

Art Songs for the Very Young: A Third Conversation with Mary Ellen

(Series of conversations conducted by Dr. Rick Townsend, Managing Director, Early Childhood Music and Movement Association, for ECMMA, 2012)

Rick Intro: My previous conversation with [Mary Ellen Pinzino](#) about young children's artistry continues here with *Art Songs for the Very Young*. While we do not receive many comments to our blogs, our tracking shows that Mary Ellen's conversations have been some of our most widely followed posts. Still, I hope that you, the reader, will join in the conversation—providing a richer base of questions on the topic.

Rick: You said that "Young children's artistry is compelled by far more musically sophisticated songs than we have traditionally provided." *Musically sophisticated* can be a very subjective concept. How would you describe it?

Mary Ellen: Traditional children's songs charm, entertain, invite participation, and carry the culture. They are very appealing, they can serve many kinds of learning, and they can facilitate parent/child interaction in song, but they do not begin to meet the musical needs of young children. Words are the driving force, putting the thinking mind in charge rather than the musical mind. Children's artistry needs songs that speak to the musical mind.

Art Songs for tender ages capture the musical imagination and bathe it in fine art. They feed and challenge music learning at every age and stage of development. They appeal to the musical mind and offer sheer musicality. Children experience and explore the intertwining of rhythm, melody, and text as artists, getting into the energy of the line in all its musical nuance. Adults often think that songs for children need cute lyrics, gestures, or accompaniments to be compelling to little children. Young children's attraction to such periphery does not begin to match their focused attention to meter, tonality and the interweaving of rhythm, melody, and text. Little children devour Art Songs for the very young.

Story tellers and poets have reached young children's artistry through generations. It is time that musicians do the same. Little children learning language can engage in quality literature throughout early childhood. Lovely little stories and sensitive little poems, in addition to traditional nursery rhymes and fairy tales create a full spectrum of literature for little children at every level of development. Some children's literature is just for fun. At the other end of the spectrum is fine poetry, with its imagery, sound sense, and artistry. Somewhere in between is quality prose, which is more sophisticated than the young child's speech, yet not such high art as poetry.

Song literature for young children should offer the same opportunity for musical growth throughout early childhood. Some songs should be just for fun. At the other end of the spectrum—the poetry of song literature—are Art Songs for tender ages, inviting sheer musicality. Somewhere in between are the quality prose of song literature—little gems that feed developing musicianship—"Gem Songs."

Rick: How does the young child's experience of Art Songs differ from that of traditional children's songs?

Mary Ellen: Children are drawn into Art Songs by the power of tonality and meter rather than through the immediacy of words or prescribed motions. Tonality and meter compel the musical imagination, while words serve the artistic whole in sound, imagery, and reflection in rhythm and melody. The experience is not dominated by the literal meaning of the words.

Rather, the woven tapestry of tonality, meter, and text becomes a magic carpet that carries the musical imagination on an extended journey through successive repetitions of the song.

Young children are spellbound by Art Songs, and the extent of their sustained attention through many successive repetitions is stunning. Art Songs not only capture the musical imagination, but hold it captive through many successive repetitions. It is not unusual for young children, even infants, to stay focused through 12-20 or more repetitions of an Art Song. The more repetitions, the more children attend to the song, and the more they become one with the song. Children are so compelled by ongoing repetitions of an Art Song that stopping the activity or interrupting the musical experience by talking "breaks the spell."

The young child may not yet be ready to sing the song or even move with it, but will absorb its every nuance, attending through many successive repetitions. Flowing movement through the many repetitions, without interruptions, invites exploration of the energy of the line and sustained interaction with the song's musicality, inviting young children to "practice music."

Rick: Are you suggesting that many teachers' notions about songs for little children might have to broaden?

Mary Ellen: Yes. Children are artists. We must expand our concept of songs for little children to accommodate and nurture young children's artistry. Traditionally, the choice of songs for little children has been based on song words. Even song difficulty has been a function of the words. We have to turn our attention to the music if we want to teach music, and provide songs of musical depth that inspire children's artistry.

We also have to broaden our concept of the experience of a song to one of extended immersion in the art. Many successive repetitions of an Art Song for tender ages provide for children to explore and express the intertwining of rhythm, melody, and text as artists, as musicians. Children's artistry deserves song experiences that compel little children to "become the song" in all its nuance. Flowing movement is an Art Song's finest accompaniment, and movement is the most immediate entry into an Art Song. Children's artistry knows that to become the song in movement, energy, expression, and singing is more important than "getting all the words."

The more we grow as a field in our understanding of the artistry of young children and the process of music learning, the more we can propel young children's artistry through the songs we choose and the way we engage children in those songs. There will always be a place for the delightful children's songs that have charmed generations, but children's artistry merits songs of greater musical depth throughout early childhood.

Rick: Do you use scarves, bean bags, or rhythm instruments to help express the art songs within a playful setting?

Mary Ellen: No. The artistry of the young child is such that if children are exposed to tonalities and meters, the Art Songs, themselves, become the play. The music is the intrigue, just as it is for professional musicians. The turn of a phrase, the change in meter, the driving rhythm of text, the building of a line, all become the play. The young child, like the professional musician, engages in "playing music." Props actually get in the way, as do well meaning explanations about the literal meaning of the words. Musicality is extremely compelling to young children. We just have to trust young children's artistry and engage children in the art.

Rick: Some may still not fully understand what you are describing. What are the distinguishing characteristics of Art Songs for young children?

Mary Ellen: Art Songs for tender ages are short little songs in various tonalities and meters with lovely, age appropriate poetry artfully expressed through melody and rhythm. A quality Art Song for young children fully defines its tonality, with all its characteristic tones and without alterations, engaging and feeding the young child's developing sense of tonality. The vocal range is within the beginning singing range, (no lower than middle C, no higher than the B-flat above), facilitating music learning. Its rhythm is the natural expression of the text, which may shift from one meter to another, often making the song more difficult to read than to sing. Its melody is contoured by the natural expression of the text, which is short, usually without rhyme, and often about nature.

A well written song for any age is a vocal stage play, with the intertwining of text, rhythm and melody serving as the staging, scenery, and costumes for the dramatic delivery of the script—the text. Art Songs for tender ages are little kernels of choral art waiting to bloom in the musical minds and bodies of little children—little choral artists waiting to bloom in songs that merit their artistry.

Rick: How can we as teachers structure our activities in a way that provides readiness for Art Songs?

Mary Ellen: Exposure to various tonalities and meters sets the stage for children to receive Art Songs as musicians, as artists. Children can, of course, learn the words to songs that they are not musically ready for, but using words to learn a song puts the thinking mind in charge rather than the musical mind, and does not build music skills that transfer to the next musical encounter. Children developing a sense of meter and a sense of tonality learn to pilot rhythm and melody by their own musicality rather than by song words, developing the readiness to engage with songs of increasing rhythm and tonal difficulty throughout early childhood and beyond.

Experience with various tonalities and meters also sets the stage for teacher readiness for Art Songs with young children. Even with that experience, reading through one Art Song and turning to the next will not likely bring a sense of the extent to which these little kernels of art can grow into rich, musical experiences with very young children. One reading or one hearing will not reveal the power of an Art Song for tender ages. Engaging with children in movement and singing through many successive verses, without the interruption of talking, will begin to unveil the wonder of Art Songs with young children.

Rick: It sounds like this would be easier to accomplish with infants and toddlers. What has been your experience with older children - say, four or five?

Children four or five, eight or ten are artists and respond as artists when we teach to children's artistry. Four and five year old children devour Art Songs for tender ages, as do both younger and older children. Many of the Art Songs written for young children have also been used effectively as warm ups with children's choruses and even college singers.

Rick: How do "Gem Songs" differ from Art Songs?

Mary Ellen: The prime difference between Art Songs and Gem Songs is that the texts of Gem Songs, and therefore their settings, are generally more whimsical than those of Art Songs. Gem Songs include playparties in unusual meters and settings of folk rhymes and

playful poems in various tonalities and meters. Gem songs take "Play Songs" to a higher level of musical sophistication. Like Art Songs, Gem Songs are in the vocal range that maximizes music learning, and successive repetitions invite immersion in the interaction of rhythm, melody, and text in all its musical nuance. Age appropriate texts are set expressively, fully defining the tonality and meter and feeding and challenging music learning at every age and stage of development.

Rick: Can you give our readers examples of Art Songs and Gem Songs?

Mary Ellen: Yes. Readers can cite this posting in an email to ccs.info@comechildrensing.com and request a Song Sampler. Several Art Songs and Gem Songs from the Come Children Sing Institute SONG LIBRARY will be forwarded via email.

Little children are closer to art than we are. Their sensitivity to beauty knows no bounds. They know that music speaks to them through tonality and meter, and that the artistic combination of words, melody and rhythm nurtures their very being. They know that the words of Art Songs speak to them through sound and imagery more than through literal meaning, and that the playful words of Gem Songs become even more fun when the musical setting of the text tickles their musicality as well as their delightful personalities. Little children deserve to grow up with songs of musical depth that feed and challenge young children's artistry throughout early childhood and beyond.

Rick: Thank you, again, Mary Ellen, for a very intriguing conversation. I look forward to talking with you again.

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