

Why Folksongs?¹

by Shirley W. Wilson

Many teachers of elementary vocal music have discovered that folksongs can serve as the most useful body of musical literature for children. In devising the school curriculum, they must make choices among all kinds of songs that textbook companies and independent songbook editors present for teaching music basics.

As in the “real literature” versus basal reader debate among language arts professionals, there remains a difference of opinion regarding the type of songs that should form the foundation for elementary school music.

As Jane Thurber, Koda'ly curriculum instructor and longtime practitioner has stated, “A subject worth teaching requires sequence and scope that are coherent, memorable, and worth doing from year to year as a body of skills and information. Add to this the values of aesthetics and creative expression in music, and the order is indeed “tall!” Through years of teaching vocal music to children, I remain convinced that folksongs satisfy the requirements better than any alternative type.”

Ms. Thurber defines a folksong as a song “handed down through oral tradition without its creator “setting” it in any particular written form. Often we don’t know the origin, even though the song may tell us much about ethnicity or occupation. With close links to the rhythms and inflections of language, it usually expresses ordinary people’s daily activity and important events of life. At some point, often years after the song’s beginning, a collector of folksongs has caught it on tape or in manuscript.”

How does this folksong legacy mesh with the elementary school music curriculum? What direct skills can a teacher develop in her students using these songs?

Affective learning results through the study of folksongs for their musical and social traditions. Children experience sharing and comparing such song-types as lullabies, courting songs, work, play and party songs. These not only are fun, but are helpful for children in exploring musical and verbal meanings from the past and present. Students can compare differences as well as find common traits in musical styles and textual themes. This study leads to appreciation and understanding of other cultures.

The uncomplicated nature of folksongs, largely due to the process of oral transmission, allows easy extraction of musical elements and concepts. Ms. Thurber continues, “Melodies are usually pentatonic, meaning they contain the five basic interval relationships of DO RE MI SO and LA, minus the FA and TI, so often poorly tuned in singing because of their half step (close) distance from more stable neighboring sounds... Rhythms and meters follow natural speech patterns and are expressed for quite awhile unconsciously before spoken with rhythm names.”

Likewise, the clear display of form in folksongs, the perceived likenesses and differences, give useful examples to children. These, then, offer teachers a springboard to introduce the larger choral and orchestral schemes of “classical” music.

In addition, folksongs offer appropriate material for the development of vocal technique in children. These songs, with some exceptions, contain ranges that are narrow. By transposing the tonal level to higher or lower levels of pitch, teachers can create greater singing comfort for the child, and therefore greater accuracy. As the child becomes more comfortable in a certain range, that level can be raised or lowered to stretch the vocal parameters. Singing a graduated range of pitches, from narrow to broad, gives the child opportunity to fully develop his or her own vocal skills.

The use of folksongs also gives children opportunities to sing solo lines and lead other children through call and response and game activities. These “fun” experiences foster musical independence and collegiality.

Folksongs offer fertile soil for creativity and improvisation. Textually, children learn skill in the endless opportunities to add on verses or substitute words according to a given rhyme scheme. In games and dances, children find rhythm patterns and free form movements easy to create. Teachers have found the singing of simultaneous partner songs useful for encouraging sound combinations that are pleasing to the ear. Besides partnering, two-part thinking is nurtured by the addition of parts to enhance a folksong. These “experiments” provide the basis for learning to sing in harmony, as well as opportunities for improvisation and creativity.

In conclusion, then, we can say that benefits abound in the study of folksongs. Authentic music that has been presented through generations of ordinary life experiences, when used with children, offers a practical, rich, foundation for all aspects of elementary school music.

¹ adapted and expanded from an article by Jane F. Thurber, *The Laurel Letter*, Bloomfield, CT, Fall 1994.