Youth Music Spotlighting Programme

London Symphony Orchestra Discovery

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INTRODUCTION

Youth Music's Spotlighting Programme is a process for sharing effective practice. It aims to document effective practice from a wide variety of different sources, evaluate the impact and benefits and share more widely. Its ultimate aim is to raise standards of practice in the early childhood arts and education sectors by making good practice more visible.

LSO Discovery, the London Symphony Orchestra's community and music education programme has a long-standing early years strand and offers a range of opportunities in music for young children and their parents including weekly sessions, workshops and family concerts. LSO Discovery was invited to contribute to Youth Music Spotlighting by tracking early years work in a Children's Centre in North London over one complete term. The Children's Centre sessions were selected for spotlighting because they represent LSO's work in the community and can be related to children's centre work that many others are now doing across both arts and education sectors.

What did we do?

The Children's Centre work consisted of two sessions led by Vanessa King, the LSO's animateur who specialises in early childhood music. The first session was for mothers with their babies and toddlers and the second for three- to four- year-olds attending the nursery class.

All the sessions were recorded on video and in written notes by a member of the LSO Discovery team. As evaluator, I attended three sessions to observe and write field notes and a final session was attended by a Alison Harmer, an expert film-maker who is also an early years music specialist. Several meetings took place between the LSO team members, the evaluator and Youth Music staff to review and discuss the work, including the video material.

As part of the spotlighting process Youth Music has identified a common set of ingredients which contribute to effective early years music making practice. The full list of ingredients can be found on the spotlighting website. My aim has been to identify elements of the LSO Discovery Early Years practice that illustrate the 'ingredients' in practice. Rather than try to illustrate the complete list, we focussed on those which are best represented by the LSO work, as follows:

- Using appropriate approaches for learning
- Understanding children's musicality
- Building on previous development
- Integrating creativity, culture and curriculum
- Providing inspirational musical experiences
- Documenting, reflecting and evaluating

Using these as a set of categories we reviewed and analysed the notes and video data. The core theme we arrived at to describe the LSO approach is **'musical give and take'**.

In Section 1 that follows I describe this theme and explain why I think it is important and valuable for early years music to re-direct its attention to the pedagogical ideas that are contained within this theme. Then in Section 2 I illustrate this theme with a set of 6 elements that are described in paragraphs that link with video clips drawn from the LSO sessions.

SECTION 1: MUSICAL GIVE AND TAKE

Introduction

A contrast is often made in general early years pedagogy between child-centred (or child-led, child-initiated) practice and adult-led (or adult initiated, content-led) practice as if the two are complete opposites. In fact no practice is ever one or the other, but is always a combination of input from both adults and children. No adult introducing musical material to children – a song, say – chooses that song without having the children in mind or ploughs on singing regardless of how the children are joining in. Likewise, adults who create situations in which children can initiate their own musical starting points are often exerting quite a lot of influence over the environment and what they choose to focus on or ignore. So rather than talking about adult-centred or child centred, it is useful to think whose musical ideas provide the initial starting points, the child's or the adult's, and then think about how those musical ideas are developed in practice through **musical give and take** between adults and children.

The long-standing tradition in music education, particularly early childhood music education, has leaned heavily towards practice in which the adult introduces the activities to a group of children and takes a strong lead. Putting it simply, the adult gives and the children take. Quite rightly this didactic model has been criticised for giving little agency or fostering creativity among the children. An alternative approach prompted by increased understanding of children's own musical competences and by an emphasis on children's creativity in education has been gaining ground in recent years. According to this alternative model, children's own musical ideas and spontaneous improvisations, perhaps with voice or on instruments become the starting points for the work. The adult 'tunes in' to the children's spontaneous music, takes up their musical ideas and develops them in to musical exchanges. This approach recognises that children are musically creative and have their own kind of musicality. It has become a hallmark of contemporary practice, notably by those working with the Reggio Emilia philosophy where child initiated creativity is key.

But while we have been busy rebalancing music education practice by giving attention to child-initiated approaches, developing good practice where the musical ideas are introduced by the adult and developed through musical 'give and take' has tended to take a back seat. This is where the work of the LSO Discovery early years programme can make a valuable contribution in raising standards of practice. But because this model of practice may seem, at first, to go 'against the grain' of current, contemporary, creative practice in early years music education and draw us back to traditional approaches that have been criticised, I need to justify this focus and look at the set of challenges that it raises.

The Aim

The aim of this LSO spotlighting then is to look at practice where the adult mainly introduces the musical ideas and develops them through give and take with the children. The important principle now is that if adults are to introduce musical

activities to children so that they can fully engage, then the match between the musical activities and the children's capabilities must be just right. Say, for example, the song is sung too fast, or at a pitch that is too high or too low, or the actions too complicated for them to manage, then the children will not be able to step aboard musically. Getting this match right requires knowledge and expertise.

It can be useful to look outside of music in considering these key ideas of match and expertise. When children are learning to read, first reading books are chosen with great care to have just the right level of challenge and teachers are highly trained in how to teach reading, breaking it down in to skills that are taught step-by-step to children. Add to this the fact that learning to read is given high value and it is taken for granted that every child will be able to learn, however slowly it might progress. It's not fashionable at the moment to talk of learning and teaching in early childhood music. All kinds of other terms such as 'co-construct', 'support', 'facilitate', 'participate' are used but the term teaching tends to be avoided because it can carry dark overtones of dull, uncreative work being crammed in to young children too early and against their natures. Those who have entered early years music from the community music background often conceive of their work as being at the other end of the spectrum from 'teaching'.

Drawing on Research

It is useful to take a detour in to some recent research in early years education. Research is often called upon to back up the inclusion of music in early childhood, but it is used selectively and often with a political agenda clearly in mind. Here I am calling up research in to effective early years practice, not specifically about music. The Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE) project (2004) and its follow-on research project Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) were large-scale government funded research projects that have investigated what quality practice in early childhood looks like. Both have been very influential on *general* early years practice in this country. They found that children learned best when there was an equal balance of child initiated and adult initiated practice and also, they learned best, not surprisingly, when staff have high levels of pedagogical expertise. They also found that children learned best when activities were cognitively (for which we can add musically) challenging and framed in interactions that they termed 'sustained shared thinking'. So what I want to propose is that in the recent drive to develop child-initiated music practice, adult initiated practice, together with all the skills and strategies that are required to facilitate children's learning, has been out of the spotlight. These skills and strategies we might traditionally call 'teaching'.

In pointing out this need to refocus attention on adult-initiated and guided practice I am not calling for a return to traditional adult-led models of music education in which children are passive 'takers' without any opportunity to be givers. Nor am I suggesting that child-initiated models of practice in which children's spontaneous musical ideas are fostered and built upon should not also be developed. Most of my research and writing over many years has focussed on children's spontaneous musicality and how adults might best support and intervene; so I am certainly not pushing that approach to one side. What I am arguing for is more attention to

practice in which adults introduce the musical ideas, but then develop them by matching the levels of skill and challenge carefully to the children's current capabilities so that they can join in fully and make the musical activities their own. Contemporary understandings of learning recognise that it is a two-way process both adults and children actively giving and taking and constructing the learning between them. But this model of practice requires a high level of knowledge and expertise.

Expertise

Now I step cautiously because expertise, particularly emphasising musical expertise, is a sensitive issue in community and educational music. Quite rightly there has been a strong move to promote the 'everyone is musical' message which I endorse wholeheartedly. This has been a very important shift in thinking that still needs saying loud and clear. However in side-stepping the formal performance skills of music in order to encourage musical confidence for all, the pedagogical skills and knowledge of early childhood music have been side-stepped as well, even though these are accessible to all and not complex. The situation is not helped by the fact that doing music with young children can look 'simple' on the surface; singing simple songs, knowing some activities with props, modelling actions. But the apparent simplicity belies how complex and skilful good practice is and what expertise and knowledge should underpin the practice so that babies and the very young are offered the best opportunities.

However acquiring this music pedagogical expertise takes a lot of time, hard work and commitment to acquire. It cannot be picked up in the typical one day training courses. Those who teach music in secondary schools music must have post-graduate qualifications from full-time training courses. Yet we don't set the same professional expectations for the youngest children, no qualifications are required, even though in many respects teaching in this age phase is the most demanding and difficult of all age phases, and the most important age to get it right.

The elements of music pedagogical expertise are:

- Knowing about children's musical development
- Knowing how children learn in music
- Knowing about music and how to design music-learning activities

In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss each one in more detail.

Knowing about children's musical development

The Youth Music ingredients include the recommendation to **build on previous development.** It is not only important to build on what children can already do but also to have some ideas of where children's musical development might be heading. The early years music age phase spans babies right through to school age and obviously this spans the most dramatic and rapid developmental changes. The aim is not to hem children in to rigid models of development – first sing two notes, now three for example. But on the other hand, some idea of how children typically learn

in music provides templates for knowing what to look for and understanding what we observe and hear children doing. Observing children carefully and **documenting** what children do is only half the story, reviewing observations in the light of what we know about children's ways of being musical, analysing them and then using developmental models to suggest what to plan for next is the rest of the story.

Documenting has become associated with Reggio inspired approaches in which children are encouraged to find their own musical starting points, but it's equally, if not more, important with adult-led music work, particularly group work. Observing and making notes about individual children's participation in adult-led work is rarely done, and yet is vital if we are to understand how children are engaging, what they are able to do and how they are progressing. It takes skill and practice to learn to focus on the children's participation and notice it, while at the same time managing the activities, particularly with a group. At first another adult can be asked to record the children's participation or video recordings made which are then reviewed. Even simple checklists of how many children are singing; what they are singing, whether they seem to know the words or not, whether they can manage movement actions, can be very revealing. The fundamental question is to ask what exactly are individual children doing musically and how can we help them to progress?

Knowing how children learn

There is considerable, research, theory and practice-based knowledge about how young children learn and how best to foster their learning. Young children are eager to learn and do their utmost to make sense of what is presented to them. Therefore we have a responsibility to try to support them in their learning by making the musical experiences most accessible. To give one example: it's widely agreed that young children learn to perceive and perform rhythms through bodily movement. Many early childhood educators know to include movement in their music sessions. But there are many questions to ask. What type of bodily movements best support children's learning of rhythm? What bodily movements might come first and how do we extend on from these first movements? What pace, type and style of movements are best in relation to children's body size? How do body and mind connect? How does this learning take place?

Thinking about these questions then puts the focus back on children's musical development and the need to observe children. Observing children carefully and thoughtfully often provides the answers.

Knowing about music and how to design music-learning activities

It may seem to be stating the obvious to say that early childhood music educators should know something about music. It is often frowned upon as elitist to suggest that adults working with young children should have musical skills and knowledge but to provide good musical experiences for children, the adults clearly need to have musical competence themselves.

And then there is one step more. There is a kind of knowledge about how to design activities that will support children's learning. This is the junction at which music, children and the teaching context are all taken in to consideration in deciding what

to do; both planning in advance and the on-the-hoof thinking that takes place while the session with children is in flow. This kind of knowledge can be termed 'pedagogical content knowledge'. It is the kind of knowledge that is often the content of training courses, but is rarely made explicit.

LSO DISCOVERY EARLY YEARS MUSIC

Holding all these thing things in mind, we turn now to look at the LSO Discovery early years music programme. The LSO programme promotes a music-centred approach in which the adult mainly introduces the musical ideas. The aim of music-centred practice is to immerse children in a wide variety of quality musical experiences from which they will absorb, learn and actively contribute. It values musical and pedagogical expertise and it values the musical 'give and take' which is key to all meaningful musical experience. The early years music education specialist, Vanessa King works in partnership with orchestral players who visit the sessions.

As a national orchestra, the LSO clearly has a team of musicians with outstanding skills. The aim of this spotlight is not to emphasise the LSO representing the world of classical orchestral playing, but to show how the key elements of LSO early years practice and the ways in which it is done can be applied to any practice. But, they do require, at heart, a fundamental conception of the aims of working in music with young children which says **three important things to children** –

1. you have your own musicality and your own pathway of development which we want to foster

2. one way to foster that is to introduce you to the cultural backpack of music and musical skills which are your entitlement and

3. we should do that in ways that best suit your current abilities and cultural background, and your ways of being able to participate.

What are the key elements?

- A musical **environment** with lots of varied, quality music
- A focus on **listening** very attentively
- The musical **variety** creates changes of mood, changes of pace (from high energy to still), changes of dynamic (from loud to complete quiet) -
- The music gives **repetition** and structure to the session which creates familiarity and confidence
- The musical **variety** enables a variety of musical experiences – singing, moving, leading, following, initiating and improvising
- The repetition and structure foster responsiveness, communication and participation

All these things combined - the quality musical environment, the listening, the varied musical experiences, communication and participation, repetition and confidence, foster **learning.**

The following paragraphs each encapsulate key dimensions of the LSO practice and were written to accompany each of the video clips that appear on the Youth Music Spotlighting Website.

MUSICAL GIVE AND TAKE

1 MUSICAL ENVIRONMENT

In talking about musical environment I have in mind not just the space and any resources, but also the music that is played and heard in that environment. Each session contains a lot of varied music; not just songs, but instrumental music or recorded music to listen to, move to. Most importantly Vanessa creates a listening environment, encouraging everyone to listen carefully, talking in whispers and drawing the children in to listen and models listening attentively herself. She has in mind a plan of the session in which it unfolds musically, with a quiet recorder tune to start which draws everyone in to listening, a song that visits each child in turn, a rise in pace and energy with a movement game and so on, until the session quietens with a final listening to lullaby music.

In order to centre the music and musical experiences, other aspects of the environment are pared down and uncluttered. Vanessa talks very little. She uses words to give simple, clear instructions to parents or children but otherwise often speaks very little, preferring to use gestures or modelling. As the sessions progress and familiarity builds, parents and children soon gain confidence to participate, and to participate in their own way, with little extra direction needed. Vanessa may make small comments to praise children, particularly the nursery age children, or to point out to parents something that their children are doing, but otherwise comments about participation are kept to a minimum.

Resources are also kept simple but good quality. There are some small hand-held percussion instruments that are used sparingly and a few small puppets, but the use of props and other material objects is kept minimal. Again, the sparing use of material things keeps the focus on the musical sound, on listening, on moving rhythmically, on singing and on joining in musically.

This clip shows the conclusion of a session with mothers and their babies and toddlers. The session was coming to a close with a quiet resting and listening moment. Vanessa then picked up on one baby tapping the floor, the double bass player joined in by improvising in matching pace and dynamic and the mothers and babies participated in varying ways. Notice how they are confident and free to ‘do their own thing’ within the structure and music offered to them – ‘give and take’. Vanessa is not saying anything, but all the time checks around the group to be sure the small improvised activity is engaging and to decide how to continue or when to draw it to a close.

Obviously very few of us will have a double bass player on hand to improvise, but the activity could have developed equally well with just tapping and voice sounds – dum-di-dum or a made-up hummed melody.

2 CHILDREN'S MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the areas of expertise that practitioners working in early years music will require is a knowledge of how children might typically progress in all areas of musical activity - their singing, their moving to music, their rhythmic abilities, their listening and participating with others. Educational practice has moved on from having rigid ideas of development (first children should do this and next this) and now recognises that children's social and cultural experiences of music are all very different. But being able to make broad predictions about what children of certain ages might typically be able to do and how they learn, allows music practitioners to plan their work intentionally so that children make progress.

In the book *Music with the Under Fours* I give an outline of children's typical musical development and how adults might support their development. I stress again that this is only to provide a template for planning practice and children are all individual and will make music in their own unique ways.

The most important skill for the adult practitioner is to learn to observe the children very attentively to see what they are able to do and perhaps what they are not able to do. With group work when the adult is busy introducing and guiding the activities it is particularly challenging to also be alert to each child as an individual and what they are doing. All too often adults are busy teaching but with a low level of awareness of exactly how the children are participating. Vanessa deliberately looks all the time from child to child and listens very attentively. This allows her to adjust what she is doing so that children can achieve more. She might, for example, change the pace of a song to fit their movements better, or she might change the pitch of a song so that individual children can 'get on board' with singing more easily. Although most activities are directed at the group as a whole, she often has ways of allowing children to contribute something individually (offering a movement and setting the style and pace of that movement, or singing a solo response in a song) and these strategies allow group practice to be differentiated to individual children.

3 REPETITION

In the video clips we see how songs or activities are repeated many times by Vanessa both within a session and between sessions. She often 'stays' with an activity so that babies, parents, young children really can engage fully.

To repeat an activity when working with young children may be intuitive and obvious, but do we stop to think why and how?

We may repeat a song, or an activity so that children can:

- listen, learn & memorise (e.g. the words, the melody, the rhythm)
- practise a skill (e.g. pitching their voices, performing a rhythm, moving in time)
- engage fully in the music-making and enjoy being 'in the flow'
- extend the music-making by adding something of their own
- take a turn at a key role (e.g. leading an action)

If you know why, then that influences what is repeated and how.

- To memorise: repeating with a focus on just one part or one element (e.g. how the rhythm goes, how the melody sounds) and with attentive listening
- To practise: repeating in a certain way to help the skill learning (e.g. doing it more slowly, giving instructions as the movements are being performed, checking the pitch suits the children's voices)
- To engage fully: repeating in a way that raises the enjoyment and energy
- To extend and add: repeating in a looser way, with 'gaps' for children to add their own
- To take a turn: repeating with individual children changing roles.

4 VARIATION

Clearly no repetition is exactly the same – so variation is always a key part. Variation is for musical reasons and pedagogical reasons, and the two can overlap. We may vary by:

Changing the pace:

- A song or movement activity may be performed at different tempi (speeds). Doing something very slowly may give the children a chance to pitch their voices clearly, coordinate their movements and will help to calm. Doing something very fast raises the excitement and enjoyment levels and also asks the children to learn to control their voices and/or body movements.

Changing the pitch:

- A song can be sung at different pitches, or an instrument play different pitches, to create musical interest, to give children a chance to explore the range of their voices and to help them perceive and learn about changes of pitch.

Changing the dynamic:

- Varying the loud and soft of musical sounds, singing and movements adds drama and mood. Very quiet sounds can encourage attentive listening. Loud sounds can raise excitement, or even cause some young children distress, but used carefully can be thrilling.

All too often musical activities for young children are performed uniformly with little variation; medium pace, medium loudness and at the same pitch. Recorded songs are usually 'up-beat', party style in pace and dynamic and are often too fast for children to sing along with and offer little musical change of mood.

Give and Take

While at first the 'give' with a new activity introduced by the adult may come almost entirely from the adult and the 'take' be all from the children, as the song and activity becomes known, the balance can change, so that 'give' is from the children and the 'take' from other children and the adult.

5 WORKING WITH PARENTS

Obviously a session for babies and very young children is also about working with parents. Working with the baby and parent pair requires a specific model of practice. The 'feel' of a session is subtle, but can be crucial in encouraging parents to feel comfortable and to sustain their attendance.

- Easy arrival with push-chairs, removing outdoor clothing
- Flexible start time and easy integration for late-comers
- Individual welcomes; learning everyone's name
- Relaxed atmosphere; a 'low-key', warm informality
- Appropriate but minimal instructions to guide parents' participation
- No public comments on individual children's or parents' participation [unless someone's behaviour is negatively impacting on the participation of others]
- Occasional comments to point out how children typically respond or join in
- Modelling for parents – both musically and in how they might manage their children's participation

Vanessa not only expects the parents to take ideas from her session, she also recognises that the parents 'give' to the session as well. Rather than 'one way traffic' in which it is assumed that the session needs to provide parents with ideas of music to do at home, she looks for 'two way traffic' between home and session music and expects to build on what parents are already doing.

Different parents will parent in different ways and their style of parenting will be on show in the session. In first sessions they will want to know how they are expected to participate and to feel they 'fit in'. Music sessions tend to fit closest to a white, middle class model of mothering where the mothers give scaffolded assistance to their children and are used to joining in, playfully. For fathers, for parents of different socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds, this model of parenting may not be as familiar or come to them as easily. Understanding and recognising these differences, the attentive practitioner will vary their approach. It's another example of 'give and take'.

It is also about remembering that the mothers may have many reasons for coming to a session, beyond just the music – it may be an important break, a chance to socialise and get out of the house. Musically the mothers will be able to learn songs and activities that they can take away from the session and do at home with their children. For some families, participation may be about learning language skills and for the children to socialise in group activities. Being aware of all these different reasons why taking part in music sessions can be valuable is important for music leaders.

6 WORKING WITH ORCHESTRAL PLAYERS

In this video clip you will see how there is also musical **give and take** between the orchestral player, Vanessa, the parents and the children.

The instrumental player can provide music for focused listening opportunities or to add to and enhance the ongoing activities of the session. For many children the opportunity to hear and see live instruments being played is something completely new and exciting.

It can be useful to think of two types of 'engagement' for children. 'Absorbed engagement' and 'interactive engagement'. Providing a small-scale, high quality performance on the instrument is highly absorbing to children. In 'absorbed engagement' they are often quite still, quiet and highly attentive, watching and listening. We all know this type of engagement. Children are taking in an enormous amount of information and actively processing it. It may seem as if they are passive but their minds are very active. High quality performance, being able to see the music made, live, in the moment, on an instrument with a distinct timbre, is a rare, but very valuable opportunity for children.

The LSO obviously has the advantage of a large pool of instrumental players who also work in community projects. Many regional orchestras have outreach and community programmes and may be able to provide players for one-off visits. Equally, parents, staff often have instrumental skills.

The instrumental players need a certain 'skill set' for working in early childhood music. They need to be able to:

- Observe the group attentively
- Improvise to match mood, tempo and dynamic
- Follow or lead, and know when each are appropriate
- Pick up the pitch, melody, tempo of songs and activities and join in
- Perform a memorized repertoire of music suitable for different types of musical experience
- Talk to young children in age-appropriate language

The visiting instrumental players must also have general professional attributes: be reliable, flexible, know how to behave in early childhood settings and abide by safety policies.