

From 'what is' to 'what if' ¹: a practitioner's reflection on the Barcelona MERYC EU Conference 2023

by Rosie Walton

In July 2023 I was fortunate to attend the eleventh conference of the European Network of Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children (MERYC), supported by a generous bursary from MERYC England. The conference was hosted by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain and consisted of four days of stimulating lectures, workshops, and papers as well as excursions and cultural activities. The conference brought together a colourful cohort of artists, musicians, music practitioners, researchers, and academics, drawing delegates from as far afield as Israel, Taiwan, Canada, and Iceland. Inspired by a variety of pedagogies and schools of thought, we talked and ate and played alongside one other, offering support and friendship as well as gentle challenge. Despite our diversity, we were joined by a shared belief in the importance of early childhood as a formative phase in human life, and of the power of music to connect, enable and express.

Although trained and experienced as a music educator and early childhood music specialist, I had spent the previous year working as an early years practitioner (nose wiping, nappy changing and snack making included). This experience had given me an understanding of what life is like for children and practitioners in a UK preschool. It had allowed me to experience the hard graft involved with caring for groups of young children, but also the joy and wonder of getting to know them over time, and the privilege of being invited into their imaginary worlds. Musically, I had been able to observe and support the children's development *in* and *through* music, as I integrated my music practice into the daily life of the setting. The experience had given me a strong sense of 'what is'. The MERYC EU Conference, by contrast, provoked me to ask 'what if...'

- **What if** we re-examined our starting points when working musically with young children?
- **What if** we gave space and time for musical exploration and discovery?
- **What if** we reassessed our adult role?
- **What if** children were enabled to express their inner worlds through music?

The lectures and workshops attended at the conference were too plentiful to summarise in their entirety. Instead, I offer a personal reflection that focusses on my questions raised by the conference and explores ways in which I hope that the experience will impact my future practice. It is written in the hope that others may be inspired to reflect and ask questions too.

1. What if we re-examined our starting points when working musically with young children?

When working with a new group of children, it can be tempting to wade in with tried and tested songs and activities or to begin with a fixed curriculum, without firstly getting to know our young learners. In her presentation, 'Alexa! Play Looby Loo': Young Children Growing Up with Music', Dr Susan Young suggested that: 'too often education may assume that children bring nothing that is

¹ The title of this paper is inspired by Rob Hopkins's book 'What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want' (Hopkins, 2019) in which he explores ways that we can reclaim our collective imagination, allowing us to envision and create a better future. It is an important call to action, and highly relevant to educators working in the arts.

useful or important [to the learning process] and may assume that we know who they are and what they bring according to given models of development or unquestioned images of musical childhood' (Young, 2023).

So, how can we best become acquainted with our new learners? Laura Ferrari and Aura Vitali's presentation 'Songs for Pepito: spontaneous songs of primary school children' inspired me to consider using the children's *own* spontaneous music making as a starting point, making use of the information gleaned to inform future teaching and learning opportunities.

Ferrari and Virali's research, based at a primary school near Bologna (Italy), took an ethnological approach, focusing on collecting and analysing the spontaneous songs of two classes of six-year-olds. Pepito, a playful cartoon parrot, was used as a pedagogical tool. He sent the class a letter, inviting them to record songs into a Dictaphone to play at his party. The children were keen to sing for their feathered friend and offered songs ranging from Italian pop music to Mozart. Ferrari noted that, when comparing the children's renditions to professional recordings, the children sang with impressive accuracy and would often sing in a similar tonality to the original. The data collected highlighted the children's impressive musical capabilities, their musical interests, and musical identities. Equipped with this knowledge, the educator could devise musical activities that matched up with the children's current abilities, background, and interests, before later broadening and developing their skills and experiences.

Ferrari and Virali's child-centred approach, offers a way in which we can ensure that we plan learning opportunities that are relevant and responsive to the needs and enthusiasms of the children we work with. I look forward to inviting 'Cyril the Squirrel' to join me in settings next term. I've heard he's looking to record songs for a party!

2. What if we gave space and time for musical exploration and discovery?

This question arose from attending Dr Ilil Keren's presentation: 'Enabling Instrumental Exploration in Toddlerhood'. Keren's study took place in three daycare centres in northern Israel and involved eight groups of children, from 0-3, and their caregivers. Discovering that toddlers are rarely given the opportunity to work with melodic, full-scale instruments, (unpitched instruments being more common), Keren equipped each group with a chromatic metallophone. These instruments were placed in quiet corners of the settings and infants were invited to play and explore the instruments freely and repeatedly over a seven-month period. Video recordings of the children's play showed that each child developed their own musical style. In addition, the recordings revealed that, despite having played with the instrument alone, shared developmental processes were evident. From scattered playing to fluent playing; from simple pulsations to complex musical ideas; from single short patterns, to constructed musical patterns (with ideas returning, rondo-style) - the children's playing had gained in complexity and expression (Keren, 2023).

The infants in Keren's study developed musically without instruction. By developing an enabling musical environment in which infants were allowed to wallow in their instrumental play without interruption, they made considerable musical progress. The crucial ingredients here were time, space, freedom, and trust.

Keren's work has motivated me to reconsider the musical play environment; to give thought to the types of instruments offered, and the way in which they are arranged. It has inspired me to experiment with creating cosy corners and musical dens for explorative musical play. It has also made me reflect on the importance of encouraging my fellow early years practitioners to slow down, stand

back and to watch and listen with wonder and curiosity: allowing them to recognise and value the children's self-initiated musical discoveries.

3. What if we reconsidered our adult role?

In my experience of working in settings in the UK, there is often an implicit understanding that the role of the educator is to *direct* the musical activity, or to *supervise* the children's musical play. These taken-for-granted roles, while sometimes necessary, do little to champion the children as creative and competent learners. In Keren's study, practitioners adopted a 'hands off' approach, allowing the children's learning to grow organically. Taking a more active role, by playing the part of play partner, can also be a supportive and enabling practice (Young, 2003).

The role of the educator was explored in Félice van der Sande's and Marjanka van Maurik's presentation: 'A new pedagogical model for music as a core element in teacher training'. According to this approach from the Netherlands, the teacher begins by selecting a song or musical idea that is playful and engaging and which is in line with the musical development of the child. From there, the educator guides the child through a process of 'repetition-variation-challenge' (Van der Sande and van Maurik, 2023). By scaffolding the musical play, the educator can help the child to find many ways to develop and extend their learning.

Throughout the process, the educator is sensitive to the responses of the child ('The teacher takes the variations in their rucksack and brings them out when necessary' (Van der Sande, 2023)). The practitioner also encourages the child to initiate their own variations (perhaps we could call these 'what if's?'). In this way, the process is not fixed but is instead co-constructed through the adult-child interaction, allowing the child to become an active participant in the learning process. This model moves the learner beyond merely reproducing a song or musical idea and instead focuses on children playing and inventing with music with guidance. It ensures a healthy 'respect for the music and respect for the child' (Van der Sande and van Maurik, 2023).

I am taken with Van de Sande's idea of packing a metaphorical rucksack with variations and am inspired to explore more ways in which songs, rhymes and musical play can be varied and extended. After all, adding variations is something that parents do naturally when singing with their infants (Young, 2023). It seems apt that, those of us who work in settings, should build upon this playful approach, in partnership with the children.

4. What if children were enabled to express their *inner* worlds through music?

Magic Acorn's symposium, 'Listening for invitations to play: Investigations with an early year's music-arts organisation', also called the adult role into question. The company's work focuses on 'exploring musical play as a creative and communicative act' (Fox, 2023) inviting us to 'relinquish our adulthood' (Arculus and MacRae, 2022), to 'open ourselves to possibility and surprise' (Pitt, 2023) and to join the children, without agenda, in wordless, embodied sound play. During the symposium, the UK collective underpinned their practice by relating their work to the writings of Froebel and to posthumanist theories.

In the past, Magic Acorn's work has inspired me to create sound environments and to engage with the children in wordless musical play. On this occasion the element that resonated with me most strongly was the Froebelian notion of 'making the inner outer' and Magic Acorn's related study, exploring ways in which children express their inner worlds through sound play (Cavanagh, 2023).

Here is an example of how this concept has been taken into my own practice, blending with Dalcroze pedagogy:

Case Study: Isaac the flying machine:

Isaac, aged 3, has a quiet presence in Preschool. He is often found in the construction area, lost in his own play and seemingly unaware of the antics of his peers.

Yet today, out on the yard, he transforms into a multi-modal flying machine; soaring around the space, arms outstretched, engine bearing ('vvvrrmmmmmm'). I join in his play by mirroring his movements and vocalisations. We fly together, in and out and up and down, following each other's pathways. Isaac brings his machine to a stop- I stop too. He turns to look at me and we share a smile.

Later we move into the hall for a music and movement session. Inspired by Isaac's play I abandon my lesson plan and warm up the children's voices with vehicle inspired sound play ('vrrmm, beep beep, nee naw nee naw'). This is the first time we have heard Isaac's voice in a group session and the other children and practitioners respond with excited acknowledgment. I ask Isaac if he would like to show the group his flying machine and he responds by soaring around the space for all to see. I accompany his movements on the piano, mirroring the quality and tempo of his movements with a rapid triplet figure and spacious harmony, ending with a descending phrase as his machine comes into land. His classmates request a turn and the group enjoy gliding around the hall together, inspired by their newly found friend.

In this example, I connect with Isaac's *inner*, imaginative world by joining him as a play partner. Our interactions are largely wordless- instead 'I tune in with all [my] senses', mirroring his movements and imitating his vocal play (Cavanagh, 2023). Later in the day, I formalise the play by sharing it (with permission) with his peers and by accompanying his movements with improvised piano music, Dalcroze-style. When Isaac returns to Preschool, he sings a solo to Stripy the puppet for the first time, and, when he is accidentally missed out of the drinks queue at snack time, approaches a practitioner to ask for some milk. This musical episode has allowed Isaac to express his inner world through music and in so doing has helped him to find his voice and to assert his needs within the setting. And for me, it has highlighted the 'liberating potential of music' (Arculus, 2023).

Conclusion:

In her Keynote speech, Dr Susan Young states that one the core aims of MERYC is to 'apply theoretical ideas and understandings from research in order to improve practice' (Young, 2023). The MEYRC conference has encouraged me to develop my practice by becoming more flexible in my approach, more questioning. To place the children at the centre of my work, attuning to their *own* ways of being musical and using music to help them to feel seen and heard. It has inspired me to keep asking 'what if...'

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