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FOSTERING MUSICAL CREATIVITY IN CHILDREN

Review by Sylvia Nguik-Yin Chong



INTRODUCTION

To a large extent, everything a child does musically derives from his or her creative exploration and imagination. There are two different bases in the study of children's musical creativity – philosophical or psychological speculation and practical application. This article will report on philosophical/psychological and practical research in the UK and USA which investigates musical creativity in children. The different stages of creative musical development in children will also be discussed and ways in which teachers can help foster musical creativity in schools.

Philosophical Speculation

One of the most important philosophical writings on creativity as it relates to music education comes from Bennett Reimer (1989). Reimer stresses the distinction between *knowing music* and *being knowledgeable about music*. *Knowing music* is evidenced by active engagement in creative activity: composing, performing and/or improvising, analysing through deep and active listening. *Being knowledgeable about music* is demonstrated by talking or writing about the art. Reimer believes that *knowing music* is the ultimate aim of music teaching and learning and that leads straight

to the heart of musical creativity. He suggests four ways to foster children's musical creativity.

- 1) use the most expressive music possible in learning situations
- 2) engage students in the creative act itself, including composition, performance and listening
- 3) stress the elements of music and their interrelationship
- 4) focus on musical behaviours that heighten the perception of the artistic qualities of the sound rather than extra-musical objects or techniques.

Psychological Speculation

From a psychological viewpoint, Reimer emphasises the importance of a stream of musical consciousness and the need for spontaneous musical production at all levels of education. Drawing an analogy with language, he argues for a two-channel approach to the creative process. The individual who makes a musical statement must first initiate it, develop it with certain aims in mind and conclude it. Two channels must be employed, so that the creator can develop ideas and maintain a sense of location and direction, while at the same time take the ideas produced and execute them either on a chosen instrument or in writing. As these (musical) statements are presented in sequence, higher-level concepts are developed. The emphasis here is on the ability to think while playing, to retain and/or develop ideas as they emerge from the stream of consciousness.

Reimer expands his view to include improvisation as a powerful tool to unlock the musical imagination and for developing musical creativity in children. He maintains

that from a very young age children can engage in improvisation without the need of extensive technical training. Each musical idea suggests its own potential for variation and development, which is realised through the course of work, depending on the skill and sensitivity of the improviser.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Margaret Galloway (1982)

Perhaps some of the most interesting work in this area has come from studies that have looked at the product and processes of creative expression in music (largely in children) and have attempted to analyse the musical characteristics. An important example from the practical literature comes from a Canadian music educator, Margaret Galloway (Galloway, 1982). In her study, eleven year old children were engaged in the composition and performance of a short opera based on the story Peter Pan. Galloway writes that the children came to her classes knowing that they would be involved in one of four activities:

1. composing music and writing it down;
2. improvising music alone or in a group;
3. reading music to play or sing;
4. learning about music;

The creation and performance of a complete opera over a period of time became a natural outcome of the week to week activities of the class. One important aspect of Galloway's account of her technique involves record keeping. Each child was responsible for maintaining an up to date file card with the following three headings;

- *what I know about theory;*

- *music I can play;*
- *my musical activities this year;*

This, together with a portfolio of composed pieces and tapes of improvised works helped her and the children better understand the development of their musical creation.

Swanwick and Tillman (1989)

An interesting exploratory research study, conducted by Swanwick and Tillman (1989) involved British children between the ages of three and nine in either compositional, or improvisational tasks with informal instruments. The authors recorded the results and studied the musical characteristics. The primary aim was to provide a sense of how the mind represents sound at various stages in development and how the music educator might benefit from this knowledge.

They found that up to the age of five or six, children’s music creative growth is somewhat idiosyncratic, with no predictable pattern. It is unclear from the data if this is because of motor coordination problems in the production of sounds or if it is a true representation of inner hearing. After this age, both rhythmic and melodic structures seem to be more predictable. Again, after five, the melodic and tonal characteristics become more pronounced. There is a gradual feeling for cadence structures evidenced in the music between six and nine, with a growing awareness of tonal centre within melodies. It seems clear that as children imitate the songs in their environment, their own music is influenced accordingly. What is especially interesting about Swanwick and Tillman’s research report, however, is the inclusion of a speculative theory of musical development for creative thinking, based in part on their research and other work (re: figure 1).

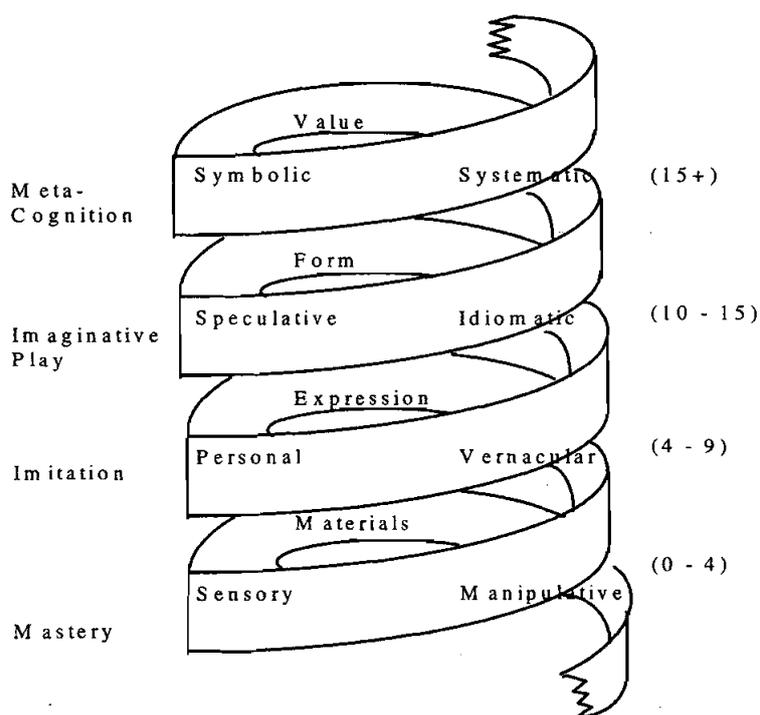


Figure 1 : Musical Development for Creative Thinking. Adapted from Swanwick & Tillman, “Towards a model of development of children’s musical creativity.” *Canadian Music Educator*, 30 (2) p.170

The four loops of the spiral represent increasing age levels of the child. The *first level (mastery)* represents the level of exploring and discovery while the *top level (meta-cognition)* represents the level most closely tied to adult creativity.

The authors speculate about the musical distinctions between each level, basing this on their study of improvisation and compositions of 48 children. Though their theory has yet to be tested extensively, the findings help provide models of the growth of musical creativity during pre-school as well as the elementary years.

One very interesting aspect of the model is the inner movement within each loop. This inner movement (left to right) is described as a tendency in each stage to shift from the personal, individualised, egocentric and experimental to more schematised, social, conventional, derivative and less original. In other words, the authors find that as children develop in their musical understanding and awareness, there is a pendulum-like movement that swings between qualities of invention and convention. Children's thinking swings in a similar way to a pendulum, between convergent and divergent thinking with creativity closely related to the latter.

Many of the questions teachers pose tap convergent thinking, which result in single, correct answers. When asked to name things such as signs, symbols, composers

or pieces of music, for example, children are thinking convergently.

At the heart of creative thinking is divergent thinking. Open-ended questions, like "*how many different sounds can a violin make*" or "*how many ways can you interpret this set of rhythms?*" will stimulate a variety of answers, and require students to look at a content area from a variety of viewpoints and to participate in imaginative ways to answer the question.

Qualities of divergent thinking in music include:

- musical extensiveness (how many ideas are generated);
- flexibility (the ease of shifting within parameters such as high/low or loud/soft);
- originality (how unique the musical ideas are).

CONCLUSION

This development of musical creativity, both conceptual and practical, is generally accepted to be the result of the interaction of environment, with musical thought and individual intellectual and personality traits. Fostering young children's creativity throughout all phases of their musical lives depends to a large extent on the positive attitude of the teacher, who needs to be willing to share music with them, as a vital and important part of life.

IMPLICATIONS

1. *Activities in the music classroom must include measures of both divergent and convergent thinking.*

To create, a child needs a basic vocabulary of musical experiences and skills, just as he needs a vocabulary of words and events to express ideas and feelings in language. Children can gradually grow in their ability to develop and expand their musical ideas.

For example with a song about falling leaves, a child can create arm, head and body movements to express the meaning of the songs about falling leaves; and at the same time the child is aware of the meter and tempo of the song to guide the creative movement. The child thinks and develops a repertoire of responsive movements and inner control (through awareness of the tempo and meter) to enact these movements.

2. *Musical creativity should be fostered in stages through developmentally appropriate activities.*

Musical content of improvisation and compositions of children differ with age. Children undergo stages in mental/creative development, progressing from unconscious growth and absorption to a period when *the knowledge of unconscious* brought to a conscious level. From the spiral model developed by Swanwick and Tillman's research report, developmentally appropriate activities towards encouraging musical creativity can be summarised as follows:

Age (years)	Swanwick & Tillman's model	Teacher Action
0 - 4	Mastery of materials and range of sounds through sensing and manipulating.	Provide age-appropriate instruments to explore & discover possibilities for manipulating sounds.
5 - 9	Imitation of both personal and vernacular ideas occurs with greater expressive quality.	Encourage growth of ideas and craftsmanship. Build musical concepts and awareness of many conventions
10 - 15	Imaginative play but using more references to popular music idioms. Concern for form and structure.	Keep expanding the repertoire of conventions for structuring music. Encourage self-expression.

3. *Use improvisation to develop musical creativity.*

Improvisation at the initial level allows children to explore and discover sounds. At a higher level, it involves metacognition. Opportunities to improvise should occur throughout children's development. It should be part of every music lesson, in movement, singing and instrumental activities, for example:

"How can you move in your space?"

"Tell me about this picture with a song."

"Choose an instrument to play with this poem/song."

SOURCES

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