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## Publication Review: Music Right From the Start: Theory and Practice of Early Childhood Music Education

By Dartsch, M., Economidou, N., and Piispanen, U.,  
Reviewed by Erika J. Knapp



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## Reviews of Publications

### Music Right from The Start: Theory and Practice of Early Childhood Music Education

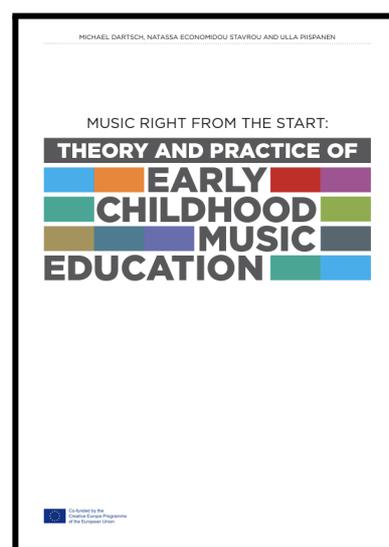
by Dartsch, M., Economidou, N., and Piispanen, U.

AEC Strengthening Music in Society Project co-founded by Creative Europe (2021)

<https://aec-music.eu/publication/music-right-from-the-start-theory-and-practice-of-early-childhood-music-education/>

Reviewed by Erika J. Knapp

In a combined effort from the European Association of Conservatories (AEC) “strengthening music in society” project and the “Creative Europe Program” of the European Union, an Early Childhood Music Education (ECME) working group developed *Music right from the start: Theory and practice of early childhood music education* (Dartsch et al., 2021). This free, open-source resource offers both theoretical and practical tools for educators within an early childhood musical setting, and the authors state their goal is to “help establish music lessons for young children all over Europe” (p. 8). To this aim, the book is divided into two sections: activity forms and designing lessons. Below, I offer a brief synopsis of each section of the book as well as review of its contents.



#### Part One

Dartsch et al. (2021) posit that they present the contents of the book as a combination of their personal experiences as early childhood music instructors as well as basing their suggestions in the extant research literature. The opening section, activity forms, begins with a short review of literature from studies and research on early childhood musical benefits, and then the authors use the subsequent sections to approach teaching early childhood music across different musical activities: singing, moving, playing, listening, and creating. The authors conclude with a section on concerts for and with children, as well a set of overarching principles for early childhood music education.

In their review of literature, Dartsch et al. (2021) advocate for “musical play, active participation, and engagement... in rich musical environment filled with stimuli” (p. 8). Further, they offer a variety of musical and extramusical benefits for children (and their caregivers) who participate in early childhood music classes. In addition to developing tonal and rhythmic skills, learning musical terms and concepts, and playing instruments, they also suggest children develop expressiveness, experience physical/emotional/brain development, build social skills, and are socialized into future school experiences such as routines and organized activities. Further, Dartsch et al (2021) suggest that participation in early

childhood music gives parents and caregivers opportunities to bring early childhood music into the home, and the experience can enrich their everyday life.

The authors' advocate for the value of a rich, immersive musical experience, and how it positively contributes to child development across many domains. One concern, however, is that it seems as if the authors vacillate between whether the ultimate goal of early childhood music is music itself, or if music is in service to the cognitive/physical/social developmental progress of a child. While, in many ways, the answer to this question is a "both/and" answer, as music educators it is important to be wary of advocating for music on behalf of another goal (sometimes called "added-value" arguments for music), instead of purely music for music's sake (Greene, 2015). While music does appear to support other goals in some studies (e.g., Jaschke et al., 2018), music educators must take care to not use that as a primary argument for its existence, as there is not enough *generalizable* evidence to support these claims (Costa-Giomi, 2015). Further, if music is positioned primarily in service to something else, music educators run the risk of advocating themselves right out of a job if they cannot prove it to an administrator who may want evidence they cannot provide.

A challenge of providing a review of literature in a guidebook of this nature is that practicing music educators primarily want to know what to do and how to do it; they are not often well-versed in the nuanced disagreements amongst researchers in the field. For example, Dartsch et al. (2021) argue that stimulating music capacities stimulates language capacity. Quoting a Dartsch (2010) article, they write "verses and song tests will be the focus again and again, so that a lesson without language and speech would simply be unthinkable" (p. 17) and this quote was specifically referring to children who could already speak. However, the use of text within early childhood musical settings is not a universally agreed-upon position, as they have led the reader to believe. While many Orff-based music educators often use speech and poetry as the impetus for musical activities, proponents of other methodologies, specifically Music Learning Theory (MLT) often advocate for few to no words in early childhood musical selections (Gordon, 2003). One reason for this is because of a belief that removing language reduces cognitive complexity for students who still have emergent language skills, as well as for those for whom English is not their primary language (Reynolds et al., 2021; Valerio et al., 2000). For example, research by Engel (2020) showed that songs without words might be better for 3–4-year-old children who are developing phonological awareness, and this would have implications for early childhood music educators' decisions to use exclusively words with songs. However, Engel's research was a pilot study, and more research is needed in this area. It would behoove the authors of this book to provide a more nuanced response to how music and other child development areas interact, as well as offer research that presents contradictory information.

Overall, the use of cited research to support the authors' positions in this opening section seems to ebb and flow without a clear pattern of reasoning. The literature review shows citations for some of their claims, but other sections stand without support. This is cause for concern, regardless of how well substantiated their statements might be. The authors' arguments for the benefits of music, musical or otherwise, would be better supported through citing additional relevant research throughout.

The remainder of part one includes chapters on different forms of musical activity for children: listening, moving, singing, playing instruments, improvising, and composing. Within each of these larger areas, the authors provide an overview of the form of musical activity, offering some citations from related literature to support a theoretical understanding of how that activity develops in early childhood. Then they offer potential scenes for different ages for how this musical activity might manifest (e.g., birth-18 months, 18-36 months), giving a glimpse into what this might look like in practice. The authors then offer a useful graphic of possibilities and activities that might take place within that musical form and elaborate on each with examples. Next, they offer pedagogical reflections to consider when thinking about teaching the specific musical activity to children, and the final section of each chapter includes an age development and musical creativity chart, which gives a macro-level view of how this skill might develop. Within this macro-level view, they offer further pedagogical principles for each area. Something that is important to note is that they strongly emphasize that although the chapters are broken up by musical activity, the concepts are interrelated and should be combined when designing an overall lesson plan in early childhood music. Generously, the authors included musical notation of songs and chants they reference in each chapter.

Throughout each activity, the authors provide graphics that give an overview of aspects to concentrate on within the specific musical forms. These, in many ways, mirror what American educators reference when we look to state our national standards for guidance on what should be included in a music lesson. Further, the authors' developmental and skill content charts are good overviews for someone looking for a full overview of how a skill develops. However, given the massive changes that a child goes through during each developmental stage, it is, at times too broad to be functionally useful on a day-to-day basis, especially if the intended audience is people who are less familiar with music at the outset. This begs the question of who is the intended readership? At times, the authors seem to be advocating for music to an audience that is unfamiliar with music education, but at other times, it reads as a source book for a novice teacher. If it is the latter, the developmental stages of each child, and the associated musical development skills, should be laid out in much greater detail.

### **Part Two**

The second half of the book gives sample lessons, and offers different styles of lessons, based on each of the authors unique experiences, pedagogical approaches, and backgrounds. It is important to note that none of the authors explicitly stated their pedagogical approach (e.g., Orff, Dalcroze, Kodály), which I believe was intentional. Instead, they offer lessons, broken down by developmental age, with the explicit desire that the lessons might translate across contexts and approaches. Each of the sample lesson plans includes a brief overview of sequencing, a suggested age range, and the requirements for the teacher and room. First, the authors give objectives for the lessons, and then list and describe the activities in chronological order, with all necessary musical scores attached.

There are several positive things in these lessons worth noting. First, as an open-source, free resource, it is wonderful that all the music is included, as well as step-by-step instructions,

timing/pacing, and the focus of the lesson. This would be very useful to a novice teacher and/or someone who is less familiar with the pacing and potential repertoire for an early childhood music class. The examples given for listening lessons are all musical pieces that could be easily sourced through the internet, and not difficult to find. Another component to these lessons that stands out is the wonderful variety of activities, not only within an individual lesson, but across the scope of these lessons. The activities included a good variety of movement, singing, dancing, creating, and playing instruments. Additionally, there were enough different activities within any one lesson that would most likely hold a young child's attention. Indeed, many of these lessons looked like they would be fun and engaging for young children.

Nevertheless, there are quite a few opportunities for growth within this set of lessons. First, many of the objectives written in the lessons are not observable or measurable skills that a child could do, and a teacher could assess. In addition, some of the objectives seem to have nothing to do with musical skill or growth and are mirroring part one's emphasis on non-musical benefits. An example of such an objective is from one of the lessons for 5–6-year-olds, which states "paint the picture of the sea and its habitants." While painting is lovely, and using a variety of extra musical props and materials is encouraged, how is one of the *musical* objectives 'to paint a picture'?

Another concern is that many of the musical objectives are quite formal in nature, and do not reflect that some children may not be ready for formal instruction at these early stages. In formal instruction, there is a clear right/wrong answer, whereas in informal musical instruction, all responses (including no response) are treated as musical. Proponents of Music Learning Theory, for example, argue that the goal of early childhood musical instruction is to prepare children for formal instruction, and as such, all responses are welcomed and valued (Reynolds et al., 2021; Valerio et al., 2000). Further, this is achieved primarily through a sound before sight method. As an example of how these lessons do not align with informal instruction, one of the lessons for 3–4-year-olds states "connect notation symbols to the pulse and the double time pulse of other activities" (p. 70). This objective implies that a student already understands macrobeat and microbeat, can associate the symbolic images with the appropriate rhythms, *and* is able to generalize this knowledge across contexts. This is not reflective of many pedagogues' views on what to teach in early childhood music settings. Further, in informal early childhood musical settings, teachers should provide children many opportunities for individual response, both rhythmic and tonal (Reynolds et al., 2021; Valerio et al., 2000), and there are little to no opportunities for students to engage in this type of musical "serve and return" with a teacher, which in turn, prevents the early childhood music educator from being able to have an intimate understanding of how a child is progressing towards their readiness for formal musical instruction.

One of the most concerning components of these lessons is they lack a reflection of the diversity of children and families that might be in an early childhood music class, especially as this book is being presented as a way to support early childhood music across Europe. Europe is not a monolith, and neither are the people within each individual country. And yet, many of these lessons imply otherwise. For example, every song (with words) is in English,

and while English may be a common language to bring together a variety of approaches across countries, it is certainly not the only one. It may be more culturally responsive to consider providing some songs in home languages or languages from neighboring countries as a way to reflect the diversity of the European Union. Similarly, almost all the musical listening examples seem to be stemming from a traditional Western classical music canon. There is nothing wrong with using music from the Western classical canon; however, it is important to present young children with experiences that represent all forms of musicking, including music from other cultures and popular music. Further, it is crucial that different styles and genres of music are placed on equal footing with each other, so as not to tokenize or create hierarchical views of some music over others. There is little to no use of listening resources outside the canon within this early childhood set of lessons, which is a missed opportunity to build cultural connections and teach in ways that are culturally sustaining to the families that participate in early childhood music.

Further, the images presented within this book, while not the actual content themselves, send a message that early childhood music and musical experiences are for only one subset of the population: white people. Often images send messages of who belongs or what kind of music is acceptable (Bernabé & Martinez-Bello, 2021; Knapp, 2021). Throughout the book, there are pictures of cheerful children and adults making music together, which seems innocuous. However, almost every single picture is of white-presenting children. In the entire book, there is only one black child, and two Asian children. Every single educator pictured is white presenting and only one is male, perpetuating the stereotype that early childhood educators are all female. This book doesn't represent the diversity of students who could and do participate in music at young ages, or of the teachers who lead these classes. This begs the question "where did these pictures come from?" If these images were provided by the authors or were taken from experiences they observed/led in their own communities, then Dartsch et al. (2021) have the responsibility to address the homogeneity in these images. However, if these images were inserted into a book by a well-meaning editor or copywriter, a conversation absolutely needed to take place before publishing and putting their name on this work. As the music education world continues to move the needle on social justice and issues of diversity and inclusion, many recognize that representation matters, and the impact of these white homogenous pictures is more important than intent.

Finally, the musical content itself is relatively homogenous. Every song provided by the authors is in a major key, and the majority are in a duple or compound duple meter. While some of the listening examples explore minor keys or triple time (albeit, not many), there is no reference to the modes anywhere in these lessons, and children are never invited to sing in anything other than a major key. While some believe in reserving modes and more complex meters for children at a later stage, others argue that early childhood is the prime time to provide a rich tapestry of meters and tonalities for children from which they can develop their own musical ideas (Reynolds et al., 2021; Valerio et al., 2000). Instead, this set of lessons is narrowing the opportunity for children during a critical developmental period, and boxing them in, yet again, to a western, notation-heavy, understanding of musical experiences.

There is plenty to be gleaned from this guidebook. For someone who knows little about early childhood music, or how it connects to the other ways children develop, it is a place to start. The melodies and listening activities are in an appropriate tessitura for children, and many of the activities would be engaging to children. Nevertheless, a truly powerful and impactful early childhood music education can and should do more. It should support a rich musical experience, develop students' understanding of tonal and rhythmic concepts in a way that simultaneously encourages their understanding of themselves as a musician, offer diversity of musical experiences, and reflect the diversity of the community in which it operates. In that regard, no single guidebook could do that, as each community and group of children/caregivers is unique. However, this one falls short in many ways, and I encourage the authors to consider how to diversify their lessons, be more reflective of the diversity of children/caregivers (including providing accommodations for teachers who work with children who have special needs), and to reflect a deeper understanding of the use of informal musical learning in early childhood music.

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