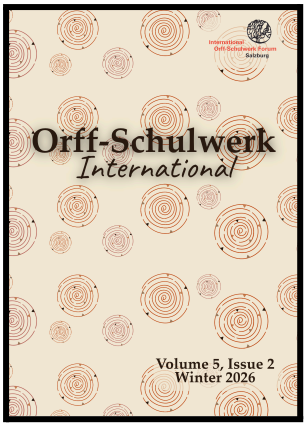
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"Once Upon … in Time". Time in Music and Storytelling as Foundation for Music Education

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"Once Upon … *in* Time"
Time in Music and Storytelling as Foundation for Music Education

Theocharis Raptis

Introduction

Storytelling is present in our everyday lives. On social media, for example, we say that we post "stories," even when it may simply be a photo or a short video. Perhaps this is because we believe that storytelling gives meaning and continuity to our lives; it is a way of structuring our experiences and making them more interesting to others. These stories are usually presented in nonverbal ways—through photos or reels—distancing themselves from language and storytelling. But we keep using the term "story" because it somehow makes us seem more attractive. Or because in this way, we seek the unity of the self. As MacIntyre notes, the unity of the self is found in the unity of narrative, 'which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.' (MacIntyre, 1981, as cited in McDonald, 2026, p. 68).

At the same time, in other fields — including science — narratives and stories can bring abstract concepts closer to us and help us understand them better. In the humanities, this "narrative turn" has taken momentum since the end of the twentieth century, marking an important epistemological shift (Kreiswirth, 1995). There may be many reasons for this development. It became increasingly clear how important it is to allow the emergence of different voices, especially voices that could not previously be heard within a dominant discourse. Listening to many different voices can shed light on events from different perspectives; creating ruptures and discontinuities within dominant historical narratives; bringing to the surface events, lives, people, and situations that had been silenced or suppressed (Spivak, 1988). As a result, there has been a significant shift in our methodological and research practices (Barusch, 2012). In recent years, this narrative turn has expanded beyond the humanities and has also been applied in fields such as medicine and physics.

In this paper I explore some thoughts about the links between storytelling and music education. Naturally, then, I would like to begin with two short "pink" stories.

The first happened in the early 2000s, when I was studying in Munich. The building of the Institute of Music Education in Munich was pink, which is why we all called it the "piggy-building". So, this is my first pink story. At that time, Professor Michael Kugler constantly tried to convey to us — his students — his enthusiasm for movement in music education, for the relationship between words and music, and for the revolution that Dalcroze and Orff had brought to music education many years earlier. He encouraged us to move, to engage in practical activities in the classroom, especially in the context of teaching music to young children in kindergarten. When classes took place in the morning, however, I did not always feel very enthusiastic about moving around. That may not always have to do with not having enough coffee; perhaps it was an unreflective reaction that betrayed a tendency to underestimate the work we do with very young children in kindergarten. More generally, our society still underestimates kindergarten itself, as well as the people within it

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— children and their teachers, most of whom are, not accidentally, women — and everything that takes place there (Young, 2021). One morning I was in class, feeling very tired because I had gone to bed very late. Then we all acted out a simple story together, bringing together music and narration. Immersing myself with the others in a shared time, in a shared experience through musical storytelling, had a profound impact on me, and I thought I'd like to do something like that in my work in the future.

And so I come to the second "pink" story, a much more recent one. I teach at the University of Ioannina, at the Department of Early Childhood. Over the last few years, I have tried to make music together with my students and with children in kindergarten. One of my main goals has been to enhance children's emotional competence. What always strikes me in the course of this work is that whenever children want to speak about something more abstract — for example, about their emotions — they always begin by telling a story. Three years ago, for example, we were in a kindergarten classroom during springtime. We were playing music and talking about emotions when a little girl began telling her story: "*Once, my godmother came to visit me at Easter, and she gave me a pair of pink shoes as a gift. The shoes were very shiny. And then…*"

Children love telling and listening to stories. They enjoy storytelling, even though they often struggle with correct verb tenses. They use temporal expressions and try to place events in sequence along a timeline. Their narratives often begin with "Once upon a time…" and continue with repeated phrases such as "and then" or "after that." It seems that children have a deep need to organize the sense of the world through time and narrative. So, in that moment, in a moment when playing "in time" was our focus, the child's "once upon a time" came in, connecting musical time and narrative time. I have thus arrived at the title of my speech today. Time almost automatically emerged as the constitutive element connecting storytelling and music.

My effort to think through both those stories eventually led me back to Aristotle. First, I will share some thoughts on antiquity, and then I will try to connect them to the present.

Ancient times

According to Aristotle, the connection between music and emotions seems to have been one of the main reasons why he included music in his proposed educational system. Aristotle considers time and movement as fundamental for understanding the relationship between music and emotions.

The key term for the arts in antiquity is *mimesis*. Musical *mimesis* can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, there is *mimesis* in terms of content, where something concrete may be represented or imitated through language, dance, or a form of programme elements of music in the narrower sense — namely rhythm and melodies — as these "imitate" emotions or character traits (Raptis, 2007).

In his work *Politics*, Aristotle (1994b) considers the forms and colours of the visual arts to be *sēmeia tōn ēthōn*, ("signs" of characters), elements that do not possess a direct or perfect resemblance to character and mental dispositions. In contrast, melodies and rhythms are described as *homoiōmata* or *mimēmata tōn ēthōn* (likenesses or imitations of character and

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mental dispositions). If we wish to understand the nature of musical mimesis, we must therefore examine the distinction between *sēmeion* (sign) and *homoiōma* or *mimēma* (likeness or imitation). The text refers to *schemata* (forms), *chrōmata* (colours), *rhythmoi* (rhythms), and *melē* (melodies). The first two terms clearly relate to painting and sculpture (*Politics*, 1340a-b).

For most interpreters, the term *sēmeion* suggests that colours and forms function merely as "signs." In other words, they can refer to character or emotional dispositions only indirectly, since they require the mediation of something else: they are indications of character that occur in the body under the influence of emotions. The resemblance of a character is in this case *epi mikron* (only a little). However, the term *sēmeion* was also used with a different meaning, namely, as a "point in time." Aristotle himself employed the term with this temporal emphasis at least twice in his works, in *De Caelo* 283a 11 und *Physics* 262b 2 (Liddell & Scott, 1996, as cited in Raptis, 2007, p. 256). In the relevant passage of the *Politics*, emphasizing this temporal dimension of *sēmeion* may lead us to a deeper understanding of Aristotelian *mimesis*. The absence of movement and time appears to be a crucial factor. Even if the soul of the depicted person is in motion, since *pathē* (passions) and *praxeis* (actions) are themselves forms of movement, the colours and forms of the visual arts, which possess no movement of their own, can only present fragments, isolated moments, instantaneous appearances of these movements. Of course, it is possible to recognize an angry person in a painting. But because anger itself is a movement of the soul, a painting cannot provide a complete imitation of anger, precisely because it lacks movement and time duration. Moreover, one cannot know whether this anger is justified and therefore cannot draw secure conclusions about the *ēthos*, the character of the person depicted. Now we can better understand this *epi mikron* (only a little), which was mentioned above.

By contrast, melody and rhythm can represent more fully the dispositions of the soul, of human *praxeis* (actions) and consequently of human character. Time is understood as the constituent element of every manifestation of *ēthos*, namely *praxis* (action) and *pathos* (passion), since it has a special relationship to movement. And, since time is to be understood as a constituent element of music, music is closely related to the actions and passions of the human soul (*Politics,* 1340b 17).

Aristotle has also given us one of the most profound studies of the nature of time. In this respect, we are lucky that his ideas were later studied by the musicologist Thrasyboulos Georgiades (1985), who was a student and friend of Carl Orff. It is worth noting that, according to Michael Kugler, Georgiades' Text "*Das Orff-Schulwerk in Griechenland (1936)"* (the title comes from the editor) is the first document on the intercultural reception of the Orff-Schulwerk (Georgiades, 2002p. 228).

Aristotle (1994a) defines time as 'the number of motion according to before and after' (*Physics*, 219b 1–2). He explains that the term *arithmos* (number) may signify:
a) that which is countable (*arithmēton*),
b) that which is counted (*arithmoumenon*), or
c) that with which we count (*hō arithmoumen*).

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In this context, Aristotle argues that number should be understood as (b) *arithmoumenon* — namely, "that which is counted" (*Physics* 219b 8). Georgiades' interpretation (1985) of this passage is helpful. Aristotle uses a present passive participle, whereas the English translation "counted" tends to suggest the completed action expressed by a perfect participle. Yet *arithmoumenon* refers to something that "is being counted now," in the present moment — something "that I count now and now again," the ever-recurring present. In this sense, counting is not primarily directed toward establishing a final numerical result. Rather, time appears as something that is continuously being counted.

For Aristotle's theory of time, the *nyn* (now) is fundamental. The "now" has no extension and no duration; it is the boundary between before and after. And I can perceive it only insofar as I count. From this perspective, time is number — that is, the reflection of time through the act of counting. I understand time when I count: "one, two, three, four…" In German, there is a profound connection between the verb *zählen* (to count) and *erzählen* (to tell or to narrate). And in English the root of the word "tell" is *tellan*, which originally also meant "to count" or "to enumerate." From the same root comes the word "bank teller." This linguistic connection is fascinating, because it suggests that narration and counting may be much more closely related than we usually think. And the basis for this connection is time.

The relationship between time and movement is also crucial for the present discussion. As Thrasyboulos Georgiades writes, 'movement is merely that by which I perceive time' (Georgiades, 1985, p. 35). From this perspective, it becomes easier to understand why the static forms and colours of the visual arts can only function as *sēmeia of ēthos*, and not as *homoiōmata (*imitations*)*. They cannot represent movement unfolding through before and after, because they are merely *sēmeia* — depictions of a single "now," isolated from temporal continuity.

And one last argument drawn from etymological considerations: In the visual arts, we speak of *schēma*, meaning form or shape, whereas in musical representation we speak of *rhythmos*, meaning rhythm. Originally, however, these two terms had closely related meanings: both referred to the visible forms of movement in dance. The fact that only the term *rhythmos* continued to be used in the field of music — and is still used today — whereas *schēma* did not, may be explained by the different endings of the two words. A term ending in *-ma* refers to something completed, fixed, or accomplished, while a term ending in *-thmos* or *-smos* refers to something involving action, process, or activity. This distinction between two constitutive and formative elements of the visual arts and music helps clarify why only music — and not sculpture or painting — is capable of representing movement within a temporal sequence.

Music can therefore function as *homoiōma tōn ēthōn* (likeness or imitation) because time and movement are constitutive elements of music itself. Music possesses a profound affinity with every form of movement, including the movements of the soul. As Aristotle writes: 'There also seems to be a *syggeneia* (kinship) between the soul and *harmoniai* and *rhythmoi'* (*Politics* 1340b 17–18). This relationship between music and the human soul ultimately rests upon their shared structure: the structure of movement and time.

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Modern Times

Aristotle provides a philosophical foundation for understanding the connection between music and emotions. Building on this foundation, we can transform the music classroom into a space where emotions can be freely experienced and expressed. But toward what direction should this transformation lead? I have attempted to address this question several times through the concept of "emotional competence." Carolyn Saarni (1999) developed a systematic theoretical framework for emotional competence, which includes, among other elements, awareness of one's own emotional state, the ability to discern the emotions of others, the capacity to express emotions and discuss them appropriately according to context, empathic and sympathetic engagement with others' emotional experiences, and recognition of the importance of emotions in human relationships. We can therefore see that the two main fields of emotional competence are the recognition and management of both our own emotions and those of others within a particular context.

Emotional education in music lessons can be grounded in a crucial distinction between the perception of emotions in music and the induction and experience of emotions through music. For example, someone may recognize the sadness expressed in a musical piece without necessarily feeling sad themselves at that moment (Juslin, 2019; Gabrielsson, 2002). This distinction between the perception and the induction of emotions can be valuable when implementing music activities in the classroom aimed at fostering emotional competence. Certain activities—such as spontaneous body movement to music, singing, instrumental performance, or listening to live music—encourage a more immediate and direct emotional experience. In contrast, activities that combine music with storytelling, short theatrical performances, pantomime, or drawing may promote the perception and understanding of emotions, encouraging a more reflective engagement with them. In this second category of activities, the narrative element plays a central role (Raptis, 2020). A specific story gives emotions a more concrete and meaningful context, functioning as a reflective dimension within the educational process. At the same time, we do not wish to reduce children's relationship with emotions in the classroom to mere discussion or purely intellectual analysis. The central idea behind our music activities in kindergarten is that the profound experiences children gain through music can become the foundation for reflection on their emotional lives. Such reflection is neither abstract nor detached; rather, it is embodied and experiential, enriched by the many ways in which emotions interact with reason.

These processes support children in becoming aware of their emotional changes, understanding why they experience different emotions and how these emotions change over periods of time, and recognizing the significance of these experiences in their lives. The main argument in this paper is that storytelling is closely associated with the capacity for thought and reflection. To better understand this relationship, it is useful to examine how storytelling shapes human thinking. Certainly, the first name that comes to mind in this context is Paul Ricoeur, who, in his work *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988), makes it clear that time becomes human time and gains meaning through narrative. We will, however, examine here, authors who explore the relationship between time, narrative, and art in general, and who emphasize emotions. In his work, Jerome Bruner (1990; 1996) focuses on the ways children think narratively. He argues that storytelling is essential for children, both as storytellers and as listeners. According to Bruner, there are two modes of thought: the

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paradigmatic mode, which is abstract and characteristic of scientific reasoning, and the narrative mode, which is concerned with stories, intentions, and human actions. Bruner suggests, however, that narrative thinking may actually underlie scientific thinking. His exploration of the narrative mode highlights its inherent sequentiality, the organization of events in a meaningful sequence, as its principal characteristic (Bruner, 1990).

There are three more points in Bruner's theory that seem to be relevant to our investigation: a crucial characteristic of narrative is that 'it specializes in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary' (Bruner, 1990, p. 47). The second point is that *c*hildren are also ready to mark the unusual and to leave the usual unmarked, to concentrate attention and information processing on the offbeat. The last point is that emotions play a crucial role in how we make sense of things, and that whatever is associated with strong emotions remains imprinted much more deeply in our memory (Bruner, 1990). Bruner's theory explains, on the one hand, how children engage with culture and how our stories help them integrate into a cultural context and a society, and on the other, why stories hold such a strong appeal for children and what this might mean in any educational context. Storytelling is also one of the most appropriate ways for a child to engage with the cultural norms and to find meaning in the world around her or him. At the same time music can arouse emotions and the stories can remain imprinted more deeply in children's memory.

Emotional education in every classroom and the development of emotional competence should not remain merely at the level of acquiring skills; rather, they should lead to something akin to what Gert Biesta (2018) calls "subjectification". Emotional education can be understood as a process through which individuals develop the capacity to make right judgments and responsible decisions under particular situations. Consequently, the cultivation of emotional competence also entails an ethical dimension. Several works of Martha Nussbaum explore the ethical significance of emotions in education. Nussbaum brings together profound reflections on emotions, storytelling, and the arts, demonstrating how these domains contribute to human development and moral understanding. As a distinguished interpreter of Aristotle's philosophy, she draws extensively on Aristotelian insights into emotions, ethics, and practical judgment.

In her book *Not for Profit* (2010), Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of play and the arts in both human life and education. She argues that storytelling and narrative play are essential for the development of children's imagination, as they enable them to envision and understand the experiences of others. Through imaginative engagement with stories, children learn to adopt perspectives beyond their own and to cultivate empathy. According to Nussbaum, play provides a safe environment in which children can explore relationships, emotions, and social interactions without fear of real-world consequences. Because these experiences remain within the imaginative realm, children are able to experiment with different roles, actions, and responses while maintaining a sense of security. Within this space of "safe risk," they can engage with complex human relationships and emotional sequences, thereby developing both emotional understanding and moral imagination.

Through play and storytelling, children learn to empathize with others, become interested in lives different from their own, and understand how people navigate relationships. Drawing on Winnicott (1971), Nussbaum describes play as taking place in a "potential space"

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between individuals, also a space in which children (and later adults) can explore otherness in ways that feel less threatening than direct encounters (2010). Within this space, the presence of others becomes a source of curiosity and delight rather than anxiety or defensiveness. Nussbaum argues that artistic activities in adulthood have a similar function, cultivating the capacities needed for friendship as well as ethical and political life. Even simple forms of imaginative engagement, such as nursery rhymes, can foster a sense of wonder by encouraging children to imagine the perspectives of others.

Also, children tend to remember stories and events associated with strong emotions more vividly. At the same time, a story's chronological structure—the sequence of events unfolding over time—helps them make sense of what they are feeling, why they are feeling it, and which actions or events have given rise to those emotions.

The times of Orff

So far, I have discussed time as a connecting element between storytelling, music, and the arts more broadly, and have linked these to both education and emotion. I' d like to explore these themes within the context of the *Orff-Schulwerk Forum*. Since my student years, and later through my collaboration with the Moraitis School in Athens, I have had the impression that the Orff approach provides a remarkably open framework for a wide range of creative and educational activities. The wide range of possibilities suggested by the Orff approach using diverse musical media and practices is one of its greatest strengths. This openness stems from the very roots of the project, which has been a long-term creative process dating back to the *Günther-Schule* era and was shaped through the collaboration of colleagues, each of whom contributed their own perspective and expertise. Combined with Carl Orff's own artistic explorations, this collaborative development gave rise to the close integration of music, movement, and language that characterises the approach. The rich opportunities it provides for combining music with movement, speech, singing, theatrical performance, body percussion, and accessible musical instruments make it an ideal pedagogical framework for designing and implementing activities that engage with children's emotions.

To understand the openness of the Orff approach more fully, however, it may be necessary to look back to some of Orff's earliest experiences. Hermann Regner writes about Orff's childhood: 'What he loved best of all, as he remembers today, was to tell stories, and from the very beginning with him this always included music' (Regner, 1975/2011, pp. 170-172). And Regner continues:

> When he was ten, he was given a puppet theatre—his first means of experimenting in the field of music/ drama. Plot, dialogue, music, production and performance did it all himself. The family encouraged him by listening attentively. At thirteen he was taken for the first time to an opera – Richard Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* [...] When Orff describes this today one can feel vibrations of the seriousness and intensity of emotion that made the thirteen-year-old boy oblivious to his real life (Regner, 1975/2011, p. 172).

These memories suggest that, from an early age, Orff experienced both the emotional power and the creative freedom of storytelling through music and other artistic media. His engagement with narrative was never confined to a single art form; rather, it emerged through the integration of music, drama, dance and movement. It is therefore not surprising

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that his pedagogical approach developed as one that remains open to dialogue with any art form capable of providing a framework for narrative expression.

Coda

Music and storytelling, as artforms that unfold entirely through time, have a special role to play in our world today, increasingly shaped by immediacy. 'Music […] commands us—to remain in its own time' writes Biesta (2025, p. 21). In the age of the "on demand," both children and adults are becoming less accustomed to waiting. We want everything now, instantly; power seems to live in the remote control and in digital platforms that offer an endless collection of choices at the touch of a button. This virtual reality often obscures one of the most fundamental realities of human life: the reality of time itself.

I think that, more than anything else, we need to be in the flow of time, not just in the "now". Aristotle told us this many years ago. Only in this way can we understand and express our emotions and communicate with others and with ourselves; only in this way can we improve ourselves as subjects capable of making decisions. And as the philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes only in this way we can hope (2024). Narrative is directly linked to hope. Narrative gives meaning not only to our past, but also to our future. Hope requires narrative imagination to make room for something that does not yet exist. This line of thought is very close to both Nussbaum's ideas and theories and, also, those of Maxine Greene (1995), who places imagination at the centre of education. Perhaps the biggest problem of our time is that more and more people do not see a place for themselves in the common narrative imaginations of the future. This is what erodes hope and fuels fear; this is what is feeding the rise of fascism around the world.

As teachers, we should give children the time to tell their stories and play their music. And we should make time to listen to them, to let them become shared, and to find their way into music. We should also make time for our stories and our music. In this age of quantification, assessments, and metrics, we should not think of these as a waste of time. In this sense, the role of storytelling and music today may be more important than ever. These thoughts could also serve as a reminder in our classes with our students, in any context, to share our music, share our stories, hope for something better that may come, and make the most of the time we spend with them.

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