

CHILDREN SINGING IN DENMARK

By Erik Lyhne

*I have a story-ear and a singing-ear
Songs get a shell, when they grow old
And then they come through the hole into my ear
I have a hole in my ear, because I have a princess-earring
There the songs float around in their shells
It's a little messy
I can feel when the shells break,
And then old songs become new songs.
My ear sings them for me
-And then I can sing them myself
Carla 4 years old*



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A Child Knows a Hundred Languages

A child knows of a hundred languages
But is deprived ninety-nine of them
School and culture
Separate the mind from the body
They force you to think without your body
And to act without your head
Play and work,
Reality and imagination,
Science and fantasy,
The inner universe and the outer
Are made into opposites.

Loris Malaguzzi

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Children singing in Denmark

It can be said and sung that simple, and it's Carla 4 years old with the princess-earring, that initiates her father in the secret of songwriting.

If you have a repertoire of 'old songs with shells', then you at the same time have a richness and a stock off words and notes. If you break the shells you can make new songs from the contents. It's easy to understand, and undoubtedly Carlas father understand, 'cause he has listened and absorbed her new 'songpoem'.

Fortunately he's not alone. Gradually many grown-ups are open minded and sensitive to children's own songs, and many understand the value they have as mediators of children's thoughts and feelings.

"Children singing in Denmark" is the title of two new books, two cd's and a video, that in many ways contain new knowledge about the musicality of children and of their ways of learning. The project puts an ear to the ground on children and their own songs, during the period around the millennium. It documents that music plays an important part in children's language and communication forms from the very beginning of their life. It is a language that can continue to last, if it thrives in a environment, where the adults notice it, play around with it and develop it, but also in environments where the adults allow the children space for their music; without any interference. There are 52 examples of children's own music. The examples are of course "coloured" by the cultural background that Danish children are under the influence of, but the way in which the children play with sound and tone, is seen trough out the entire world. Thus, one can derive some general conclusions through these examples

After having worked with children and music for many years, especially concerning children's musical development, I felt the urge to collect songs made by children, to show that there exist a strong culture, in which children are able to create for them selves. A culture filled with adults who, luckily, give the children space and support them in their work with, the containing of, and the developing of their musical abilities. We've always known that children's culture is strong and alive, but for the first time in Denmark, these new publications show just how strong and nuanced children's musical expressions are and on how high a level children are developing.

We started with encouraging children and adults throughout Denmark to send us songs made by children and sound examples of small children's musical engagements.

We would have been happy if we had had fifty replies. But! Reality exceeded our biggest expectations when we realized that we had received over six hundred examples on songs coming from all over Denmark.

From these we have selected fiftyfour songs, which are presented in varies ways in the two books, on the two cd's and on the video.

This tells of a great musical activity, creativity and of a great attention amongst the adults with whom the children spend their time. It's living prove of the splendid variety of possibilities and potential that lives in the music culture of children.

How do children sing

Children sing from their very birth. They sing before they can speak and an important part of learning the language is this vocal, musical and physical im- and expressions. But can you call it a song, when it comes from a three-month-old baby? That, we won't be the judges of, but it is certainly an expression of play with sound elements, when a small child explores tones. It can be testing the limits of vocal peeks and valleys and it can be playing with "blue notes" to shape and create lingual sounds. In can be the tasting of the physical feeling that sound creates. To sense the sound, sense the changes of the physical feeling in the change of pitch and to feel how the physical vibrations change at the resonance of high and low pitches.

It can also be the child and the adult playing with sound together. It is in these call/response situations that the very foundation of the child acquiring the lingual tone, tune or dialect of the parents is laid. It is through this form of communication, that the musical traditions you have, are passed on. If the child experience is being surrounded by music and a play with tones, this is something that will stick with the child and it will keep being a way of expressing yourself that will develop throughout the childhood. If the child never experiences answers to the music it makes, this part of the child's expressive means will wither away and die.

Ex. 1 Child 3 month (barn) and his mother (voksen) – listen to examples at www.lyren.dk

The musical notation consists of two lines on a single treble clef staff. The first line shows a child's vocal line starting with a 'gaa' note, followed by a dashed line indicating a response from the mother. The second line shows the mother's response, followed by another dashed line for the child's response. Labels 'barn' and 'voksen' are placed above and below the staff to indicate the speaker. A 'gaa' note is also present at the end of the second line.

In this example a mother communicates with her child – 3 month old. It happens every day for parents, but written in musical notation you can analyse the notes in the communication. After the mothers first “answer” (ends near the note A through D back to A again), it’s obviously that the child and the mother’s tones are crossing each other, and the child imitates the grownups notes rather precisely. We don’t see that kind of communication as a coincidence, but as an inspiration and imitation for both the grown-up and the child. This game with sound and antiphony is in our opinion a very important game when it comes to keeping and developing the musicality of children. It’s important that the grown-up is not always taking the leading position and sings well-known songs, but ‘plays’ with the child’s expression and find mutual inspiration in playing ‘soundgames’.

Ex. 2 Child 10 month – listen to examples at www.lyren.dk



In ex. 2 a boy at the age of 10 month plays with glissandos declining. A sort of relaxing drone before the child falls asleep. It’s a definite melody where every little motif has approximately the same ending tone. You could call it the first ear training. It is our experience that games with sound are rooted in both the physical perception of vibration and pitch and the auditory perception of sound.

Breathing makes a natural ending of the periodically tone- sequence, where the deepest note is the ending note in every sequence. Together with the breathing it provides the background for the next phrase.



Ex. 3 Child 2½ year – listen to examples at www.lyren.dk

N ja aps ka ba ja la sa ma la ka sa ma ka sa ma
 ma le - ge sa la ka sa la ka sa ma ka ma sa la
 ka ma sa lå og ma je ka ja ma ja ka ge suk sa ma ja
 ka ge suk ja ba ja. Da en lil le gyn ge stol gyng gyng
 gang gung gyng gang ging gung ga ja ma gyng gang gyng gang gyng
 gang gyng gang gyng gang gul ske gu ga ang gø gang gø da a ja
 sa me je me je la ku ja a ja ma ke ja sa ma ka ma
 ja la sa le je ka ma sa va ma ja kas ma ja ja
 la ka sa ma ka mu se ka ma sam - men er ka ma sa
 ka me sa å ma ja ma sja ma sa hed - der den - ne lil - le kat

A girl, aged 2½ year, sings the song “Rockin’ Chair” a spontaneous song lasting more than 9 minutes; an imaginative spontaneous song as an example of children making long connected song – sequences.

In the song, lasting more than 9 minutes, she plays with a lot of different vowel and consonant compositions.

She sings many different melody phrases where the main theme is “Se den lille katekilling” (a well known Danish song for children). The theme returns in variations time and again.

Playing with linguistic sounds sometimes rules the melody and reverse. Breathing is often adapted to the structure of the melody.

The child sings partly from an inner universe, where the lyrics are formed from pictures of experience, concepts and friends, and partly from an outer universe, where what happens right now becomes a part of the song. For instance her mother comes by, and immediately the girl sings about her.

There are several platforms used throughout the song: For one thing she circles around different melodic structures, which narrows down to “Se den lille kattekilling”. She becomes aware of that when she mentions the word ‘cat’. For another thing she plays with words with the vowel ‘a’ as general sound - e.g. ‘rap’, ‘gang’, ‘hua’, and ‘moa’.

You often see children singing while they are doing other things. For example when they’re drawing, reading books, sitting on the potty, or when they are sitting in a shopping trolley in the supermarket and sing about the things they see around them.

Children sing about things they are preoccupied with. It is ‘here and now songs, which cannot be reproduced. If you ask the child to repeat the song you cannot be sure that he will and can sing it again because the focus has changed. You can’t even be sure that the child is conscious about that he was singing and if he tries again, it’s often a new song with a new content, where elements from the previous song appears.

Children’s spontaneous songs are heard all over the world. Some times they last a few seconds, and some times they continue for a long time like in ‘Rockin’ Chair’.



ved vi hva'. Nu ved vi hva'. Nu ved vi hva'. Nu ved vi hva'.
 Nu ved vi hva'. Nu ved vi hva'. Flot-te blom-ster i -
 gen. Flot-te blom - ster i - gen. Flot-te blom - ster i - gen,
 Hve - r dag. Flot - te blom - ster hv... Flot - te blom - ster. Flot - te
 blom - ster i - gen. Flot - te blom - ster i - gen. Flot - te blom - ster i - gen. Flot - te
 blom - ster. Flot - te blom - ster. Flot - te blom - ster. Flot - te blom - ster.

In the song “Flotte blomster” a girl, aged 3½, sings an imaginative spontaneous song, while she’s dressing. She sings about the pretty flowers on her blouse.

She sings in a fixed form repeating “flotte blomster”. You can hear, that her power of concentration falls when dressing becomes too difficult. The song is interrupted when she gets her head stuck in the blouse.

The main-theme of the song is the maintained playing around with the sounds ‘fl’= flotte and ‘bl’ = blomster. She also sings about how she’s looking forward to start in kindergarten.

She plays around with different sounds and intensity in her voice, and phrasing and accent is a main part of the way she repeats the simple note- and language themes.

Analysing the notes you find that the value of the notes double: In the first 4 staves she sings in quavers as basic rhythm, then passes over to crotchets and end with minims. You could call it a kind of augmentation. The child uses these techniques and builds a kind of climax at the time when she puts on her blouse.

At the end of the course you distinctly hear how her singing is freer, effortless and extrovert, when she puts on the rest of her clothes. (The experience of the song is stronger, when you watch the video) The amplitude of the song is almost 1½ octave.

How does such an intuitive mastering of musical language develop – that is the play with augmentation – and how is the connection to theory of composition as a subject at universities? - We wonder.

Maybe over centuries a theory of composition has developed from, even small, children’s inherent expressions?

You discover something similar when you analyse the rhythms of children hopping and jumping: ‘Haltehop’, ‘slæbegalop’, ‘galophop’, ‘halve gadedrengehopp’ og ‘gadedrengehopp’. The rhythms in ‘gadedrengehopp’ are similar to the swing rhythm heard in jazz music. ‘Gadedrengehoppet’ has

existed at all times all over the world. So you could ask the question: What came first? The child or jazz music?

We believe, that there is a connection between the musical culture and the musical tradition in our society and the spontaneous musicality displayed among children. In “Children singing in Denmark” we have opened a series of themes, and we hope others will work on, both on the practical and theoretical level.

Many of the songs, sent to us, was performed by two or more children. In these songs it’s easy to hear that they have practiced. Not once, but several times. Their shared sense of rhythm and melody is often synchronous. They practice the songs listening to each other and make it swing, and they are able to sing the songs in unison or in harmony, - and they sing with great conviction even if the songs are stuffed with difficult syncopé’s. The children are not aware of the difficulties, - they just do it!

Other songs come from institutions and schools and it clearly appears that music has high priority. Here is space for the creative musical abilities of the children, and many teachers use a musically/aesthetically approach to education.

From experiments to music

What will children find difficult and do you have to sing in a high or low pitch when you sing with them? Childrens abilities to perform syncopes have often been debated. Some claims that children cannot sing syncopé’s before the age of 7. We claim, that an important premise for singing syncopes is that children hear and become acquainted with them. If children, while growing up, hear syncopé’s, it will be a part of their way of expressing themselves. We have examples on video and tape where small children use and play around with syncopé’s and other advanced rhythms. Many adults are inclined to underestimate the abilities of children. If the adult’s opinion of children’s abilities is very narrow and if they use the motto: “They can’t do it” children will probably live up to the expectations. If you on the other hand use the motto: “Anything is possible until opposite is proven”, the children more often will break the limits. The children are not aware of the difficulties, - they just do it!

A common discussed subject is the pitch to use when singing with children. If you examine the pitch of children’s spontaneous singing, you will find that there are considerable fluctuations. Some children sing very low-pitched with a dark sound, while others sing high-pitched with a very light sound. Small children are often more high-pitched than older children but they have one thing in common: They all experiment with both low and high notes, and they play around exploring the possibilities of their voice.

How do you maintain these possibilities? Any experiment demands abilities and children are able to experiment inside the limits of the matters they know or obtain knowledge of. That is, the larger the specter of approaches children has and get, the more means of expressions they will get possession of.

If your childhood is marked by situations where impressions rarely cause personal expression, and mechanical correct reproduction has high priority, your inborn creating abilities will be limited. Even the finest musician is only able to improvise and create new stuff out of known elements, but the elements of inspiration can rise from unpredictable sources. A foghorn on the harbor of Singapore, the sound of a smashed dish, the constant rhythm of the windscreen wiper on a rainy day, steps in fallen leaves, the cry of eagles in the mountains – anything can be a source of inspiration.

Place, time, temperature, feeling and context – all elements are of significance and all elements influence each other and the possibilities of (musical) expression, but the premise is the possibility of expression.

Any expression is unique and should not be compared with anything else but itself and nobody has, till this day, a patent of what is right.

“You have to walk in another mans moccasins at least 5 miles to speak of his road “ an old Indian saying goes, and it could be exactly this respect of the individual, which is the foundation of real understanding of, that the ability to give each other opportunity to dare and be able to make use of our inborn creative powers.

The teacher, the inspirator, the spectator must put himself in the creators place and judge from this fixed place. On the other hand the creator must descend from his pedestal as an ‘artist’ (That is, if we have made creation lofty) and look at his work in the light of the spectator, the listener. The mutual premises are the foundation of the judgements, which we in our part of the world find so important in connection with aesthetic creation.

“Say or write what you mean! Could be changed to: “ sing, play, dance, paint, or mime what you mean!”

The lively teacher or lecturer always involves more aspects than the spoken word.

You could seize on the educational debate – How do children learn and how soon can you start a formal learning.

We claim that both teachers and nursery teachers should give the children space to use music as a mean of communication. At school it could apply in any subject. We hope that this project shows that children naturally learn from birth and that learning to a considerable extent is dependent on the persons that surround the child.

Like small children’s linguistic development is connected with musical expression, learning of other academic subjects can be stimulated and developed when you involve aesthetic modes of expression.

Our experience tells us, that you have to use as many modes of expression as possible if you want to involve all the children.

Practicing using many ‘ languages’ is on the other hand the best inspiration for our children. – Children don’t do what you say, but what you do!

How to create environments, where children create their own songs?

The premises for children to get started with any creative activity are that the environment applies the opportunities. E.g. that the necessary materials are provided and interested grown-ups are giving positive backup.

The charm of novelty will often do from the start, but if the grown-ups in the environment do not appreciate the activity by talking about it or doing it themselves, the activity will normally cease. There is no being together, because the environment don’t ascribe to the activity as valuable.

If a child has a Lego product with predetermined shape – e.g. a spacestation, where every brick has its own fixed place and the environment are proposing that it only can be used this way, the creative process dies and becomes pure reproduction.

It’s the same with songs: If we only value “real songs” and don’t encourage and take part in the childrens songwriting, their abilities will never develop beyond rhyming, jingles and paraphrasing well known songs.

The same way you naturally ask children to draw an experience, you can encourage them to make a song. The more specific we express, what we want out, the easier the children realize which means of expression they have got.

If a small child has learned that songwriting is as natural as drawing, dancing, baking or anything else, this mode of expression can be kept and developed.

All children develop the skills valued in their environment, and if they hear music at home, in the leisure center or in school their attentive and reproductive skills are improved.

If the children move in an environment where it's natural to make songs and play them to each other, as a way of being together, and where every song is valued, the children will develop their abilities and skills and make greater demands on their own songs – because they in the process experience



new approaches, new means and new techniques according to age and readiness.

Pictures are composed of lines, curves and dots added colours with an infinity of possibilities. The same way a song consists of a limited number of notes, which can be coloured with moods, dynamics, speed and intensity also with an infinity of possibilities. It is by doing it yourself, that these possibilities become interesting and develop, but the premise is that the environment are attentive and provide space and opportunity and displays inclination to experiment.

Basically it's all about getting started. Many will probably claim that it's easier said than done, - but in fact it's easy. Just encourage the children to write a song and possibly give them proposals of the content. and if they are in the mood, they'll do it.

An institution was well under way of doing a musical

performance and wanted the children to write their own songs. The grown-ups had a lot of trouble, not knowing how to cope with the situation, since none of them had tried writing songs of their own. They did not know what to do. We talked to the grown-ups in the staff-room. While we trying out solutions, two girls entered the room to ask for something. We asked them if they could write a song. The girls wanted to know what it should be about, and we suggested that it should be about princesses. Ten minutes later the girls came back with a finished song with 3 verses and melody of their own. The staff members were speechless. In their hurry they did not involve the children in the process.

If we clearly express what modes of expression we want, the children get a chance to try them out and develop them.

Children use the modes of expression they find in the environments.

Children singing in Denmark – keep on singing!

“I think many people are still like the mother I met on the bus the other day. She had a boy, who was about three years old and he sat by the window. He was very interested in the colors of the cars passing by and he was quietly singing about them. He had made his own melody and the lyrics went: “and there comes a red car” and “there goes black car” as the next car passed. And so it went on until the mother nudged him and said: “be quiet now.... sing a *real* song instead” And that was the end of the music!”

This experience can be read about in the foreword to “**Children singing in Denmark**”, written by Jytte Rahbek Schmidt. She has been working actively with children, music and children’s musical development since the 1940’ies. Amongst other things, she was a part of the group that started Aarhus Friskole in the beginning of the 1950’ies.

The project “children singing in Denmark” has multiple purposes:

- o The importance of focusing on bringing children’s own creative culture into the light. This can be done by documenting that this culture exists and by showing examples of what children can do. Very often we experience children who are singing and imagining right in front of adults, who do not even notice it - or perhaps - do not consider it a musical display. In the Reggio Emilia region, one of the leading educators and ideologist, Malaguzzi, said that children have a hundred languages – but we take away the ninety-nine. Danish composer Carl Nielsen says something similarly in his book *Min fynske barndom* (My funish childhood). One of our purposes is to strengthen children’s own culture and to give examples on how you, in your work with children, can strengthen and conserve this culture and these languages.
- o The importance of showing examples of children’s own cultural production; to show how you can use this productivity in the work with children – wherever this work might take place. We can show how a simple song or a simple exclamation can be the starting point for making a common musical activity with children of all ages.
- o The importance of leading the way from children’s own expressions to examples of a musical teaching process. We mean to deliver examples of a teaching process equal to children’s situation.

We think that you can give children a possibility to learn what modern society demands of you and at the same time allow time and space for them to develop those cultural qualities, that influence their early childhood. These are not opposites but rather a more whole approach to teaching processes with children.

In this connection we hope that the project “children singing in Denmark” can help sharpening the interest, so that research resources will be prioritized towards keeping up the work in this area. In Denmark we have a historical and cultural background that for many years have allowed us to be pioneers in such a work. This status should, in our opinion, be maintained and expanded.

Summary on the books, videos and CD's

Children singing in Denmark contains 54 songs written by children aged 3 months – 13 years. The book is supplied with music, lyrics and comments on every song. including CD containing 54 songs.

Children singing in Denmark. 13 songs on video, that give a visual impression of the way children write songs. VHS.

Children singing in Denmark – 18 arrangements. Arrangements of the children's own songs suitable for community singing. Shows the way from the children's small motifs or small tunes to finished and arranged songs. 48 pages.

Children singing in Denmark – 18 arranged songs on CD. 40 minutes of swinging children's music.

Publications by Erik Lyhne and Michael Madsen:

Børnesangbogen. Modtryk 1983

Den rytmiske Børnesangbog. Lyren 1987

Spil op – om børns musik og bevægelse. Lyren 1990

Den glade Børnesangbog. Lyren 1992

En helt almindelig fredag i Hobbitten. DVD about children and music (aged 0-6) 1993

Musik med mening. 2004. About Bernhard Christensen, Astrid Gøssel and Jytte Rahbek Schmidt

Read more about this project and lots of other articles about children and music on www.lyren.dk

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