

THE SPONTANEOUS VOCALISATIONS OF TWO- TO THREE-YEAR-OLDS IN A DAYCARE SETTING

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ABSTRACT

There have been several prior studies of young children's spontaneous vocalizations in free-play and arising from these a broad similarity of findings. However, in the detail of the findings there are differences and ambiguities. Furthermore, most studies have focused on three- to five-year-olds attending kindergarten and nursery education; younger children are less represented. Methods of data collection and analysis have been determined, for the most part, by an interest in identifying the emergence of conventional song forms and young children's developing ability to sing. These foci have biased studies away from a concern to understand children's spontaneous singing as situated activity within the context of their general play in everyday settings.

The small-scale study reported in this paper aimed to provide information which would assist in the process of extending and clarifying the findings of earlier studies. In particular, it aimed to do this by focussing on children of two to three years old, (younger than the children in most prior studies) and by collecting general observations of their free-play with the aim of understanding spontaneous vocalising as situated activity.

The regular occupants (six to eight children) of the playroom for two- to three-year-olds in a daycare in London UK were observed during a free play period of approximately one hour over a sequence of six weekly visits. Details of their spontaneous vocalising, together with details of their general play activity, were collected. Categories were generated from a process of comparing the collected field-notes and cross-referring the emerging categories with those generated from earlier studies.

The observational data clustered into categories of vocal play which are similar to those which have emerged from prior studies. There were some variations which, it is proposed, are mostly attributable to the younger ages of the children observed and to the differences in the methods adopted by this study. The emphasis on studying spontaneous singing as situated activity drew attention to its multi-modal connections with the child's body movement, the movement of toys and to its role within social interactions with others.

1. INTRODUCTION

The small-scale study reported in this paper was drawn from a larger funded research project which aimed to develop models of practice in music within a range of early childhood settings in South West London (Young, 2003). The project was guided by the questions, what are the spontaneous musical behaviours of children in these settings and how might adults best foster children's spontaneous musicality?

2. REVIEW OF PRIOR STUDIES

The Pillsbury Foundation studies from 1937 to 1940 in the USA consist of detailed observations of children's spontaneous musical activity from an extensive, long-term study in a nursery catering for children varying in age from eighteen months to eight years old. The Foundation set up a nursery designed to provide conducive conditions in which children's 'natural forms of musical expression' could be discovered (Moorhead & Pond, 1941, p.7). The musical director, Pond, documented the children's spontaneous musical behaviours and the situations of their occurrence. Pond generalised his observations of spontaneous singing into various types, within which he made a distinction between one variety which was 'unfettered and free rhythmically, like plainsong' and another 'chant' which was rhythmic, of limited compass and repetitious (Moorhead & Pond, 1978; p.8). Although described with detail, his categories of spontaneous singing are generalised across the very wide age phase he observed. Therefore, any age-related characteristics are not identifiable from his descriptions. Importantly for the topic of this paper, Pond proposed that 'chant' is the prime genre of children's singing. Chant excludes 'fragmentary songs' (p. 8); a term which is not clear however and could refer either to fragments of traditional songs learnt from others, or unformed spontaneous songs made from original material.

In contrast to Pond's study which, by his own description, he did not intend to be 'scientific', Moog, working in Germany in the 1960s, set out to plot age-related changes under experimental test conditions. Over 500 six-month to five-year-old children were tested with a number of musical stimuli and the responses observed and collected. From the vocal responses of the youngest children in his study he arrived at a distinction between 'musical babbling' and 'vocalisations'. What he terms, 'babbling' would seem to correspond to Pond's category of plainsong in that it is wordless, rhythmically free and ranges across a wide pitch variation. Moog identifies a developmental continuum from babbling among one- to two-year-olds through to spontaneous song-making at the age of two to three years old. He describes these songs as sung by the child alone, to single syllable or simple phonic sounds, being rhythmically 'amorphous' and containing microtones. Moog also refers to reworkings of known songs in which children embed short phrases, often bonded with the words, into their 'babbling' sequences. These may be the fragmentary songs to which Pond refers. However, whereas Pond focuses on his category of chant, giving much detail about the context and production of these song forms, Moog appears to have found no forms of singing which correspond. The very different circumstances of Moog's work in which the responses of individual children under test conditions were observed rather than their spontaneous behaviours during free play with others, is a likely explanation for these differences in findings.

Sundin, working in Sweden around the same time as Moog (reported in 1998), also arrived at two over-arching categories of spontaneous song: a chant-like, 'formula song' as he terms it, and a freer melodic song. From their descriptions, these song types would appear to correspond directly with Pond's 'chant' and 'plainsong'. Like Pond, Sundin's observations were drawn from groups of children during a free-play period. Furthermore, both researchers identified varying social contexts for the two types of singing. 'Plainsong' is a primarily solo, introverted activity, and the 'chant' was most often produced in group activity. This social dimension was of prime interest to Bjorkvold carrying out comparative studies of children attending preschools in Norway, Russia and the USA. He also noticed that 'chant' or 'formula song' is the dominant form of spontaneous vocalisation among children playing in groups, ascribing to it an important social function. Although the sociable chant was Bjorkvold's prime interest, his work includes descriptions of earlier, 'floating' singing forms which may also include fragments of reproduced songs in some kind of compressed or changed form.

One dominant strand of research into children's spontaneous singing has been dominated by an interest in the evidence it might provide to understand how children learn to reproduce the songs of their own culture. This interest has two aspects, children's emerging skills as singers and their developing awareness of tonality and song form. Dowling's analysis (1982) of spontaneous singing enabled him to plot a progression from the repetition of short song fragments, typical among two-year-olds, often with pitch instability, to the more consistent tonality and ability to reproduce longer sections characteristic of older children. Davidson, McKernon and Gardener of the Boston Project Zero (Davidson, 1983) show a similar interest in identifying the reproduction of known songs and plotting children's increasing ability to do so in their spontaneous singing. Hargreaves (1986) adds to a discussion of these studies with examples of spontaneous singing collected from his two sons. In these studies framed by music psychology, the focus narrows to spontaneous vocalisations which most accord with conventional singing and the analysis seeks to plot developing abilities to produce melodies of conventional melodic contour within stable tonalities. Since learning to sing is of central importance within Western European music education, this focus has purpose. However, this research interest has led to selective analysis of children's spontaneous vocalisations.

The mosaic of young children's vocal activity includes the blending and overlapping of music with language and researchers have drawn the line between the speech and singing in different places. Dowling (1982) suggests that the development of language, such as the repetition of short, rhythmic, phonically rich verbal fragments is linked with the chanting of such 'catch' phrases. Pond, similarly, takes time to document much of the syllabic and repetitive verbalisations and then sub-categorises these under his all-encompassing category of 'chant'. Sundin takes a different view and identifies only those vocalisations which produce an identifiable pitch as singing and disregards all other. Moog (1976), similarly, set aside 'babbling' which is language based from musical babbling which he describes as melodic but usually wordless.

Singing not only blends with language but also with children's activity across other domains. Pond (1981) noticed and described the integration of children's vocalisations with movement, as did Moog in a few instances (p. 75). However, the primary focus of researchers on song reproduction has isolated children's singing from its context. Predominantly researchers have collected the outcomes of children's spontaneous vocalisations, notated and analysed the musical content. Pond makes some contextual references to children's use of the environment and their blending of singing with play with toys, but he too returns to notate and analyse the musical detail of the children's 'chants' as discrete song.

From this review of prior studies, a general consensus emerges identifying two broad types of spontaneous vocalisation; a communicative, chant-like repetitive singing of short verbal and musical ideas and a more introverted, free-flowing, diffuse singing, often on open syllable sounds. Snatches of known songs might resurface in children's singing of either kind. However, these findings have been arrived at with little representation of two- to three-year-olds, particularly in group free-play in early childhood settings. In addition, the focal concern to understand how children learn to reproduce conventional songs may have narrowed attention to that which most closely conforms to the singing of conventional song forms. It may be rewarding to take a broader definition of children's spontaneous singing as inclusive of border-line speech-music forms, and to term it, therefore, spontaneous vocalisations, and to consider children's vocalisations as situated activity embedded in children's ongoing play with objects and with others. Thus attention is shifted away from children's spontaneous songs as discrete objects for music-theory analysis to vocalisations understood as an integrated component of free-play.

3. METHOD

In this study, observations of children's vocalisations were made during free-play hour over the course of six weekly visits. The playroom was occupied by the same six to eight children each week (absences resulted in some variations), with one or two adult staff. I had been a regular visitor to the playroom for several weeks beforehand and so was known to the children. When observing I moved freely about the room to sit, crouch or stand close by the children writing free-hand field notes. To track in this way was necessary in order to listen carefully to their vocalising. Since the aim of the study was to describe and then categorise vocal behaviours, the observations were unstructured. During the first four visits, observations were collected randomly from those children whom I heard vocalising spontaneously. In the last two visits, I focused on individual children.

In order to collect the vocalisations, I jotted the syllables or words and then any regularities of rhythm in conventional notation giving some indication of the pitch variation. Some vocalisations evolved into clear snatches of melody, and these were notated using relative sol-fa. As a shorthand method, relative sol-fa is quick but does not record the exact pitch. In practice the more distinctively melodic vocalisations were short enough and relatively infrequent to enable this jotting method to be adequate. To check the accuracy of my notes, samples of

children's vocalisations were recorded on audio-tape during the second visit to cross-check the written with a recorded version. In conferring with a colleague, the general level of correspondence between my field notes and the recorded versions of children's vocalisations was considered high enough for the specific purposes of this study. The written versions of the children's vocalisations were intended to be descriptive sketches providing a fixed and communicable form which can provide the basis for categorisation and discussion. The purpose was not to go on and use specific pitch and rhythm features as the basis for a further layer of music-theory analysis and inference. Importantly, the quick jotting method of collecting the vocalisations enabled the full detail of the children's actions and play with toys to be noted.

By week 4, the field notes contained a prolific quantity of spontaneous vocalisations and very little speech, either talking to self or others. There was a possibility that observing the children randomly was causing an imbalance in the data. So for the last two sessions, individual children were tracked for continuous periods of time in order to record everything they produced vocally. Although this change in procedure picked up some talk directed at peers or adults, the predominance of non-communicative, non-speech-like vocalisation was confirmed.

The total data across all six visits were subject to a process of comparison to allow commonalities to emerge and categories to be identified. The types of spontaneous vocalisation identified by prior research studies were influential in this process. This accorded with the aim of this small study, to clarify and extend findings which have emerged from prior work. I propose that this cross-comparison of findings from earlier studies into the process of generating categories strengthens an otherwise small-scale observational study.

4. CATEGORIES OF VOCALISATION

In this next section the categories of vocalisation will be described and integrated with the findings of earlier researchers.

4.1. Free-flow vocalising

When engaged in solitary play, particularly with small objects and toys requiring fine-motor manipulation such as bead-threading and dressing dolls, the children typically sung long lines of rhythmically free-flowing, unstructured melody vocalised on open vowel sounds across a wide pitch range. Sometimes this vocalising settled into snatches of melody, some which were recognisable as songs which had been absorbed from experience. This type of vocalising matched closely with the descriptions given by Pond and Sundin.

4.2. Chanting and intoning

While playing freely, all the children repeated short verbal phrases, either intoned with distinctive pitch inflexion or chanted with a characteristic pitch rise or fall on a limited range. These short phrases were often repeated many times over and in this process some would begin to transform and evolve with variations.

Mostly these younger children played with little social interaction with one another and so these chants were not directly integrated into communicative play with others. The chants were often associated with whole body movement play occupying more space than the play most commonly associated with free-flow vocalising. Occasionally chants were part of role-play with toys in which one toy might call to another, but on the whole, the social dimension which had been the focus of interest for Bjorkvold was not evident. Although this category of vocalisation could be isolated in the data, it was not as frequent as the free-flow vocalising and nor as distinct a category at this age phase as Pond, in particular, implies.

4.3. Reworkings of known songs

A number of known songs could be identified as resurfacing in children's vocalisations. This does not discount the possibility of more known songs which I did not recognise. The songs recognisable to me included traditional children's nursery rhymes, the song repertoire introduced to the children by their careworker in a singing circle time and a contemporary pop song.

The songs rarely resurfaced with their original words but were sung to syllable sounds, short sections of their original words or transformations of their words. The reworkings were either free-standing vocalisations or were integrated into episodes of free-flow vocalising or chanting. Some researchers had tended to downplay or ignore this aspect of children's spontaneous singing because they considered it derivative and not original.

4.4. Movement vocalising

From the detail of children's free-play it was possible to identify the integration of vocalisation with movement, either self-movement or the child's moving of objects. This vocal analogising of movement picks up the exact timing and qualities of the cinematic properties of moving objects or the self in motion. Pond's (1941) long-term observational studies emphasised the link between movement and vocalising.

4.5. Vocalising to animate

Dramatic role play, particularly with toy animals and model people, was common in the children's free play. Vocalisations were woven into this play. Often the toys were animated with vocalisations which emphasised timbral, rhythmical and pitch inflexion features. The animations were only loosely imitative of actual sounds of people or animals, and appeared to focus on those qualities which gave them an expressive and emotional dimension. These vocalisations were repeated rhythmically with little variation or transformation, and were more discrete linking closely with the play with toys rather than episodes of vocal or movement play.

4.6. Vocalising actual sounds

The broad focus on vocalisations adopted by the study drew attention to another category of vocal sounds produced by children which appeared to be representations of sounds

made by vehicles, animals, people and events. These were characteristically sharp bursts of vocal sounds accompanied by acting out with objects and were distinct from the previous category in that they were declaimed as single accents or in short clusters of regular sounds. Common among these were siren or vehicle engine noises. Their intention appeared to be to illustrate the sounds of their role play.

Although Pond documented these last two categories of vocal play and integrated them as sub-categories of chant, no other researchers allowed the boundaries of what constituted 'singing' to extend into this dimension of vocal play.

4. DISCUSSION

This discussion has two main purposes. The first is to add to our understanding of young children's vocal play by considering its processes as situated activity. The second is to add a further conjecture in the light of this study and its place in the symposium as a whole.

The observations from this study were isolated into types and the vocalisations were temporarily brought into central focus. However, it is important to reposition the children's vocalisations within the context of their composite, spontaneous play. The children were frequently engaged in dramatic-music-movement play forms, playing with time and space in their own movement, and the movement of objects. They constantly shifted and transformed movement structures into analogous vocal/aural forms - and vice versa. The presentations of ideas in different modes as structural replicas which retain important defining features of underpinning amodal schema is fundamental to children's play. They then extend their play through the transformation of these basic structural forms by both conversion between modes and evolution through repetitions within modes. I suggest that vocalisation plays an integral part in capturing and representing emotional, physical and intellectual dimensions of their play.

Moving towards an understanding of young children's vocalisations as embedded in general play draws attention to the underlying processes which give rise to these vocal expressions. While collection and categorisation at the surface level of observable features and understanding them in terms of conventional musical structures is important, analysis might fruitfully move on to exploring the ways in which vocalisations arise from and contribute to generic processes which generate children's play across many domains.

5. REFERENCES

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