

# **“A Man Sings That!”: Children’s Musical Culture in an Ontario Public School**

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This study examines the musical life of children in Grades One, Two, and Three at a public school in Oakville, Ontario, a suburban community of 100,000 located 30 kilometres west of Toronto. The study is based on field work carried out in March, 1992.

The impetus for the project was Virginia Caputo’s 1989 MA thesis, *Continuity and Change in Canadian English-Language Children’s Song*. Caputo undertook to reproduce fieldwork originally carried out by Edith Fowke from 1959 to 1964 at eight public schools in Toronto. By recreating Fowke’s field methods as closely as possible and comparing the newly collected data with Fowke’s original study, Caputo hoped to gain an insight into continuity and change in the song repertory of Canadian school children. In the concluding section of her thesis, Caputo made several suggestions for future research, among them:

- 1) That the presence of a female field worker may have contributed to an overabundance of girls’ songs collected and that a male fieldworker might have collected different material.
- 2) That the stability of the English-language repertory of children’s songs is apparent despite changing demographics, and that further investigation of that stability is needed.

The possibility of increasing the number of boys’ songs collected seemed a reasonable goal for the modest research I had in mind. In order to restrict the scope of my study to a manageable size, I decided to focus on a single school and to record several different groups (Grades One, Two, and Three) with a view to noting differences in the repertory among students of various ages. On completing the fieldwork, I realized that many more issues had been raised than questions answered. As a result, this report, rather than drawing conclusions, is more in the nature of a speculation. As questions of methodology are among the most important raised in this study, I include a fairly detailed account of my field work. This is followed by a discussion of some issues raised and questions generated, and some concluding thoughts.

## Field Work

I telephoned the principal of Munn's School early in March, 1992. After introducing myself, I explained my research interests. His response was very cooperative and indeed, enthusiastic. We agreed that I would visit the school to record the first three grades. He suggested that, as the classes were small, it might be good to combine two classes for each session. As this would result in a group (approximately twenty-five) that was close to the classes observed by Caputo, I readily agreed. The sessions would take place during the regularly scheduled music classes, with the music teacher present, and thus not interrupt the schedule.

I arrived at the school about fifteen minutes before the first session was to begin. After checking in with the Principal, I was let into the music room and began to set up my equipment. The music room was a large carpeted room on the ground floor, with many shelves well stocked with Orff instruments (xylophones, metallophones and tambourines) and a very good sound system (turntable and tapedeck with high quality amplifier and speakers).

As I was setting up, I met the school music teacher. Unsure of the nature of my project, she was concerned that the children would not be well prepared to sing, as they had been concentrating on recorder playing recently. I explained that polished performances were not really what I was after and that I was interested in all the songs the children knew, whether learned in school or on the playground.

As the first, Grade-Three group arrived, the boys immediately established themselves in the front as they sat on the floor. I said that I was interested in hearing them sing and, following Caputo's method, suggested that we warm up by singing together a song we all knew. We sang "Old MacDonald" followed by a song they had learned in school, "Little Toy Trains." I then asked what songs they themselves would like to sing and got an immediate and enthusiastic response from the boys. To the accompaniment of much laughter and elbow nudging we heard the following:

Jingle bells, jingle bells,  
Santa Claus is dead,  
Rudolph took a baseball bat,  
And whacked him in the head.

Closely followed by:

Jingle bells, Batman smells,  
Robin laid an egg,  
Batmobile lost its wheel,  
And Joker takes ballet.

This created a situation which illustrates the limitations of a study that relies on material collected under conditions in which informants are not able to

select their songs freely. The music teacher objected to the "inappropriate" nature of the "Jingle Bells" parodies and made it clear that the students should consider the propriety of their songs before offering to sing them. In the classroom context this was not an unreasonable reaction. A teacher must maintain order in the classroom and the disorder and anarchy that these songs threatened was immediately apparent.

In spite of the warnings, the children in this session and the following (Grade Ones) obviously knew many "inappropriate" songs and even were willing to risk adult disapproval to sing them. In both sessions, the children were eager to sing for me, so eager that my own inexperience at maintaining order in a classroom was all too evident. However, for the purposes of this study, the chaos was not entirely counter-productive. More than once, boys would use the general hubbub to mask their alternative texts to a song which was being sung conventionally elsewhere.

At the end of the day, the music teacher expressed concern that the group was "out of control" and suggested several techniques for the next session. The following day, I brought in a bodhran (an Irish frame drum) and played and talked about it a bit before using it to accompany the children (Grade Twos this time) in a rousing version of "Down by the Bay." On the music teacher's advice, I told the children that my playing the bodhran would be a signal that the noise level was getting too high and that they should quiet down. This "crowd control" technique worked quite well, but there were far fewer "inappropriate" contributions, especially from the boys. This surely does not indicate a smaller repertory of such songs among the Grade Two boys but rather, greater inhibition in the session.

The difficulties of researching the repertory of children's music in a classroom setting rapidly became clear. Adults in the school (principals, teachers) are the intermediaries through whom one must go to reach the target group; no matter how cooperative or well intentioned they are, their presence will inevitably colour the sample. A complex mechanism of social interactions is set in motion that includes not only the teacher/student/fieldworker relationship but also the adult/child relationship that always will exist between the adult fieldworker and children. Children represent a group to which it will never be possible for an adult to become an "insider."

At the same time, an opposite tendency is at work: the enthusiasm of the boys to demonstrate "their" music to someone from a group that normally is uninterested in, or actively discourages such songs. At the beginning of all the sessions, the boys were the most voluble and the first to volunteer. In every case, the first song offered (after an initial warm-up on a school song) was "inappropriate."

One of the most important aspects of enculturation is the setting of boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Boundaries can only be defined by



testing them. By offering an "inappropriate" song immediately, the children were testing me to see what my limits of acceptable behaviour were and to define more clearly my status *vis-à-vis* their teacher.

Even taking into account all the preceding caveats regarding the samples' representative qualities, several areas of comparison between the 92 collection (as I will call my field collection) and the Caputo and Fowke collections are of interest. Of the fourteen non-school songs (songs not learned in the music class) in the 92 collection, eleven appear in the Caputo collection, most with only minor variations. A typical example is "Miss Mary Had a Steamboat," which is found in two versions in the 92 collection, each only slightly different from Caputo's and indeed, hardly differing from Fowke's or the version I knew as a child.<sup>1</sup>

Caputo comments on the disappearance of ball-bouncing songs between Fowke's collection (1959-64) and her own (1988), noting that the only one which persisted had lost its ball-bouncing function. This song, "Hello, Hello, Hello, Sir," was also collected in 92, specifically as a ball-bouncing song, though the first line had become, "Ho, Ho, Ho, Sir." It is also found in Fowke's collection as "Are You Coming Out, Sir?" where it is listed as a song for both ball-bouncing and handclapping.

The only song in the 92 collection that differs in any significant way from its counterpart in Caputo's is "Eeny-Meeny-Popsaqueenie," which, although retaining (with minor variations) the text reported in Caputo uses a substantially different melody. Its refrain, "Didn't do the dishes ..." has the syncopated rhythm as Caputo's version, but the melody rises a major sixth then falls a major second, in a manner similar to the first phrase of "Shortnin' Bread."

### Discussion and Conjectures

In her review of the state of research on children's play, Helen B. Schwartzmann divides the role of play in the life of children into three areas (108): 1) enculturation and preparation for adult roles, 2) learning and practising culturally appropriate sex roles, and 3) "games of order and disorder." These categories are clearly represented in the songs and the games they accompany in the field collections of Fowke, Caputo, and the present study. Others (Johnson and Ershler; Merrill-Mirsky, esp. 47; Ignico) have noted differentiation of play behaviour along gender-related lines as early as pre-school. Though some suggest that such preferences have a biological basis, it is clear that children concern themselves very early on with questions of self-identity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has defined culture as "a fragment of humanity which presents significant discontinuities with the rest of humanity." In a similar formulation, Fredrik Barth (11-13) defines an ethnic group as having "a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same

order." By these criteria, it is possible to consider children as a cultural or ethnic group rather than as simply an appendage to the adult culture of which they are junior members. Indeed, children's culture has been seen by some to be a global entity.

In his examination of the rhythms of children's music, Constantin Brailoiu says that "children's rhythms constitute a particular system defined by precise and comprehensible properties.... It remains to be seen how the most diverse languages manage to bend themselves to its inflexibility [and] why all languages seem to have, in some way, come under it and to explain its immense distribution area" (238).

Gender role differentiation is one of the most fundamental questions of any cultural study. A striking feature of this study is the great importance the children attached to gender roles which were certainly well established by Grade 1 and continued apace.

Gender differentiation cannot be seen as merely an "effect" or "reflection"<sup>2</sup> of differentiation in the adult world. Indeed, the past decades have seen radical changes in the attitudes of most adults (albeit mainly in the North American middle-class cultural milieu of these children) toward gender-specific behaviour. In the adult world, men push baby carriages<sup>3</sup> and an increasing number of women are executives and bulldozer operators. This social trend has not penetrated the world of children. It could simply be that oral cultures are slow to change. It is possible that the present repertory is at an intermediate stage where the songs are retained but their meaning is largely lost and the texts have become cant.<sup>4</sup> Caputo (132) and Beryl Rowland both argue that this happens regularly, though songs that clearly define gender-specific behaviour, e.g., "My Father is a Garbage-man," probably retain significant formative power.

The relation of the world of children to the adult world is emphasized in the types of music which form the repertory. I make a distinction between the music *of* children and music *for* children. The music of children is that which is transmitted from child to child without adult mediation. Chants, skipping and ball-bouncing songs, contrafacts and parodies make up a large part of the total repertory. The ubiquity of the rhythmic structures of chant has already been noted and Jay Rahn has developed a typology for classifying children's song based on melodic and prosodic characteristics. While the tunes and versification patterns have distinctive, recurrent features, the texts are concerned with the issues that concern all cultures: power, sexuality, gender consciousness, life and death, all filtered through the mind of a child. By these criteria, one can consider the music *of* children as a genre separate from music *for* children, with which it shares many traits, but which differs in its place of origin, the adult world.

Under the general rubric of music for children, I include all the songs that children learn in the course of their formal music classes in school as

well as any other situation where adults sing with (and for) children. Thus, nursery rhymes, usually thought of as within the child's domain, are included in this group. Quite literally, they are learned at one's mother's knee (or one's father's, but not usually one's sister's or brother's, except in parodic form). Though statistical conclusions cannot be drawn from the present sample, it is noteworthy that very few traditional nursery rhymes were collected in the 92 study, in fact, only one: "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep."

Another component of music for children is what I call school songs: songs taught to children in school. They are frequently event-specific (Halloween, Christmas) and often reflect an ideology or policy.<sup>5</sup> The enculturative role of the school is clearly seen in the prevalence of such songs as "May There Always Be Sunshine," "If We Could Consider Each Other/A Neighbour, a Friend or a Brother," and "Oh, What Can We Do for the Peace of the World?" In Caputo's study, when asked to sing a school song, the children's "uneasiness was demonstrated in their posture and singing tone. The children immediately took on a very stiff pose, stood up tall and sang in a way that can only be described as very 'un-childlike'" (46). By contrast, the children at Munn's School, generally enjoyed singing their school songs and were eager to perform them for me. In fact, the word that best describes their reaction is "enthusiastic."

School music is a mode of enculturation. Through music, the values of the adult world are passed on to children. These values may be overtly ideological (world peace, environmentalism) or social (gender roles). Aesthetic values are also passed on in this way. Concepts of good and bad singing are formed, I suspect, not so much by child/child interactions but by child/adult interactions. Much of the literature on early childhood music education focuses on ideas of "correct" musical behaviour and training.<sup>6</sup> Roberta Park (97) has traced to the late 19th century the inception of this tendency of schools to direct and give structure to previously informal modes of children's play.

The boundaries between music of children and music for children are fluid. Many songs originating in the adult world find their way into the world of children. Carol Merrill-Mirsky mentions several skipping chants based on television jingles and almost all the "inappropriate" contrafacts in the 92 collection are based on songs created by adults. Caputo suggests (89) that the very popularity of *Sally Go Round the Sun* (the 1969 book of songs collected earlier by Edith Fowke) as a source for school music teachers<sup>7</sup> and entertainers (Sharon, Lois, and Bram, Fred Penner, Raffi) may perpetuate the repertoire "artificially," older songs being re-introduced into children's culture after a detour through the adult world of schools and commercial recordings.

The music of children that has remained virtually impermeable to adult influence consists of playground chants: the rhythmic vocal accompani-



ments to skipping and handclapping games that are performed almost exclusively by girls. This was Caputo and Fowke's finding and my study has found nothing to contradict their conclusions. The Grade Three boys at Munn's School were vehement in their response when I asked if they knew any clapping chants: "Boys don't do that kind of stuff!"<sup>8</sup>

In the chants we find the most explicit references to authority figures: policemen, teachers, and parents. Relationships with authority figures are a significant part of a child's life and it is not surprising that their chants reflect these ambivalent relationships. Children depend on adults for survival, but adults are often seen as lumpish overlords to be outwitted. Iona and Peter Opie (364) give the following example of the child's view of teachers in late 18th-century England:

Doctor Faustus was a good man  
 He whept his scholars now and then  
 And when he whept 'em made 'em dance  
 Out of Scotland into France  
 From France he whept 'em into Spain  
 And then he whept 'em back again.

Chants, performed exclusively by girls (but also known by boys), are also where we find the most explicit references to gender roles. Men are cowboys, garbagemen, policemen; women are cooks, mothers, hairdressers (although one grandmother is a rock star). Boys are "rotten," "brats," and "stinking," but girls are "sexy." Merrill-Mirsky describes the role of hand-clapping games in gender shaping as "a working through of cultural expectations and a sense of laying the groundwork for sexuality in the future. The language and body movements of almost all the games indicate an awareness of sexuality and female roles. The girls are after all only seven- to nine-year-olds, but they sing about love, about sailors, about boyfriends, and about washing dishes" (58).

The communal aspect of these games has been noted elsewhere (Merrill-Mirsky; Lever). They can be seen as playing a crucial role in the formation of gender consciousness, which has been discussed at length in the feminist literature (e.g., Gilligan). Girls' games tend to be non-competitive and co-operative, with no winners and no losers. Boys' games, on the other hand, are generally very competitive, with complex rules. Indeed, the debates over the rules are often as important as the game itself (Lever). This at least is the standard picture painted in the literature. My small study generally confirms these assertions.

Though it is useful to regard children as forming a culture of their own or indeed, as forming a separate ethnic group, the borders between the culture of children and the over-culture of adults is quite permeable. Children are simultaneous members of multiple cultural groups and they

routinely incorporate musical material from a wide variety of sources into their own culture. Songs from television and pop music are especially well represented. Although the target audience for Top-40 radio is adolescent, the knowledge of six, seven, and eight year olds of current trends in pop music is prodigious. Boys (especially in the 92 collection) were eager to "rap" (though they were not exactly sure what this involved) while approximating the dance moves of M.C. Hammer as well as performing their versions of Beach Boys and Michael Jackson numbers. Interestingly, the only Top-40 song the girls offered was "Everything I Do, I Do for You," a currently popular ballad/love song by Bryan Adams. Their rendition was cut short by a loud objection from several boys: "A man sings that!"

Pop songs take two forms in children's musical culture: straightforward reproduction (usually complete with vocal mannerisms and rock video posing), likely as an effort to participate in or mimic admired adolescent behaviour, and source material for contrafacts.<sup>9</sup> Thus, one can recognize three broad types of songs in the musical culture of children:

- 1) music of children: songs (usually chants) that "come from nowhere," that "everyone knows," whose melodic and rhythmic content is circumscribed (Rahn; Brailoiu) and whose texts, though innocent-seeming to adults, reflect the deep concerns of the young singers;
- 2) music for children: songs from the adult world which children absorb as part of the enculturative process, including nursery rhymes, school songs, pop songs, and the repertoires of children's entertainers;
- 3) music of the adult world which children have transformed, adapted, and then claimed as their own: the contrafacts and parodies. These categories are imprecise. The proper location of pop songs is unclear. I have included them in category 2, even though they are not produced exclusively for children. They are, however, artifacts from the adult world which are often taken up by children.

## Conclusion

With some minor exceptions, the repertory of the 92 study is consistent with Caputo's collection. Girls' chants and school songs make up the bulk of the material collected. The collection of songs in a classroom context, not the gender of the collector, is, I would claim, the crucial factor in the rarity of boys' songs. On the basis of what I observed, I speculate that boys have a large and varied gender-specific repertory, consisting almost entirely of contrafacts and "naughty" songs. This repertory is the property of boys although they also are aware of the chants. For both girls and boys, these songs function to promote group solidarity. They are songs that they know adults do not know, that adults, in fact, disapprove of.

The possibility has also been advanced that a useful paradigm for further study of children's musical life is to consider children as a cultural



or ethnic group. Susan L. Greendorfer has made a similar suggestion, going a step further in fact, by suggesting that gender itself should be regarded as ethnicity (199):

If gender roles were considered to be culture, then variations in play and sport could be viewed as aspects of the enculturation process. Males and females could be viewed as belonging to separate or distinct cultures, and variations in play and sport would be viewed as vehicles through which child rearing practices enculturate individuals into the ideology of their gender roles. Thus the two distinctive behavioral patterns which emerge in play and sport—one for males and one for females—would be reflections of substantive differences in beliefs, values, and orientations. They would be designed cultural products, not unpredictable outcomes acquired by individuals who engage in play or sport.

## NOTES

1. In the version I recall from childhood, the “yellow curtain” was an “Iron Curtain,” thus demonstrating the sensitivity of chants to shifting political reality. In addition, the second half of the chant (from “The boys are in the washroom”) was unknown in my circle of friends.
2. Jane Sugarman (206) discusses the relationship of gender to music for Prespare Albanians: “Many of the examinations of the relationship of music to gender, for example, have focused on the ways in which the musical activities and performance styles of women and men ‘reflect’ or are ‘determined’ by the societies’ views on the sexes. In the case of the Prespare, singing is indeed constrained by community notions regarding gender. But singing may also be seen as a means of acquiring these notions and of suggesting ways in which they may be refined or revised.”
3. In my own childhood, a well-known teasing rhyme, used to embarrass a boy who was paying too much attention to a particular girl concluded: “First comes love, then comes marriage/Then comes John pushing a baby carriage.” The definitely disparaging implication was that a hen-pecked husband was now doing a woman’s work.
4. I clearly recall being concerned, as a seven- or eight-year-old, that “Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy,” those oddly named girls, were going to follow me “all the days of my life,” and I did not especially want them to.
5. For example, in an effort to make end-of-fall-term celebrations inclusive, and to be sensitive to the multi-ethnic reality of contemporary communities, present-day school boards have suppressed Christian references from student performances: carols are out; Rudolph and Frosty are in.
6. E.g., Simons (15): “Songs and styles of singing that properly employ the light and bright vocal qualities of young children help foster correct vocal and aural concepts. In my opinion, young children can and should be taught to be sensitive to the general quality of their singing. Boisterous singing is unmusical and counterproductive.” See also Maynard and Zimmerman.
7. The music teacher at Munn’s School had a copy of *Sally Go Round the Sun* and brought it to my attention as a book that she found especially useful.

8. However, another informant, my daughter (a Grade One student at another school in the same Oakville neighbourhood), tells me that her friend, Graeme, taught her "Stella Ella Olla," a hand-clap, as well as "Inky Pinky Ponky."
9. See Caputo for parodies, especially of Michael Jackson songs.

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**Résumé:** *John Brownell relate l'étude sur le terrain qu'il a réalisée dans une école de Oakville, comme suite au travail de recherche, en 1988, de Virginia Caputo sur les chansons enfantines anglaises. Brownell a notamment essayé de déterminer si le sexe de la personne qui procédait aux recherches pouvait avoir une influence sur le type de chansons collectées. Constatant que les enfants avaient chanté devant lui pratiquement les mêmes chansons que devant Caputo, Brownell émet plusieurs hypothèses sur la musique et la formation des enfants par un homme ou une femme, y compris l'idée de Susan L. Greendorfer selon laquelle la distinction homme-femme est une forme "d'ethnicité."*