

Children and Music

Working with children - a Danish attitude to education

by Erik Lyhne, Michael Madsen and Jytte Rahbek Schmidt

The great fairy-tale writer Hans Christian Andersen wrote his novel *The Improviser* about a hundred and fifty years ago. In this we can read about the Italian boy Antonio's childhood and adolescence in Rome - from his earliest childhood with his poor widowed mother to his adolescence and early manhood living with wealthy benefactors.

Antonio's disposition is such, that when he has a vivid experience he feels compelled to give it expression in improvised song. He sings about his strong impressions of nature, but can also be inspired by something as banal as a butcher's shop. We read how the owner of such a shop has decorated it in connection with a Catholic feast - with festoons of bay leaves, candles wound with gold paper, and with hams and sausages standing upright to form a group bearing an amber-yellow parmesan cheese.

To the boy, all these delicacies, together with a picture of the Madonna lit by a red lamp, seem like a magic world that he has to sing about. His mother and her circle enjoy his songs, call him a little poet and urge him to continue.

At some point the boy's life is totally changed. His mother is killed by a couple of runaway horses harnessed to a carriage belonging to a wealthy family. The latter feel responsible for the orphaned boy, and after a brief stay with a poor though lovable shepherd the boy is taken into their care. So then he has to go to school, where he is taught religion, philosophy, classical literature and art by Jesuit monks. All this interests him a great deal, but his urge to give rein to his imagination and to improvise is not appreciated, nor does his new wealthy family appreciate his poetry either. He is admonished and told to take his studies seriously, to learn his classics and not be so proud as to think he has the talents of one of the divine poets. But one of his school friends, who are interested in Antonio's poetry, urges him to continue and to write his poems down.

Some while afterwards, when the young student Antonio is visiting Naples and out of earshot of his benefactors, we meet him as a theatrical improviser. At that time it was customary in connection with plays or operas to conclude the performance with an entertainment by an improviser. The latter would receive written notes from the audience stating themes he was to assemble into a story and improvise in song.

Antonio, who had taught himself to play the guitar, delighted his audience so much that he became the talk of the town for some time. But, although lionized by the bourgeoisie, in the end he was persuaded to return to his studies in Rome.

Here we shall leave Hans Christian Andersen's thinly disguised autobiography and his reminder to his readers not to suppress the child's fantastic ability to give expression to whatever makes a lasting impression. Of course Andersen's story may well be interpreted as concerning only children with exceptional talents, but here we can get help from another world-famous inhabitant of the Danish island of Funen - the composer Carl Nielsen. In his memoirs, *My Funen Childhood*, he writes:

It has often surprised me how little we realize that the moment a child receives a strong impression, strong enough to imprint itself for ever in the memory, the child is in reality a poet, with precisely a poet's special capacity for absorbing the impression, for reproducing it or merely retaining it. At bottom the poetic talent is probably the ability to observe in a special way. We have all at one time been poets, artists, each with our own special character. The missing gentleness with which life and the grown-ups call the child forth from its beautiful world of poetry and art to face harsh, sober reality must surely bear the blame for the fact that most of us lose these abilities, so that the divine gift of fantasy with which the child is born becomes mere daydreaming or else is totally lost.

The great poets, thinkers, natural scientists and artists are merely exceptions that prove the rule. Some people may perhaps say that poetic talent consists of the ability to represent. But representation is merely elaboration, and is surely a question of practice, cultural influences and learning.

In another place Carl Nielsen describes some important incidents he experienced together with his slightly older brother Sophus. He loved the countryside and, as a shepherd boy, he had plenty of opportunity to experience the surrounding animal life at close hand. He could whistle and imitate all manner of birdsong. He was also good at making whistles out of willow wood and playing them. Now and again Carl Nielsen writes:

... then he began to let his imagination loose and make up his own tunes with lots of runs and trills, and I don't know that I have ever heard music that has given me so much sweetness, freedom and variation.

Thus the words of two serious artists - words that question more or less directly the validity of our traditional educational goals. We walk among improvisers, singers, poets, musicians, composers,

sound imitators, dancers, mimes, clowns, draughtsmen and painters, and the question is whether we really appreciate this.

The question has in fact been raised by a group of Danish artists, psychologists and educationalists. Some were teachers at a nursery-school training college, and they also started a progressive free school in Copenhagen. And among the most prominent were Bernhard Christensen and Astrid Gøssel.

Here began Denmark's long tradition, with roots right back in the 1930s, for taking children's own musical development and creative ability as point of departure for working with children and music. To observe children and the various ways in which they express their musicality and to use this as a springboard for working with children and music is a method peculiar to Northern Europe. This type of work with children has since spread like ripples on a pond and is nowadays used in many cases as a foundation for teaching and associating with children of all ages. In 1944 Astrid Gøssel wrote of an experience in a kindergarten:

A group of children are busy making a birch-rod for Shrove Monday. The sedentary work on the rods alternates with ordinary activity, gesticulation and outbursts of song. One child admires its rod so much that it gets up and sings, "See my rod - see my rod!" The other children quickly learn the song, which develops into a great, rhythmic choral exclamation, and all the children jump about and dance to it.

This is a typical example of how children express themselves musically in everyday life, and how this simple form of expression spreads like lightning to the entire group. As adults it is a question of having our eyes and ears open to a phenomenon we meet with in our daily life - no matter whether we live in Denmark, Africa or the USA!

When we sing with children we usually use songs written by adults about subjects adults assume children are interested in. The melodies are also written by adults, so that the text, melody and harmonies fit well together and can be sung and played without difficulty by adults. Thus we pass on an adult tradition based on specific norms regarding what a song should comprise in the way of text, tonality, rhythm and harmony.

That is all very well. But if we compare our attitude to children's own songs with our attitude to their drawings, the latter seem to a greater extent to be regarded as what they are: emotional expressions that speak for themselves, though at the same time developmental manifestations that no adult would dream of correcting or dismissing in order to teach children to draw "properly". We appear to have greater respect for the children's own form and choice of expression regarding their drawings than is the case with their song and music. In using songs for children produced by adults we tend to teach children to reproduce music rather than to use it as a language or unique form of expression.

When working with children's creative abilities their own form of expression is always the best. Children are often extremely musical, and only need encouragement. The exclamatory song just mentioned is an example of a typical self-invented children's genre - a genre playfully based on the language's own rhythm and music. The exclamations become all the funnier the greater the number of children that join in, and much of the enjoyment is precisely the fellowship that arises when all the children shout and cry a noisy, catchy rhythm together.

How can we as adults create fertile soil for developing these activities, and which skills should we possess? As adults we should let ourselves go, and jump to the children's rhythm! Sing to it! Clap to it! Experience the moments in which the whole house or playground swings as never before. It may last ten seconds or fifteen minutes, and the song or cry may consist only of a few sounds or words, but everyone joins in - we swing, we suspend time and simply exist. In such moments we can experience a fellowship that can only be achieved by voices in unison and a common sense of body rhythm. Music becomes a common language that everyone feels part of.

When you work with children and music it is a privilege to be able to use and prolong such moments.

Such active musical fellowship is unfortunately rare today. The context for fellowship is outlined by music machines. One of the few places where we can experience the collective strength and spirit of musical expression is at international matches when national songs are sung by about 50,000 people - or when the cheers rain down over the players (Many of these cheers have their origin in children's cries).

If we wish to use music as a language and a means of fellowship it is important to nurture the live experience, the joy and the enthusiasm - rather than the technique. Technique can always be learnt later and based on the children's and the adults' ability. If the joy of music is present, the joy of developing one's own skills can be acquired. Only when we are motivated can we learn techniques.

It is willing hands that make light work.

o Jytte Rahbek Schmidt has worked with children and music since the 1950s. She has studied children's musicality and taught it in many contexts. In 1952 she became a co-founder and music teacher at Denmark's second progressive free school - Aarhus Friskole, here children's musicality is given priority. From 1953-1987 she has taught music at Social-Pædagogisk Børnehaveseminarium (The Socio-pedagogical College of Education) and she has published a number of articles on "Children and Music".

o Michael Madsen has worked with children and music since 1980. Together with Erik Lyhne he has published a number of song books containing children's own songs: Børnesangbogen (The Song-book for Children) (1982), Den Rytmske Børnesangbog (The Rhythm Song-book for Children) (1987) and Den Glade Børnesangbog (The Happy Song book for Children) (1992). They are joint authors of the book Spil Op! (Strike Up!) about children's musical development.

o Erik Lyhne has worked with children and music since 1980. Together with Michael Madsen he has taught children's musicality in many contexts. He teaches at Aarhus Dag- og Aftenseminarium (The Aarhus Day and Evening Teacher Training College) and has been a member of Kulturernes Børn (Children and Culture) since 1995.