

Bringing Live Music to Young Children
Concerts for children aged 0 to 4 in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This exploratory project aims to offer live music in the form of family concerts with music educational aspects to children aged 0 to 4. By using specially written and arranged songs that are developmentally appropriate next to instrumental pieces as well as the use of objects, a process of musical meaning making is created through which the children can understand and enjoy the music. In this process, the presence of (grand)parents and/or carers is vital to create a familiar and informal environment to stimulate musical learning.

Keywords: concerts, musical learning experiences, meaning, cultural context

Introduction

The concerts are created to bring live music into young children's lives, emphasising musical experiences and actual contact with the instruments and their players. During these concerts for children aged 0-4, (grand) parents/carers and children can discover the pleasure of singing, listening and making music together in a safe and well-structured though informal environment. The creation of these concerts is informed by early childhood music education practice, early childhood music education theory and early childhood music education research, and by an established early childhood music education approach in the Netherlands as well as our personal musical and music educational experiences. Our mission is to arouse interest in early childhood music education and early participation in music cultural life.

Background

Departing from the point that even babies are already sophisticated listeners (Ilari & Polka, 2006) and that very young children are able to discern metrical structures (Trehub & Hannon, 2006) and melodic structures (Welsh, 2006), we initiated concerts to bring live music into young children's lives. Coming from a joint extensive background in early childhood music education, we also wanted the concerts to have music educational aspects in order to provide children with relevant musical learning experiences in an informal concert environment (Dionyssiou, 2013). Young children learn by social interaction, by participating and by active listening.

As a result, an exploratory project (Stebbins, 2001) was created to gain ideas and insights based on our mission that young children are entitled to live music of good quality instead of electronically diminished versions. This also implied a conceptual consideration: what do we - the initiators of the concerts - consider musical childhood to be and as a result how can we

engage young children to enjoy and fully participate in the musical environments we offer them?

The implementation of music educational aspects expresses our wish to arouse not only interest and early participation in music education, but also these elements, when used in a developmentally appropriate way, can support young children in maintaining their concentration during a concert. According to Sims (2005), "Just like any other skill, the ability to listen attentively for a sustained period of time to both live and recorded music must be developed and practiced" (p.78).

Making decisions about the kinds of music that can be presented in a concert will undoubtedly be influenced by personal ideas about what good music is and by choices for suitable music educational purposes. The choice for certain music pieces and how the audience experiences these appears to be culturally bound (Blacking, 1973; Trevarthen, 2002). Musical experiences "cannot be transmitted or have meaning without associations between people" (Blacking, 1973, p. x). Offering purposeful and meaningful live musical experiences depends on the cultural context in which meaning can arise from a "cultural agreement about what is perceived" (Blacking, 1973, p.9). "Knowledge of the social and cultural context in which children live helps ensure that musical experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the children and their families" (Flohr, 2005, p.3).

The transfer of meaning, implicit comprehension of the music on a personal level, is considered important to engage in music and to musically learn (Retra, 2010). Music is an art form that unfolds over time and according to Blacking (1973), music is "humanly organised sound" (p.10). An aspect of this exploratory project is to arrive at a theoretical framework of

reference to, amongst others, comprehend the functions and practical application of meaning not only as a way to understand and enjoy the concerts, but also as a support for musical learning processes during a concert.

Another aspect is active musical engagement that we consider to be a requisite to understand, interpret and remember music. Movements, with or without the support of objects, can further musical representation and therefore the meaning of a piece of music (Retra, 2010). Through musical experiences and musical interaction the children will be able to explore what Walker (2000) names a “physical embodied frame of reference for knowledge and meaning” (p. 27). According to Trevarthen (2002) “meaning grows in personal relationships of shared pleasure and trust” (p.178). Therefore we consider the presence of parents/carers a prerequisite during the concerts.

To stimulate recognition and familiarity, part of the repertoire is based on the daily environment of the children. Recognition is enhanced by the use of songs used in music education practice and specifically written for young children. According to Greenberg (1979) children aged nine months appear to respond more to vocal music than to instrumental music and he considers all children by nature to be vocal organisms. Songs have lyrics that support the meaning of the music and the possible action to perform during the song: singing what you do and doing what you sing (Retra, 2010). Furthermore, lyrics also provide points of reference to attach an activity to, in order to support the engagement of the children with the music. A range of objects is used – musical equipment and toys – supporting the lyrics of a certain song or piece of music. The use of objects most likely also supports a sustained period of attention.

Practice

At this stage in the project, the concerts can be described as a form of prepared sequences of musical activities that are delivered as semi-staged performances. This structure is based on early childhood music education lessons in the Netherlands. These music classes are based on the recognition that all children are musical. All children can learn to sing in tune, keep a beat and participate in the music of their culture. In these classes, group processes are used, more or less derived from the family structure, as an important pedagogical underpinning.

Parents/carers are therefore considered to be important participants in the concerts. The presenter of a concert functions not only as an entertainer to engage the audience and deliver a pleasant musical experience, but also as a mediator of musical information and guides the listening and musical learning processes (Gestel van & Retra, 2011). A concert generally takes 30 to 45 minutes. An average of 8 songs and instrumental pieces will be performed. Each piece will take about 2 to a maximum of 4 minutes. The audience is invited to join the activities but they are not obliged to do so. The children are allowed to walk around and sit close to the musicians or when a larger ensemble is playing they can sit in between the instrumentalists.

Objects are distributed in between the pieces and connect to the content of the musical activity to come. For example, during 'The Teddy Bears Picnic' the children can dance with a teddy bear. Then they can rock the same bears to sleep with a lullaby 'Cuddle bear'.

Consequently, for example, the lullaby of Brahms can be the next piece on the programme thereby connecting to the classical canon. The different parts of the programme are linked to each other often through a very small narrative that streams into the next activity.

According to Sims (2005):

Listening to a variety of styles give children the opportunity to encounter music beyond the level of their own performance ability and can provide them with a variety of positive musical experience upon which future learning can be built and future choices may be based (p.78).

The concert programme contains musical pieces in different styles: jazz, pop and classical. We also offer pieces in different keys and metres. These are aspects that are taken into serious consideration when constructing a concert programme.

The whole experience aims to be inspirational and to transport the audience in a state of flow: “A state of optimal enjoyment where one feels highly challenged and highly skilled” (Custodero, 2005, p.186). A shift of consciousness into a “zone” like feeling: being in the moment (Custodero, 2005).

Arrangements

The songs used during these concerts generally consist of a single melody of 8 to 32 bars. Presenting them in a concert implied that arrangements had to be made for different ensembles. The arrangements were often tailor made to the performing ensembles with possibilities for adjustments for other instrumentations.

The texture of the arrangements is open but not over-simplified. Elements from contemporary classical music are modestly incorporated in a playful and obvious way: for example bi-tonality and pronounced major seconds.

The arrangements are written for specific instrument combinations but can be more or less

easily transferred to other combinations. This way different ensembles that would like to participate in a concert can play the music.

Making the arrangements ourselves has two major advantages. Making arrangements appropriate for a performing ensemble ensures a good quality performance. Secondly, we can implement research results. For example, tempi of musical pieces that match the natural tempi of the children can further the synchronisation of movements to music and consequently evoke a sense of beat in the children (Retra, 2011). The songs are arranged in such a way that the tempi are appropriate for children aged 0-4. According to Pouthas (1996) even very young children can learn to regulate rhythmic responses to sound stimuli.

Implications

So far the concerts have met with an overwhelming approval, which we have taken as an inspiration to go forward and further in developing this project.

The exploratory nature of the concerts will hopefully accumulate into a theoretical construct about possible ways to organise and conduct music educational concerts for young children, with the possibility of translation to other cultural settings. Our approach will be of a qualitative nature, incorporating direct observation (Rolf, 2001) and interviews.

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