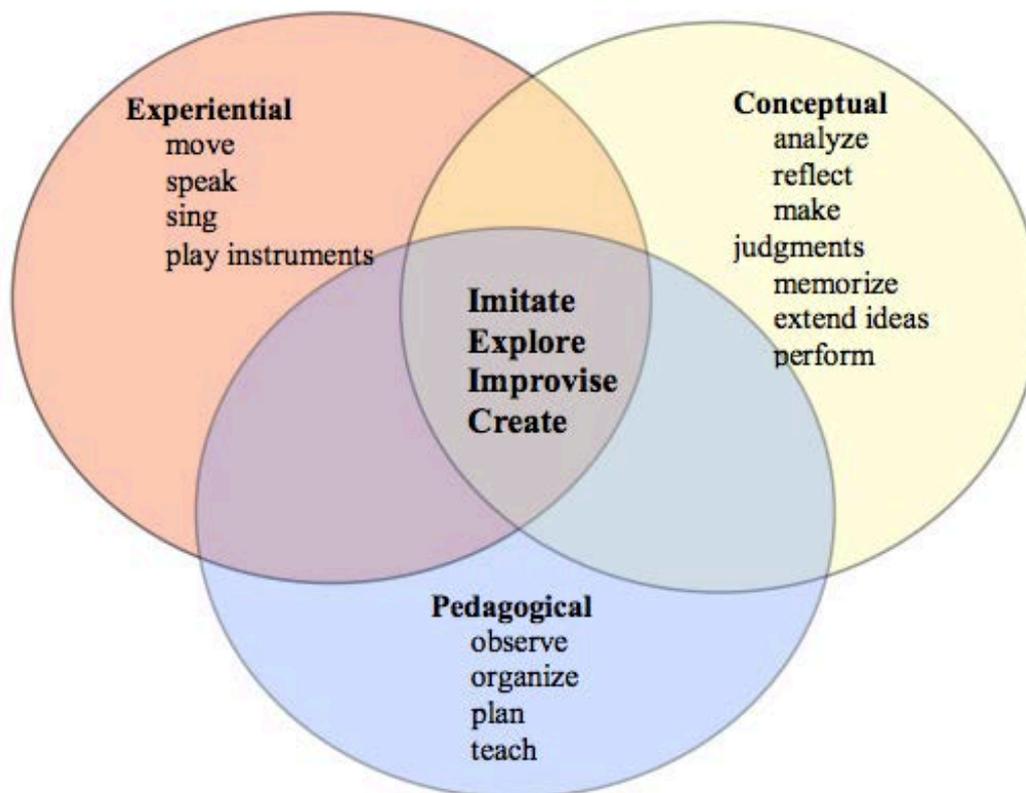
*Orff Schulwerk Association of South Australia*

[www.osasa.net](http://www.osasa.net)

*We are a professional organisation of classroom teachers who use a creative teaching approach for music & movement who aim to:*

- Promote, support, encourage and inspire classroom music teachers through practical workshops and conferences
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- Provide a forum for Association members to exchange ideas
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(AOSA, 2012, p. 6)

In addition to being non-prescriptive, the Orff process is also organic. As outlined by the AOSA teacher-education, curriculum standards and learning outcomes focus on elemental music-making and develop ontogenetically. By mirroring the development of the cognitive develop of the child, musical competencies and understandings grow in sophistication according to a natural, organic progression. This lineage is one that Carl Orff himself endorsed as part of the philosophical and theoretical framework of the Orff process (Orff, 1963).

Although based on certain fundamentals, it unfolds dynamically and therefore resists formalization. As Kugler (2011) put it, “there is a tense relationship between the dynamic reality of the concept and its fixation through publication” (p. 18). As a function of its organic nature, Schulwerk-based instruction does not fit prescriptive step-by-step lesson plans. Instead, Orff-Schulwerk teacher-educators offer pedagogical models and kernels of ideas to provide access to creativity. Widely-used examples of these publications include: *Elementaria* (Keetman, 1974), *Orff-*

*Schulwerk: Applications for the Classroom* (Warner, 1991), and *Discovering Orff* (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987). In a more recent example, Frazee’s *Artful – Playful – Mindful* (2012) provides an Orff-based curriculum to guide teachers toward facilitating thoughtful, musical activities.

Goodkin’s *Play, Sing & Dance: An Introduction to Orff-Schulwerk* (2002) offers a similar authentic interpretation of the Schulwerk, in the form of practical suggestions and teacher-oriented curriculum guides.

As creativity (often demonstrated as improvisation) is an underlying feature of the Schulwerk, scholars have found the task of researching the Orff process quite challenging, from both pedagogical and assessment perspectives. One exception is Beegle’s 2001 thesis, *An Examination of Orff-trained general music teachers’ use of improvisation with elementary school children*. From observational and interview data, she found that teachers agreed on the importance and definition of improvisation. They also agreed on the importance of musical intentions (highlighting the Orff process) instead of

musical performance (resulting in a polished performance). They disagreed, however, about how to assess and how to structure improvisational activities (Janovjak et al., 1996).

#### **National Standards for Music Education**

While practical considerations such as assessment and performance expectations may diminish teachers' ability to practice the Schulwerk authentically, recent developments with the National Standards for Music Education in the United States present new opportunities. The National Association for Music Education revised those standards in 2014. Instead of the more procedural and prescriptive standards from two decades earlier, the current standards use these four broad artistic processes: Creating, Performing / Presenting / Producing, Responding, and Connecting (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, 2016). Developed in cooperation with the corresponding organizations for other art forms, the revised standards are common across art forms: Dance, Media Arts, Theatre, Visual Arts, as well as Music. As a result, these standards are more consistent with the Orff approach and reinforce twenty-first century skills including: creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking (P21, n.d.). From the national level to actual lesson plans, pedagogy narrows to provide teachers with more guidance and clarity for student learning (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014). Both instructional and operational curricula offer opportunities for music teachers to apply the Schulwerk in creative and authentic ways to satisfy both music-specific and transdisciplinary learning outcomes.

#### **Conclusion**

Orff Schulwerk is far more than the iconic barred instruments. Although most often associated with these instruments, the Orff approach is a far-reaching and highly creative pedagogy that can provide musical, cognitive, and personal development when delivered authentically. Some teacher-educators even claim they could teach without instruments or equipment, relying instead on speech, body percussion, and improvisation.

While the instruments are the most obvious indicators of an orientation toward Orff Schulwerk, they are not necessary for a teacher focused on the Orff process. Instead, the instruments help the teacher facilitate creativity. By focusing on the student experience during the process, the teacher can

incorporate authentic music-making activities as formative and summative assessments. Such active musical experiences provide opportunities for teachers to document student engagement, personal growth, and musical understanding.

Music teachers face a range of challenges, including financial needs, logistical obstacles, and scheduling conflicts. Addressing these considerations is no easy task, but experienced music educators develop classroom management strategies and practical solutions to address most common issues. Even so, Orff-based teachers sometimes lose focus of the Orff process and goal of creativity. As a result, assessment may devolve to the level of group performance measures and student attitude.

Similarly, prepared performances at annual concerts and other public regular events are often inconsistent with the Orff process. They are, however, real expectations for many music teaching positions. Skillful and creative Orff teachers can develop high-quality performances of student-generated arrangements, thereby demonstrating both musical achievement and personal growth (Johnson, 2006). In these and other ways that honor and promote the Orff process, music teachers can demonstrate how Orff their Schulwerk really is.

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