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### Nurturing the Musical "Open-Earedness" of Seven-Year-Olds

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**Chapter 8**  
**Nurturing the Musical “Open-earedness” 7-year-olds**  
**Diane Persellin**

Today’s 7- year-old children exhibit openness and excitement about many genres of musical styles experienced in their every day lives and in their ever widening world. As these young children from around the world are growing out of their early childhood, they continue to enjoy singing, dancing, moving, and playing at home or on the playground alone or with extended family members as they have since they were toddlers. Many still delight in sharing songs that they have learned at school from their friends and teachers, at home from their parents and siblings, or as they begin to participate in music lessons. Some 7- year-olds still enjoy creating their own spontaneous songs much as they did when they were younger. Music is an important part of their expanding world.

In this digital age, many 7-year olds also now relish in singing and dancing to their iPods, television programs, boom boxes, electronic games, computers, and other modern musical toys and instruments. They collect CDs, DVDs, and MP3s of their favorite music. Increasingly, these children learn from popular culture through radio and television programs, from observing older siblings and parents engaged in music technology, and from imitating and emulating popular tunes and advertisement jingles (Campbell & Lum, 2007). Johnson-Green and Custodero (2002) noted the powerful response that music in the media elicits from children as young as 1 and 2- years old. In a large study with over 2000 8 to 18-year-olds in the United States, 8-year-old children were found to listen to a variety of types of music an average of one hour per day (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

Young children and their parents enthusiastically support diverse genres of digital music. One label, *Baby Rock*, caters to parents in their 30s and 40s and features renditions of lullabies and early childhood songs in the style of The Cure, The Beach Boys, and Metallica (La Gorce, 2006). Another popular recording company, *Putumayo Kids*, was created to introduce children to cultures of the world through music and has become one of the world's leading children's record labels. Amazon.com and iTunes feature hundreds of classical music recordings of many categories and traditions targeting young listeners.

This enthusiasm, acceptance, and preference for a wide-variety of musical genres by young children have been a topic of great interest. Hargreaves (1982) has labeled this characteristic as “open-earedness” and found that children under the age of 5 are accepting of many genres of music. He has found that this open-earedness appears to wane as children grow older and become less tolerant of a broader range of music in favor of popular music. As they develop, 9 and 10-year-old children may become more interested in popular music that is shared by their peers and family members and reinforced by media.

Several children who were interviewed in the MPMM study exhibited broad and eclectic musical interests as 7-year olds. Would they maintain these interests in diverse music styles and genres over the next few years of their lives? Would active participation in age-appropriate music classes, lessons, and experiences support their broad interests or would their interest narrow as they aged? In this chapter, I review the literature examining the evidence of open-earedness of young children and the studies documenting how this interest wanes as children age. I discuss music preferences and open-earedness of two 7-year olds from the United States. As an extension of this study, three years later I revisited the two children from the United States who had participated in the MPMM study again as 10-year olds to interview them and their

parents to determine if their music preferences and open-earedness had changed over the course of three years and, if so, what influences were influential in contributing to these changes.

### **The open-earedness theory**

In the early 1980s, Hargreaves (1982) examined aesthetic reactions to music with groups of children from 7 to 15 years of age as well as in a study (Hargreaves, 1987) with children 4 to 7 years old. He found age-related changes in liking for unfamiliar melodies with a significant decrease from age 4–5 to age 6–7. From his research, he coined the term “open-earedness” in which younger children tend to be more ‘open-eared’ to forms of music regarded by older listeners as “unconventional”. He found an existence of aesthetic openness to more types of music from younger children before these wider and more accepting habits began to wane by age 6 and the music window appeared to narrow.

Hargreaves and LeBlanc led studies to extend this initial research with additional studies on open-earedness (LeBlanc, 1991; LeBlanc, Sims, Siivola, & Obert, 1996; Hargreaves, North, & Tarrant, 2006) suggesting (a) younger children are more open-eared and are less likely to reject classical music or music of an unfamiliar style, (b) open-earedness declines as the child enters adolescence. Five-year old children had a high level of preference and liked many types of music, but preference levels then declined to a low point at age 10.

Gembris and Schellberg (2003) also found evidence for an open-earedness effect. The authors investigated preferences of elementary school children for music of four different styles (classical, ethnic, avant-garde, pop). For the preference measurement, they used a sound questionnaire and an iconographic rating scale (smiley-face scale). The authors found an increase in disliking for classical music for children 7 to 10 years and a constant level of liking for popular music. The ratings for avant-garde and ethnic music remained constant from grades 1 to

3 (in the scale of 'liking') and moved to disliking by the age of 10. Schellberg & Gembris, (2004) confirmed these results in a second study. With increasing age, all pieces of music were judged more negatively. These changes in preferences were highly significant regarding all types of music. Kopiez and Lehmann (2008) also found a decline of open-earedness for unconventional music (classical, ethnic and avant-garde music) between the ages of 7 and 8 years.

Brunger (1984) also found an open-earedness for unfamiliar styles of music with younger children, declining gradually with increasing age. He found that this open-earedness disappeared in most children by the age of 9. One example of this trend was with a Mozart aria. More than half of the 5 and 6-year-olds liked the Mozart aria, but with each additional year, the dislike of this music grew more strongly. Similar patterns emerged for examples of the classical music of Bach, Mozart, and Mendelssohn as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century art music and ethnic music. Younger pupils indicated liking this music. By the age of 10, however, children indicated a strong rejection of these types of music. The results confirm an open-earedness for unfamiliar styles of music with the younger children, declining with increasing age. Other investigators have confirmed that younger children routinely gave higher preference scores for all recorded music excerpts that they listened to, and responded more positively to all music excerpts presented than older children (Brittin, 2000; LeBlanc *et al.*, 1996; Montgomery, 1996; Sloboda, 2001)

Does this open-earedness in children wane in favor of popular music? In a longitudinal study (Schellberg, 2006) 109, 7 and 8-year-olds rated their likes or dislikes of ten short pieces of music which were representative of a range of different music styles (vocal music - operetta and opera excerpts, instrumental classical music, pop music, 20<sup>th</sup> century art music and ethnic music). The same questionnaire was repeated one and two years later. Most of the 7-year-olds liked or tolerated the music, whereas the 8 and 9-year-old children reacted more negatively to all

excerpts except pop music.

Children's increasing preference for popular and rock styles of music has been found to increase with age (Brittin, 2000; Greer, Dorow, & Randall, 1974; Jellison & Flowers, 1991; LeBlanc, 1979, 1981, Roberts et al, 2005). Children also prefer music – popular, rock and other styles performed in faster tempi (LeBlanc, 1981, LeBlanc et al, 1988; Montgomery, 1996). Minkenberg (1991) noted that music examples with fast tempi and “suitability for dancing” were highly rated. Sims' and Cassidy's study (1997) also demonstrated that the absence or presence of lyrics did not appear to affect young children's music preferences.

In a broader qualitative study, Roulston (2006) examined music preferences of children 3 – 8 years of age through conversations and interviews with parents and children and observations of classroom settings in daycare and elementary classrooms. She found that (1) children expressed distinct preferences for an eclectic range of music from a very early age; (2) popular and rock music were frequently mentioned as preferred styles by parents and children, with movie and television soundtracks also ranking high in popularity; (3) music listening and experiences in the home described by children and parents differed considerably from what was offered in school and daycare settings. Sims and Cassidy (1997) came to an even broader conclusion that young children's music attitudes and preferences do not seem to be based on specific musical characteristics and that children may have very idiosyncratic responses and listening styles.

If children's tendencies toward open-earedness is closing and shifting in favor of popular and rock music, can their music preferences be modified? Several investigators have studied the possibility of modifying music preference of children using several various treatments. These treatments have included passive repeated exposure to unfamiliar music as well as through age-

appropriate active music instruction. Schuckert and McDonald (1968) asked children 4-6 years old to make an initial preference for one of two distinct types of music (classical or jazz). For the next four days, children passively listened to their least preferred music for five minutes while doing an unrelated task. Children were then retested to determine shifts in musical preference. While half of the children slightly increased their liking of their least preferred music, the results were not significant. This study, however, did not invite the children to move, interact, or participate in instruction with the music.

Conversely, Carper (2001) did incorporate active music instruction in his study. He presented four types of music, American popular music, children's music, Western classical music, and traditional Japanese music to young children, ages 3 - 7. Half of the children passively listened to the music. The other half of the children actively participated in six 30-minute early childhood instructional sessions. Children who actively participated in the instruction were significantly more likely to have increased preferences of the unfamiliar music. With the exception of popular music, which started at the highest level of preference and then slipped a few points following treatment, the other three types of music all increased on the preference scale with the Japanese music increasing the most. While the unfamiliar style of the Japanese music was initially less preferred than the other three types of music, it increased to the level of Western classical music. Older children in the study, the 7-year olds, indicated the strongest preference for popular music. The younger children, the 3 - 6 year olds, were still more open to all four types of music.

In two additional studies (McKoy, 2003; Shehan, 1984), music instruction did not increase world music preference to a level corresponding with initial preferences for popular music with 8 - 10 year olds. However, students' preferences for world music after instruction did increase and

were comparable to pre-instruction preferences for Western classical music. Fung and Gromko (2001) found the most dramatic change. In their study, children ages 7 – 12, who were actively moving and drawing to unfamiliar Korean music greatly increased their preference of the music (94%) compared to children who passively listened to the same music (52%).

In summary, young children are receptive to a wide range of styles of music. This open-earedness has been found to begin to decline at about the age of 5 and continues to decline until about the age of 9 or 10. As children's preferences begin to narrow, interest in popular and rock music increases undoubtedly influenced by children's easy access to music through the media. While repeated exposure to unfamiliar music through passive listening has not found to be successful at modifying children's music preferences, some investigators have been successful at modifying musical preferences of children through active music instruction. This study gives a closer snapshot of four young children at the age of 7 and again at 10 to determine if the open-earedness theory applies to them and to gain some insight into the musical lives of these young children.

### **Methods**

As part of the MPMM project, I interviewed two 7-year-old children, a boy "Brad" and a girl, "Rose" and each of their mothers on their musical interests, preferences, experiences, and instruments. All of the conversations, interviews, song sharing, and dance demonstrations were videotaped and transcribed. Both children were eager to sing and dance for me as well as share their favorite songs, games, instruments, and places to make music.

Three years later, I followed up and interviewed these two children and their mothers from the United States again to determine whether the children's musical interests had changed. Because these children were local, I also was able to interview their music teacher who had



taught them twice each week over the course of the past three years. I asked the children and their mothers the same questions from the MPMM project. I also then reminded each child, their mothers, as well as their music teacher of the responses when the children were 7-years-old and asked if and how these interests had changed and evolved. Because I was so interested in the changes and development of musical interests and preferences of these two children in the United States, I decided to interview two other children from the original MPMM study. I selected two children who, as 7-year-olds, exhibited a wide range of music preferences: a girl from Greece, “Melina” and a girl from Israel, “Sissi”. I contacted their MPMM investigators who assisted me in providing introductions to the young girls and their mothers. I was able to ask them my questions via email. In each of these cases, the MPMM investigators knew the children personally so were able to offer additional insights about the music activities of these girls. My questions were the same as those asked in the initial MPMM study as well as how their musical tastes and preferences had changed over the past three years. The children and their mothers were delighted to share the current musical interests of these girls and how they had changed since they were seven.

## **Findings**

### **The 7-year-olds**

The 15 7-year-old children from around the world who participated in the international MPMM study reported to have diverse interests in music (See Andango & Pacheco, this volume; Young, this volume). While the investigators may have selected children they knew were interested in music, the wide range of interests was striking. Many of the 15 children cited traditional children’s songs, popular children’s songs and kiddie rock songs as favorites. Their parents confirmed these interests and gave examples of these more traditional musical interests.

In addition, however, children and their parents shared examples of interest in music such as classical, opera, solo cello, country western, worship, country and western, ethnic dance, school music, popular radio music, Byzantine chants from a nearby monastery, musical theatre, songs from television, Broadway, and folk ballads.

Some of the parents in the MPMM interviews were aware of this “open-earedness” of their child and were delighted by it. The mother of “Sissi”, a 7-year-old Israeli girl who participated in this study, stated:

I can put on CDs of all kinds of music and Sissi won't say to me, “Hey, what is that stuff?” She won't say that. It's like with Bobby McFerrin: she simply sat with me and studied his website. We really researched him. We saw more and more details. And she also listened to Bach. It does something good for her. She has no prejudices about things..... I can play the CD of “Carmen” and start to sing and tell her the story. “The Magic Flute” was the same way. I told her the story. She watched it and has seen it three times already without me. . She doesn't need much mediation (introduction). A one-time mediation is enough for her and then it will open her imagination and she's already there (engaged).

Sissi, as a 7-year-old, also stated that she was a fan of film music, Bobby McFerrin, Bach, Grieg, and other classical music. She would delight in singing songs after just listening to an adult choir rehearsal. She also enjoyed playing the piano and recorder.

“Melina”, the 7-year-old girl from Greece, also enjoyed a variety of music including Greek pop and dance music, theatrical performances with music, and ethnic dance music such as samba, mambo, salsa, tango. She enjoyed listening to children's music on her CDs and playing the glockenspiel, piano and toy guitar. When she studied and before she went to bed, she listened to classical music. She also reported to enjoy listening to Byzantine chant sung by monks at a nearby monastery. Her musical tastes as a 7-year-old appeared to be broad and eclectic.

The 7-year-olds from the United States who participated in this study also delighted in listening to and singing a variety of types of music. Each of these children live in a beautiful

suburban neighborhood near their private Montessori school in large city in the Southwestern part of the country. They attend excellent music classes three times each week. Their second grade classroom teacher also enjoys sharing his favorite music with his class. The mothers of each child work primarily in the home.

“Rose” is a bright 7-year old girl who loves all types of music: simple school songs taught in music class, complex songs from Broadway musicals taught by her classroom teacher, songs heard on television such as those sung by pop singer Hannah Montana, and her parents’ songs played on the CD player in the kitchen. One of her favorite ways to enjoy music is to participate in the electronic *High School Musical* dancing game and was delighted to demonstrate that game for our interview. She especially likes to sing songs from these multiple sources on her swing set in the back yard.

While Rose’s mother stated that doesn’t feel that she nor her husband are particularly musical, they are interested in having Rose introduced to music and hope that she will play the piano. They introduced her to the CD series of classical music, *Baby Einstein*, at an early age as they felt it was important for her to become familiar with classical music. Her father enjoys singing country western songs with her, especially songs sung by Randy Travis, a popular country western singer. Rose’s classroom teacher enjoys teaching his class Broadway and standard popular classic songs such as, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from the musical film *The Wizard of Oz* and “Would You Like to Swing on a Star” from the film *Going My Way*.

When asked to demonstrate her school songs, Rose sang the two-note song, *Snail, Snail*, accurately and musically (see Figure 1). But when she ventured out to the backyard to demonstrate her favorite place to make music on the swing set, she became fully engaged in the more challenging and diverse Broadway music, singing with great enthusiasm and expression.

She appeared to forget about the interview and was only aware of her singing of these favorite songs. The swinging motion appeared to inspire her singing.

Figure 1. *Snail, Snail folksong*

**Snail, Snail**

Traditional Song from the United States



so

Snail, snail, snail, snail, Go a - round and 'round and 'round.

“Brad” attends the same private school with the same teachers as Rose. While his parents don’t claim to be musical, they enrolled him in an early childhood music program and then in violin and piano starting at age 5. Brad has a large toybox dedicated to music toys and an impressive collection of electronic games. He proudly shows off his collection of 72 CDs that he plays in his purple boom box. In addition, he has an iPod Nano full of popular and children’s music as well as music games. His mother reports that he loves to sing in the car and in his bedroom. His favorite toy appears to be the *Cha Cha Slide*, an electronic game with a rock music accompaniment and verbal dance instructions. He was happy to sing, “Here Comes a Bluebird” with perfect intonation for the interview and then improvised a simple melody using sol-fa syllables and hand signs. When he set up the electronic floor music game, *Cha Cha Slide*, however, he became more excited and would have continued to dance all evening following the verbal instructions and rock music on this electronic game. He jumped, hopped, clapped, and twirled and was thoroughly engaged by the challenge.

**Returning 3 years later: interests**

Three years later after the original MPMM interviews, I contacted four children who participated in the original study to conduct follow up interviews to determine if and how their musical interests and preferences had changed. Melina from Greece, who loved Byzantine chants and classical music, is now 10 years old and is more interested in Greek pop music rather than her more eclectic tastes as a 7-year old. She no longer discusses an interest in Byzantine chant or other more diverse types of music, and is now much more focused on the popular music that she shares with her friends and siblings. She does not participate in formal music classes or activities outside of school so has limited opportunities to reinforce her earlier interest in classical music and early Byzantine chant.

Sissi from Israel who loved opera and other classical music three years ago as a 7-year-old is now an enthusiastic fan of pop music. Her favorite artist is the British pop singer, Adele. Her mother hears her singing, dancing, and jumping on the bed to this music in her bedroom. She enjoys sharing this music with her older teenage sister. She has continued to take guitar lessons. Sissi claims to have lost all interest in opera and classical music, but her mother, however, disagrees. At a recent guitar lesson, Sissi's teacher played a recording of an Albeniz guitar concerto. Sissi was fascinated by the piece and listened to it over and over again. She continues to listen to classical music in the privacy of her own room. Her mother feels that she still loves classical music even if she is unwilling to admit this at the age of 10.

From the United States, Brad's mother and music teacher agreed that Brad's broad musical repertoire and interests have narrowed somewhat now that he is 10-years old and are now much more focused on rock and pop music. He confirmed that he is very enthusiastic about the electronic dance music of "deadmau5" (pronounced dead mouse) and in several interviews he couldn't think of any other music that he currently enjoys. However, Brad continues to

enthusiastically participate in after school music ensembles such as an instrumental tone chime choir and a community vocal choir. These programs are nurturing his broader musical interests even though he is reluctant to admit that he is delighted with these extra-curricular music programs. While Brad is eager to describe his interest in the popular music of “deadmau5”, he continues to enthusiastically participate in extracurricular music activities that focus primarily on classical and folk music. These ensembles are keeping his musical interests broad and more open.

Rose’s musical interests continue to expand as an active 10-year-old girl. Currently, she is involved in her school choir, a tone chime after-school ensemble, and in a community children’s chorus that performs with the local professional symphony orchestra. She takes great pride in these performance opportunities and delights in what she is learning in these extracurricular programs as well in her music class at school. At home, she eagerly listens to her favorite performer, Taylor Swift, a popular country western music musician. This interest continues to reflect her father’s loyalty to the country western genre. In addition, Rose is also a fan of the teenage favorite rock band, *Neon Trees*. Her mother reported that Rose is “an avid watcher of American Idol and other musical television shows like that”. Her mother reports that she still sings all of the time and her vocal repertoire heard in the house is wide and varied. Her music teacher says that Rose continues to be interested in all music. Clearly, Rose continues to be “open-eared”.

### **Summary**

All four of these children had strong and diverse musical preferences as 7-year-olds. They all were beginning to enjoy some popular and rock music, they also appeared to be delighted with other types of music including school folksongs, Broadway musicals, Byzantine chant, opera,

country western music, and ethnic dance music. When revisited three years later, they all cited and even stronger interest in popular and rock music. Rose, Sissi, and Brad are also demonstrating although were more reluctant to admit their interest in genres of music other than popular music enjoyed by their peers. Upon more careful examination, their broader musical interests exhibited at 7-years old have not disappeared and arguably are increasing. Perhaps their active participation in private music lessons, after school choirs, instrumental ensembles, music-making in the home, and quality music instruction in school has kept this interest in and openness to diverse music alive. As a 10-year-old, only Melina appears to be less interested in a wider range of music. She is not participating in formal music lessons or classes outside of school and appears to be focused only on the popular music of her peers and siblings. Because a systematic and controlled assessment of unfamiliar music wasn't conducted at the age of 7 and again at the age of 10 with these and other children, it is impossible to be more conclusive about these findings.

## **Conclusions**

Music plays an important role in human development, enhancing the growth of cognition and emotional response. It enhances children's play and may be an important means for them to learn about their world (Campbell & Lum, 2007). Rich experiences with a wide variety of music at an early age may provide a higher quality of human experience throughout a person's lifetime (Flohr & Persellin, 2011).

We have evidence that young children's ears and minds are open to a wide variety of genres of music before this interest begins to narrow in favor of music preferred by their peers or embraced by their families. It may be possible, however, that children's open-earedness can be nurtured and their musical preferences can be modified. While Schuckert and McDonald (1968)

found that musical preferences cannot be changed by passive listening to music, other investigators (Fung & Gromko, 2001; Carper, 2001) found that age-appropriate music instruction that includes singing, moving, and actively listening to a wide variety of music has the potential to change and expand music preferences in children. When children are interacting with the music in relevant ways, they may become more tolerant and accepting of that music. In addition, an enthusiastic parent or older sibling may nurture a deepening interest in a specific genre of music in the home.

Children learn more quickly in the first few years of life than at any other time. The early years of childhood represent a significant period for enhancing verbal, cognitive, physical, and musical development. This period of rapid development establishes a base for future learning. Some past interests and experiences are maintained when nurtured while novel interests are introduced and embraced (Hviid, 2012). Applied to music, the acquisition of a rich and diverse repertoire of music when children are the most open can be an important part of childhood. Parents and educators can then encourage and build on the natural positive relationship young children have with this rich storehouse of music by providing active age-appropriate music experiences for children as they develop.

Never before have we had such plentiful access to such a wide diversity of music. In the home, parents can easily download nearly any type of music from the Internet. Television offers hundreds of channels with many music programs. Today children enjoy more access to concerts and live music in their communities. While some parents are taking advantage of this broad array of music, others rely on more familiar genres such as baby rock and the music that harkens back to the sounds of their own teen years. Parents are encouraged to share excellent and diverse types of music, recorded and live, with their children of all ages. Children delight in



making music with their parents, so mothers and fathers should not be shy about singing and dancing with them.

At school, teachers can also make a concerted effort to share a wide variety of excellent music that includes opera, world music, jazz, Avant-garde, and a variety of classical music. This unfamiliar and intriguing music can be introduced and reinforced through age-appropriate hands-on instruction that includes singing, moving, actively listening, and composing simple responses to this music on classroom instruments.

While we have a rich literature about young children's musical preferences, there is, however, still much to be learned. Pop and media music are becoming more universal via the Internet, television, and movies, but the music preferences of young children may still differ by effects of age, country and gender. Further study into the development, narrowing, and nurturing of children's music preferences would make a valuable contribution to the field. This work could help parents and teachers decide how and when to introduce children to unfamiliar music and how to keep children open and enthusiastic about a broad variety of musical genres.

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### Abstract

Enthusiasm, acceptance, and preference for a wide-variety of musical genres by young children has been labeled as “open-earedness” (Hargreaves, 1982). This characteristic tends to wane as children grow older and become less tolerant of a broader range of music in favor of popular music. In this study, music preferences and open-earedness were examined of four 7-year-old children: two from the United States, one from Israel, and one from Greece. Three years later these children as ten-year-olds or their parents were interviewed again to determine if this open-earedness had diminished and, if so, what influences were influential in contributing to these changes. Findings indicated that when children continued to actively participate in music activities that included a broad repertoire, that this open-earedness may not necessarily wane as

children develop. When children interact with diverse music in relevant ways, they may remain more tolerant and accepting of that music rather than turning their attention totally to popular music shared with their peers and older siblings.

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