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Jarring notes in children's songs. The obvious and not obvious functions of children's songs in early education

Introduction

Nowadays, children's songs are used in various pedagogical areas: in pre-school and early school education, in therapeutic work, in teaching foreign languages, etc. A remarkable Polish music theorist and pedagogue, Elżbieta Frołowicz, enumerates the following educational applications of music (including children's songs) and related artistic activities: 1) means of animation, 2) means of relaxation, 3) means of challenge and various evaluation exercises (both verbal and non-verbal), 4) subject of cognition, experience and evaluation (Frołowicz 2011:16). Therefore, it is undeniable that the educational potential of children's songs is huge. However, inclusion of songs in the educational process seems to be burdened with a certain risk, the nature of which I would like to discuss herein. The attempts made at a comprehensive and interdisciplinary depiction of children's songs on the grounds of pedagogy are, so far, scarce. Perhaps, it results from the conviction that it constitutes an immanent element of childhood and early education and its 'natural presence' does not raise any controversies. My ambition is to separate children's songs among other seemingly constant and undisputed pedagogical concepts in order to subject them to constructive criticism.

Children's songs – distinctive features of the genre

In pedagogical literature it is difficult to find an unequivocal definition of children's songs. The concept thereof is usually treated by authors as obvious, not requiring

meticulous explanations. Definitions are simply replaced by synonymous descriptions of children's songs, for instance: songs for children, (vocal) children's music, children's repertoire, a selection of children's songs, etc. Attempts at specifying this concept were made by children's folklore researchers – Iona and Peter Opie. They explained the essence thereof as 'a preschool poem that constitutes the background for music, a song made by children and functioning in the group of peers or modern works created for the purposes of entertainment, for domestic or educational use.' (I. Opie, P. Opie 1959: 21–22). In this characteristics authors draw attention to the fact that children's songs can originate from various sources (a spontaneous activity of children, an intentional activity of adults or heritage of folk culture). They also underline the plethora of use thereof in the life of a (little) human including the entertainment and educational function. Other researchers, while trying to separate children's songs from among the total of cultural texts, refer to the criterion of performance (technical abilities of a child and/or actual performance of the work), as well as a desired recipient of the song. And thus, slightly paraphrasing the definition quoted by Janusz Sławiński, it can be stated that a children's song is a verbal-musical work intended to be performed by children or a children's ensemble (choir). Or: a verbal-musical work intended for performance by a singer-soloist or a band for children's audience (see: Sławiński 1988: 357). The last group of definitions concentrates on the dichotomy of contents that are proper vs improper for children. If the source lies in social beliefs concerning a child and childhood, such as the stereotype of 'an idyllic and carefree childhood' or tabooisation of various spheres of life (e.g. human sexuality, suffering, real social problems). In this depiction, the children's song's definition means only that its contents do not include elements that might cause anxiety, among others: obscenities, descriptions of a sexual act or acts of violence.

While summarising considerations regarding the 'childishness' of children's songs, I would like to underline again that this feature may refer to the age of the work's author, contents considered proper (adequate) for children or a specific construction of work taking into account the nature of a language and/or developmental needs of a child. In a given verbal-musical work all of these elements can co-exist or be only signalled. In practice, however, vocal works created by adults with, unfortunately, a varying aesthetic and pedagogical sensitivity are most frequently encountered among children's songs actually used in preschools and schools. It is worth underlining that songs which actually reach (or not) a young recipient are selected on by adults acting as intermediaries. As bitterly stated by Ewa Szatan, 'In the scope of shaping interests and musical tastes [...] we are observing a worrisome phenomenon – indiscriminately, we are thoughtlessly consuming models depicted by the media on a daily basis without verifying and evaluating the arts especially dedicated to the youngest.' (Szatan 2007: 5). Therefore, the people professionally dealing with education of the youngest can and should be expected to pay attention

to the artistic and educational value of musical works while selecting them for pedagogical work.

Obvious functions of children's songs in early education

Children's songs, starting from a lullaby, constitute the first meeting of a child with the world of music. Being a relatively simple musical form, a children's song gradually introduces the youngest to the phenomena of differences in sound pitches, changes of pace, rhythm or volume of melody. In organisational terms, a song is also the most accessible manner of contact with music, since it does not require any specialist equipment or instruments aside from voice and a good ear. Therefore, children's songs gained a special place in contemporary conceptions of musical education.

Musical education fits the idea of education through art started by Herbert Read in *Education through Art* (Wojnar 1965: 5), and popularised in Poland by such pedagogues as: Irena Wojnar, Stanisław Ossowski, Stefan Szuman or Bogdan Suchodolski. According to Kazimierz Sośnicki (1967: 57), 'initially, the reason of introducing the aesthetic education to school education was the economic motif. However, over time, it has spread to other areas of human life and strives to cover the whole thinking process with aestheticism.' In contemporary conceptions of aesthetic education, one indicates the two-way influence in the scope of a child's contact with art: (1) education through art and (2) education for art reception. The first type of a pedagogical influence is aimed at using the situation of a contact with art for a versatile development of a child, that includes shaping sensitivity and imagination through contact with a product of culture (a musical work, an artwork, a sculpture, an artistic installation, etc.). As the famous Polish comic book artist, Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski, the author of adventures of *Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek*, used to say, contact with art is supposed to 'humanise' us. Whereas, the curricula of education for art reception should provide children with knowledge and skills necessary to the conscious use of the cultural offer, for example, knowledge of basic terminology, important historical facts, representatives of various directions of art, famous art and music works. Suchodolski (1965: 22) states: 'While discussing aesthetic education, we should have in mind not only how an individual develops its attitude to the artwork, which they have contact with, but also what happens with an individual under the influence of the artwork and how art shapes a human.' Aesthetic education includes various areas of education: arts, technical, musical, theatre, etc. I concentrate here on the subject matters related to children's songs, therefore, mainly on musical education.

Musical education covers both education through music and education for music reception. Already Jan Ámos Komenský (1592–1670) in his work *The Great*

Didactic drew attention to the fact that singing is a common skill that each person needs in their life (Danielewicz 2013: 36). The beneficial impact of the child's contact with music from the earliest age was underlined by various representatives of paedocentrism. Jan Henryk Pestalozzi (1746–1827) believed that proper, harmonious development of a child is determined by the balance of intellectual, physical and moral stimulation (Danielewicz 2013: 36). He situated the source of artistic expression (including musical) in the child's heart. Pestalozzi attributed a special pro-development value to singing chants and songs. He also developed simplified methods of teaching singing. Witold Danielewicz underlines: 'Opinions expressed in the textbook written by Pestalozzi [...] concerning simplified methods of teaching singing became milestones in the development of theoretical basics of music pedagogy.' (Danielewicz 2013: 36). A wide contact of a child with music was also planned by Maria Montessori (1870–1952) in her pedagogical attitude. It included, among others: development of musical hearing, practising musical memory and imagination, learning about musical notation, notation of favourite songs and melodies, basics of musical composition and learning to play instruments (Danielewicz 2013: 37).

While characterising the contemporary model of early music education in Polish school, Frołowicz enumerates three main forms of student's contact with music: 'performative expression (singing, movement to music, playing instruments), creative expression (music improvisation and creation) and work perception supported by active listening to music.' (Frołowicz 2011: 25). All of these elements, although with various intensification, are present in contemporary conceptions of music education. And, it is worth underlining that children's songs apply to all three of the aforementioned forms of student's contact with music: as a voice material, a basis for creating musical accompaniment and/or movement illustration. Contemporary models of early music education in Poland were established on the basis of western trends and innovations in teaching music and thus, systems developed by prominent music pedagogues, among others: Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Carl Orff and Zoltán Kodály (Uchyla-Zroski 2013: 109). Vocal repertoire proposed by them is very diverse: it covers folk songs, chants and songs, songs composed especially for children and songs accompanying musical games. Those creators eagerly used in their pedagogical work musical folkloristic motifs and referred to the achievements of artistic music. One will not find lessons based on popular music or musical kitsch in their work. Nonetheless, authors of the aforementioned methods were professional musicians, who, while selecting the repertoire for their work with children, paid more attention to the musical form of the piece than its verbal layer.

Today, children's songs are used in various 'education-related' areas such as: medicine (for example music therapy) (Danielewicz 2013: 30) or speech therapy (in particular therapy of stuttering and movement, speech and music therapy)

(Walencik-Topiłko 2016), The Good Start Method (GSM) developed by Marta Bogdanowicz on the basis of the French conception *Le Bon Départ* by Thea Bugnet-van der Voort. The basis of the GSM's lesson plan comprises songs written especially for children's needs, which provide background for other activities: self-improvement exercises, physical games, writing and drawing exercises. Marta Bogdanowicz, Małgorzata Barańska and Ewa Jakacka prepared teaching aids to implement the GSM's assumptions including, among others, sets of exercises for children titled 'From a song to a letter' and 'Songs for drawing'¹. Preschool and early school education teachers, after graduating a certified course, can introduce elements of this method into their pedagogical workshop. Moreover, the game-based method developed and promoted by the association *Stowarzyszenie Klanza*, consisting of conducting music and movement games with the use of an animation scarf has become popular in preschool education. Apart from the scarf, a set of CDs with music especially composed for the needs of using this method can be purchased². Artistic music for children, including children's songs, are also promoted by a family company *POMELODY*[®], by sharing music materials in a digital form, organising music and movement workshops and selling CDs with original children's music for domestic and preschool/school use³.

It is worth underlining that using these and other alternative methods of teaching music to the youngest students is of a facultative nature and relates only to a small extent concerns general education in Poland.

Not obvious functions of children's songs in early education

Children's songs are, in the first place, associated with early education, especially with preschool classes: they accompany physical games (e.g. 'Kółko graniaste' ('*Ring-a-ring-a-roses*'), 'Chodzi lisek koło drogi' ('*Duck, duck, goose*'), 'Mało nas do pieczenia chleba' ('*Few of us to bake bread*')), support constructing daily routine in the institution (e.g. welcome songs, mealtime songs), constitute an element of children's theatre performances, as well as – in many teachers' opinion – help to implement the curriculum. As far as the first three listed functions (I called them provisionally: recreational and integrational, organisational and artistic) rather do not raise any controversies, the postulated substantive value thereof encourages deeper reflection.

¹ See: homepage of Professor Marta Bogdanowicz, PhD: <https://ptd.edu.pl/proftest/mds.html> [access: 9.03.2020].

² See: website of the association *Stowarzyszenie Klanza*: <http://klanza.org.pl/> [access: 19.03.2020].

³ See: website of *POMELODY*[®]: <https://pomelody.com/> [access: 19.03.2020].

Since the famous (for some – infamous) educational reform of 1999, early education, especially in I–III grades, adopted the so-called integrative form of teaching in Poland⁴. This term has led to misunderstandings from the very beginning, as already at the level of preparations to the introduction of changes, the actual type of teaching was not specified. Dorota Klus-Stańska and Marzenna Nowicka discuss the problem of defining comprehensive education, among others, in the book *Sensy i bezsensy edukacji wczesnoszkolnej* (*The Sense and Non-sense of Early School Education*). The authors draw attention to the fact that the curriculum in early elementary education is rather based on free, mainly verbal, associations with a given topic, than on a deep, multi-aspect integration of the students' knowledge (Klus-Stańska, Nowicka 2005: 182–220).

According to Frołowicz, in 'the scope of music education in early elementary grades it [introduction of the integrative education model – note: M.P.] resulted in marginalising the subject of music in school activity.' (Frołowicz 2011: 9). Similar fears are expressed by Beata Kamińska: 'a lack of division into subjects in early elementary education [...] can, in consequence, lead to the exposure of one subject which is the closest to a given teacher, and to marginalisation of others.' (Kamińska 2013: 167). Whereas Szatan, on the basis of her own research and observations, claims that negligence and neglect in early music education has been present for a long time, since 'Teachers are often aware of their incomplete qualifications (e.g. caused by a lack of previous predispositions). Therefore, in compliance with the medical principle *primum non nocere*, they prefer to neglect activities rather than do harm.' (Szatan 2006: 226). The only music activity that does not go beyond the teachers' comfort zone seems to be children's songs.

In fact, children's songs in such an – integrative – teaching method took a 'special' place. They ceased to be treated only as a basis for music education or integrative-organisational activity. They 'are promoted' in this model to the source of reliable knowledge on the world, whereas, the selection of repertoire strictly depends on the topic of the block of classes or a specific lesson, for example: songs about winter, songs about a family, songs about nature, etc. Music education historians indicate that thematic cycles currently executed in early education have roots in the socialist model of education developed in the fifties of the 20th century. Jadwiga Uchyla-Zroski writes:

All environmental artistic events were subjected to the events of social life. They were regulated by the so-called annual calendar, for example: harvest festival, Women's Day,

⁴ In the currently binding curriculum for I–III grades, we read as follows: 'In primary school, at the 1st educational stage comprising I–III grades – early education, education is provided in the form of integrative education.' (p. 15) Whereas, an explanation of the type of educational activity which should be understood by this concept is missing.

Mother's Day, Children's Day, Advent, Christmas, carnival, Easter, political holidays: 1st May, Armed Forces Day, anniversary of the October Revolution. Usually these events were accompanied by rural meetings, lectures and entertainment such as: performances of school youth, fetes, folk games in the open air, buffet (Uchyla-Zroski 2013: 102).

Although names of some holidays have changed, the idea of insistently repeating the same thematic scheme has survived until today in the early education curricula. The role of children's songs in this scheme is inferior, auxiliary to the binding thematic calendar. Jerzy Dyląg writes in this context of 'excessive exploitation of children's songs.' (Dyląg 2006: 235). In the aforementioned professional music education systems (by Jaques-Dalcroze, Orff, Kodály), chants and songs constitute the basis of vocal, auditory and performative development – thus, the contents thereof depend on vocal and emission capabilities of a child, and selection of a repertoire covers pieces of high artistic value. Currently, the high artistic quality of children's songs does not seem to be perceived as crucial – it is rather important that the youngest sing 'on the subject of' or 'on the occasion of'. In Małgorzata Cackowska's opinion, children are simply 'doomed to kitsch' in the scope of a cultural offer of institutional education (Cackowska 2015: 278). Therefore, it is worth quoting Maria Przychodzińska-Kaciczak: 'The tendency of pedagogues to accept average repertoire is not a good phenomenon, since music on an everyday basis – a song, has a significant impact on developing music taste of children.' (Przychodzińska-Kaciczak 1979: 200–201).

Texts of children's songs present a schematic, simplified picture of the world. Whereas, their presence in early education is often literal and omits the metaphorical sense. A good example can be including the song *Była sobie żabka mała* (*There Once Was a Little Frog*) in the strictly nature-related topic 'Residents of ponds and lakes'. While looking through educational packages prepared with a view of implementing the core curriculum in early education, one can find more of such absurdity. Klus-Stańska and Nowicka give the following examples: 'The subject *Autumn* can involve colouring illustrations, learning a song about chestnuts or a chat on changes in nature occurring in autumn. It will not bring anything explorative to students' thinking process or knowledge.' (Klus-Stańska, Nowicka 2005: 184). Furthermore, authors cite a proposition of conducting with students the subject 'Forest' with a song *Jesteśmy jagódki* (*We are Small Berries*) (Klus-Stańska, Nowicka 2005: 189). It raises quite significant doubts of a didactic nature. Rafał Majzner also notices that children's songs in the integrative education model provide only a background for other classes, while, his research implies unambiguously that the text of the work is almost always related to the subject of the day's block (Majzner 2017: 203–207).

Children's songs have been permanently instilled in the teachers' lesson plans in early education, which is also evidenced by classes I conducted with early education

students at the University. While preparing lesson plans for I–III grades, the majority of seventy students proposed ‘implementation’ of a subject selected by themselves by an introduction of a poem (rhyme) and a song. It is worth underlining that the selection of a song was random – it was usually the first title that popped up after entering the words ‘a song about... (spring, autumn, family, animals, etc.)’ in the search engine. Students admitted that they had not familiarised themselves more with a selected work, since they believed that as far as the title of the song ‘fitted’ the subject of a lesson, there was no need to critically assess contents thereof. I suspect that this is the effect of the school socialisation they had experienced as pupils. However, this issue would require conducting more insightful research, so it has only been signalled herein.

Summary

It is undeniable that among available children’s songs one can find works that are valuable in artistic terms, as well as the ones that stimulate cognitive development by, for instance, facilitating memorisation of selected information, enriching children’s vocabulary, asking questions about various spheres of human life. I will not, however, agree with the statement that by learning a song about spring aimed at presenting the artistic (sometimes pseudo-artistic) vision of this season, a child will learn about seasons as a natural phenomenon. Such use of songs during lessons in early education rather evokes in me associations with teachers’ survival strategies by Peter Woods: in this depiction, children’s songs take a place somewhere between ‘A ritual and routine’ by creating ‘well-known frameworks giving a sense of security’ and ‘Occupational therapy’ aimed at ‘doing something, doing something continuously regardless of whether it makes sense.’ (Janowski 1995: 184).

Therefore, it would be worth re-thinking what place children’s songs can and should take in early education. I would like to propose to, in the first place, concentrate on selecting high quality works for children, not necessarily related to the subject discussed within other educational areas. Instead of searching for superficial links between a given song and a main subject, one may reflect more deeply on the message thereof, conduct analysis of the verbal and melodic layer, and in the end, invite students to present their own interpretations (verbal, musical, vocal, artistic). Then, children’s songs will be able to fulfil an educational function.

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Summary

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The aim of this article is to problematize the category of children's songs and to critically characterise the functions that children's songs fulfil (or should fulfil) in early education. The author presents various perspectives of describing children's songs as specific texts of culture, as well as points out their place in organised forms of early music education. Both subject literature and the author's personal experience reveal that the postulated value of children's songs vanishes when confronted with the requirement of so-called 'integrated education'.

Keywords

children's song, music for children, early education, cultural offer for children

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