



# Why Do We Do That?

## Questioning Five Common Practices in Elementary Music

**Peggy D. Bennett, Ph.D.**  
Professor of Music Education  
Oberlin College Conservatory of Music

- Sometimes we follow a method, because it is convenient.
- Sometimes we are told how to do certain things, because they are “research-based.”
- Sometimes we accept “expert opinion,” because we believe experts are right.

We can all benefit (and so can our students) from reflecting on and questioning what we do and why. Five practices are addressed here: So-Mi, rhythm syllables, beat, patterns in music, and sequence of instruction.

### So-Mi

---

- Are we singing folk songs or “folk sayings” that are sung on specific intervals?
- Are we teaching intervals or teaching melodies?
- Is “school music” also beloved as “home music?”
- Is notation driving pedagogy?

A persistent observation that I believe to be based on very weak evidence, dating perhaps from studies by Werner (Revesz, 1954, *Introduction to the psychology of music*), is that the interval of a descending minor third is basic to children’s singing. . . . There was little evidence in the present corpus for a universal sol-mi-la-sol-mi melody. (Dowling, 1984, p. 161, *Cognitive processes in the perception of art*)

[My observations] agree with those of Moog (1976, *The musical experience of the preschool child*) in finding no evidence for the universality of the interval of the descending minor third. Moorehead et al. (1941-1951, *Music of young children*) found the descending minor third common only in social chants, and not in normal spontaneous songs. The cross-cultural evidence for the universality of a descending minor third outside Europe is also weak. Blacking (1967), for example, found a definite preponderance of other intervals in children’s songs of the African Venda. (Dowling, 1984, p.161, *Cognitive processes in the perception of art*)

Our eagerness to see children demonstrate skills that appear to indicate music knowledge and literacy may have sidetracked our pedagogical goals and revised our perceptions of musical heritage. . . . Musicality should be a feature of all steps toward literacy. (Bennett, 2005, p. 45, *So, why sol-mi?*)

### Beat

---

- When, where, and why did our over-performance and over-emphasis of “beat” begin?
- Why do we think that knowing and performing the “beat” is prerequisite to knowing and performing music?
- How can we teach beat with musical rather than mechanical movement, with nuance, expression, and flow rather than rigid accuracy?

"It is important not to let the way we teach rhythm be strongly influenced by how beams make the rhythm look. To avoid poor habits in reading and performing, we need to look for ways to teach rhythm, to talk about rhythm, and to teach music reading and writing that do not depend on *beams*." (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1999, p. 63, *SongWorks 2*)

"Music need not sound the way conventional notation makes it look. Performances that reflect only what is on the page – the way notes are beamed and the placement of the bar lines – are often evaluated as subpar or unmusical. Musical performances take what is given on the page and do something more with it. Part of what constitutes this "more" reflects figural groupings and categorizations." (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1999, p. 35, *SongWorks 2*)

"Movement to a song should *accompany*, not *govern*, the musical flow. Be cautious about movement that is heavy or mechanical, causing the song to sound the same way." (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, p. 65, *SongWorks 1*)

## Rhythm Syllables

- Why should it be necessary to *see* the music notation in order to know what rhythm syllable to *sing*?
- Wouldn't it be helpful to children if we used different syllables to distinguish duple from triple meter or division of the beat?

"[An] advantage of the Gordon syllables lies in the fact that they do not represent note values or duration." (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1999, p. 72, *SongWorks 2*)

## Patterns

- As we select patterns for study, do we choose patterns based on how music *sounds* rather than how it *looks*, i.e. based on aural (song) rather than visual (notation) qualities?
- Can we agree that visual patterns in music are not necessarily musical patterns?
- How would our teaching change if we taught according to sound chunks: patterns of individual sounds that cluster together to give meaning, expression, and context.

". . . the smallest meaningful musical unit is the phrase or gesture, not an interval, beat, or measure" and "if we get fixated by the interval notation we may find ourselves 'barking at print' . . . [reading] in a stilted way with little idea of . . . meaning." (Swanwick, 1999, p. 45, *Teaching music musically*)

"Ignoring context, making things simple by isolating them from the backgrounds in which they are normally found, can anaesthetize musicality." (Bennett, 2005, p. 46, *SongWorks 1*)

"[Song chunks] accurately capture a thought and a cohesive unit of sound and language . . . Song chunks, like phrases, result from the interaction of melodic, rhythmic, and language relationships. Like phrases, chunks preserve context and musical flow even when separated from the whole and, for that reason, can maintain their musical shape, making their performance musical, even when we are paying close attention to a single element. Phrases and chunks are organizers within songs that are determined by our perceptions and not by our notation system." (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, p. 122, *SongWorks 1*)

## Sequence

- What would change in our teaching if we treated the whole song as curriculum, the whole child as pedagogue, and observation as methodology? (F. Sweeney)
- Whose sequence are we teaching? Beware of experts that tell us what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. They haven't been in our classrooms.

"Learning is not linear. Learning does not proceed in discrete hierarchies. Because learning is not linear and can take many directions at once at an uneven pace, conceptual learning is not something to be delayed until a particular age or until all the basic facts have been mastered. . . Current evidence makes it clear that instruction emphasizing structured drill and practice on isolated facts and skills does students a major disservice. . . such learning out of context makes it more difficult to organize and remember the information being presented." (Herman, Aschbacher & Winters, 1992, p. 15, *A practical guide to alternative assessment*)

"Once we begin to look critically at this notion of teaching in logical sequence, we can see the usually a further giant—and utterly wrong—assumption has been made: that if a subject is fragmented into little bits, and the student is then presented with the bits in some order that seems logical to somebody, the student will be quite able to assemble the parts and emerge with the whole—even though never given an inkling of the whole! . . . The logic that seemed apparent to the curriculum builder, textbook writer, or teacher may be invisible and incomprehensible to the student." (Hart, 1982, *Human brain and human learning*)

"You will always be wise to let the song itself do as much of the teaching as possible. Do not pick it to pieces beforehand. Do not stick in your thumb and pull out a couple of tonal patterns for preliminary study . . . Teach the whole song. Do not teach the materials little bit by little bit, or even phrase by phrase. Remember always that *the song itself is the thing*." (Mursell, 1951, p. 192, *Music and the classroom teacher*)

"Understanding the steps in a sequence is not always necessary to accomplishing a task or achieving a goal. But when things are presented in discrete steps, one feels compelled to understand the individual steps. And sometimes this focus on individual steps

- causes students and teachers to misinterpret their importance;
- causes apprehension in students who see the steps as confusing, challenging, and disconnected with the larger picture of music; and
- causes disenchantment with music study when students or teachers equate mastering steps with making or knowing music." (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1999, p. 37, *SongWorks 2*)

"What sense does it make to train out of children the musicality that seems to be inherently in them, for the purpose of teaching them music?" (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1999, p. 35, *SongWorks 2*)

## References & Sources

- Bamberger, J. (1991). *The mind behind the musical ear: How children develop musical intelligence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, P. D. (2014, in press). Questioning unmusical ways we teach children music. In *Approaches to teaching classroom music: Methods, issues, and viewpoints*, Abril, C. & Gault, B. Eds. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, P. D. (2012). *Playing with the classics, Volume 2: Music masterworks for children*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music Publishing.
- Bennett, P. D. (2011). *Playing with the classics, Volume 1: Music masterworks for children*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music Publishing.
- Bennett, P. D. (2010). *RhymePlay: Playing with children and Mother Goose*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music Publishing.
- Bennett, P. D. (2005 Jan). So, why sol-mi? *Music Educators Journal*, 91(3), 43-49.
- Bennett, P. D. (Ed.) (1999). *SongPlay: A collection of playful songs for children*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard.
- Bennett, P. D. (1990). Children's perceptions of anacrusis patterns within songs. In T. W. Tunks (Ed.) *Texas Music Education Research 1990* (1-7). Austin, TX: Texas Music Educators Association.
- Bennett, P. D. (1990). The method dilemma in elementary music education. *General Music Today*, 3(2), 21-23.
- Bennett, P. D. (1988a). Children's pattern perception, accuracy, and preference in three response modes. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 39(1), 74-85.
- Bennett, P. D. (1988b). Importation, adaptation, evolution from Hungary to North America: The story of Mary Helen Richards' shift from the Kodály method to Education Through Music. Clinic presentation, International Society of Music Education (ISME) World Conference, Canberra, Australia.

- Bennett, P. D. (1987). From Hungary to America: The evolution of Education Through Music. *Music Educators Journal*, 74(1), 36-45, 60.
- Bennett, P. D. (1986). When method becomes authority. *Music Educators Journal*, 72(9), 38-40.
- Bennett, P. D. (1981). *An exploratory study of children's multisensory responses to symbolizing musical sound through speech rhythm patterns*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of North Texas.
- Bennett, P. D. & Bartholomew, D. R. (1999). *SongWorks 2: Singing from sound to symbol*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bennett, P. D. & Bartholomew, D. R. (1997). *SongWorks 1: Singing in the education of children*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bennett, P. D. & Langness, A. (1994). It ain't necessarily so: When simple is not easy for children's study of music. Clinic presentation, Music Educators National Conference, Cincinnati, OH.
- Berr, B. (1990). Misleading music notation. *The Instrumentalist*, 45(1), 64-66.
- Blacking, J. (1967). *Venda children's songs*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Dowling, W. J. (1984). Development of musical schemata in children's spontaneous singing. In W. R. Crozier & A. J. Chapman (Eds.), *Cognitive processes in the perception of art*. Elsevier Science Publishers. B. V. North-Holland.
- Dowling, W. J., & Harwood, D. L. (1986). *Music cognition*. Orlando: Academic Press.
- Elliott, C. A. (1990). Singing in America: Reviving a tradition. *Music Educators Journal*, 76(5), 24-26.
- Elliott, C. A. (1982). The music reading dilemma. *Music Educators Journal*, 68(6), 33-34, 59-60.
- Foy, P.S. (1988). The creation of a standardized body of songs suitable for American school children: A history of the community song movement and suggested entries for a contemporary song list. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina.
- Gomme, A. B. (1894). *Children's singing games*. New York: Dover.
- Gordon, E. E. (1984). *Learning sequences in music*. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications.
- Hart, L. A. (1982). *Human brain and human learning*. New York: Longman.
- Harwood, E. E. (1987). The memorized song repertoire of children in grades four and five in Champaign, Illinois. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Herman, J. L., Aschbacher, P. R., & Winters, L. (1992). *A practical guide to alternative assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- Lerdahl, A., & Jackendoff, R. (1983). *Toward a generative theory of tonal music*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lomax, A. (1960). *Folk songs of North America*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Lomax, J., & Lomax, A. (1947). *Best loved American folk songs*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
- Mark, M. L. (1986). *Contemporary music education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Schirmer.
- McGuire, K. M. (2000). Common songs of the cultural heritage of the United States: A compilation of songs that most people "know" and "should know." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 48(4), 310-322.
- Moog, H. (1968). *The musical experience of the preschool child*. C. Clarke (Trans) 1976. London: Schott.
- Moorehead, G. E. & Pond, D. (1941). *Music of young children*. Santa Barbera, CA: Pillsbury Foundation.
- Mursell, J. L. (1951). *Music and the classroom teacher*. New York: Silver Burdett.
- Newell, W. W. (1883). *The games of American children*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Opie, I., & Opie, P. (1988). *The singing game*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prickett, C. A. & Bridges, M. S. (1998). Familiarity with basic song repertoire: Music education/therapy majors versus elementary education majors. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 46(4), 461-468.
- Raessler, K. (2003) *Aspiring to excel: Leadership initiatives for music educators*. Chicago, IL: GIA.
- Révész, G. (1954). *Introduction to the psychology of music*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Richards, M. H. (1985). *Let's do it again!: The songs of ETM*. Portola Valley, CA: Richards Institute.
- Richards, M. H. (1984). *Aesthetic foundations for thinking: Rethought*. Portola Valley, CA: Richards Institute.
- Richards, M. H. (1980). *Aesthetic foundations for thinking: Part Two*. Portola Valley, CA: Richards Institute.
- Rohrbough, L. (1940). *Handy play party book*. Rev. by C. Riddell, 1982. Burnsville, NC: World Around Songs.
- Schmid, W. (1995, Jan.). Get America singing again! *Music Educators Journal*, 82(1), 4-5, 54.
- Seeger, R. C. (1948). *American folk songs for children*. New York: Doubleday.
- Siebenaler, D. J. (1999). Student song preference in the elementary music class. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 47(3), 213-223.
- Swanwick, K. (1999). *Teaching music musically*. London: Routledge.
- Sweeney, F. (2002). From sound to symbol: The whole song as curriculum, the whole child as pedagogue, observation as methodology. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Thurmond, J. M. (1982). *Note grouping: A method for achieving expression and style in musical performance*. Pennsylvania: IMT Publications.
- Uptis, R. (1987). Toward a model for rhythm development. In J. C. Peery, I. W. Peery & T. W. Draper (Eds.), *Music and child development*. (pp. 55-79). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Ward, M. J. (2003). The extent to which American children's folk songs are taught by general music teachers throughout the United States. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville.

#### For more about SongWorks and Peggy Bennett:

**Music EdVentures: [www.musicedventures.org](http://www.musicedventures.org)**

**Peggy D Bennett: [www.peggydbennett.com](http://www.peggydbennett.com)**

**Oberlin: [www.oberlin.edu/library/digital/songworks](http://www.oberlin.edu/library/digital/songworks)**

**[peggy.bennett@oberlin.edu](mailto:peggy.bennett@oberlin.edu)**

**[http://new.oberlin.edu/conservatory/departments/music-education/faculty\\_detail.dot?id=20577](http://new.oberlin.edu/conservatory/departments/music-education/faculty_detail.dot?id=20577)**