

Music as expression of children's spirituality: The case of Steiner early childhood education

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Abstract

This article examines early childhood music education from the perspective of Rudolf Steiner's indications for music with young children, exploring their connection to his concepts of childhood spirituality. Specifically, it looks at how the musical interval of the fifth relates to the spirituality of young children. It investigates music practices in Steiner early childhood settings and considers whether Steiner's ideas of music and soul health, live performance and ritual have broader applicability beyond Steiner environments. Since its inception in 1926, Steiner early childhood education has expanded to approximately 80 countries, reflecting an enduring relevance of Steiner's ideas. As the centenary approaches, this article revisits Steiner's approach to music education for young children, emphasising its unique reflection of child spirituality. While Steiner education is renowned for attributes such as play, imagination, and the use of natural materials, its distinctive approach to music, particularly its links to child spirituality, remains underexplored.

Keywords: music; music education; early childhood; Steiner Waldorf

Introduction

This article looks at early childhood music education through the lens of Rudolf Steiner's indications on music and considers how these indications link closely to his notions of childhood spirituality. It looks at music practice in Steiner settings and asks if this approach has aspects which recommend it beyond Steiner early childhood settings.

Steiner¹ early childhood education has been practiced since 1926 (Howard 2005). Over this period, it has developed and expanded from its central European beginnings into around 80 countries. This continued expansion speaks to a resilience and relevance of Steiner's ideas to parents worldwide when choosing an education for their children. As the centenary approaches, it is timely to consider Rudolf Steiner's approach to music with young children.

Steiner early childhood education is known for a range of attributes and practices including an emphasis on play, on imagination, storytelling and narrative, the use of natural materials, the importance placed on short- and long-term rhythms, and a delayed introduction to academic learning (compared to some, especially English-speaking, countries) (Suggate, Schaughency, and Reese 2011). However, the approach of Steiner early childhood to music and its relationship to child spirituality is less explored or well-known.

Rudolf Steiner's cosmology and its relationship to the image of the young child in Steiner education

Rudolf Steiner's cosmology is founded on there being a non-physical as well as a physical existence, and the interpenetration of what he called a spiritual world simultaneously within the physical world which can be discerned with the physical senses. While these views are not shared by those who argue for a solely material reality, Steiner regarded these two 'realms' as indivisible; two aspects of everyday existence, only one of which can be perceived with the ordinary senses. Steiner dedicated his life to the investigation of these dual 'worlds' and the creation of what he termed a 'unitary worldview, or monism' (1894/1995, 20). 'It is due ... to our organisation that the full, complete reality, including our own selves

¹ Steiner education is also known as Waldorf education, taking the name from that of the first school established in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919. The terms are interchangeable and refer to the same educational approach.

as subjects, appears at first as a duality. Where a dualist will see these two realms as standing apart and opposed,' a monist would regard them as 'two sides of a single reality which are kept apart merely by our organisation' (i.e. by our not being able to see into spiritual realities) (Steiner 1894/1995, 88). Steiner identified three different forms of monism: one only considering the material (materialism), a second considering only the spirit (spiritualism) and a third uniting what is spiritual with what is material, advocating 'descend[ing] into the depths of our own being' (Steiner 1894/1995, 26) to do this.

Steiner's image of the human being reflects the third monist approach. He described the human being in multiple ways, some of which are highly complex, however, one of the simpler is as threefold: body, soul and spirit.² There is a physical aspect, the body, the inheritance of parents and forebears, a spiritual aspect which exists before a person is born, the kernel of that person as an individual, which is borne by the individual during their life and is released at death back to the spiritual world, and a soul which mediates between the two.³

At its most simple, Steiner's depiction of a human life is the process of the incorporation of these three elements. For Steiner, as well as a physical body, a young child possesses a unique spirit. Early childhood is a period characterised by a gradual process of the incarnation of this spiritual element and harmonisation with the physical body. This is

² The threefold division given here is not uncommon and has been held by many besides Steiner. See for example, this extract from Kierkegaard's, *From sickness unto death*

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self... But spirit is the third factor. It is this which permeates and penetrates the relationship between the soul and the body, constituting the self as a true synthesis. (1849/1980, p. 40)

³ There are many ways to understand the term 'soul'. Here I use it to describe the inner, emotional, affective aspect of the human being, the world of feelings, something which is always in flux. The soul is able of being influenced, developed and strengthened by means of artistic and other exercises and experiences.

mirrored in old age which he regarded as a gradual exarnation phase (see, among others, Steiner 1914/2013).

The incarnation process of young children is mediated by all that surrounds them, including the education process. For Steiner, it is the task of the educator to facilitate this incarnation process providing developmentally appropriate and supportive experiences and opportunities for the child (Frödén and Wright 2018).

Importance of sense impressions

Along with Froebel, Montessori, Piaget and others, Rudolf Steiner emphasised the sensitivity of young children to their surroundings. He understood that, up to the change of milk teeth, ‘the child is, for all practical purposes, entirely a sensory organ’ (Steiner 1924/1997, 7), completely open to all that surrounds them. Sense impressions at this age play a crucial role in shaping the child’s development; whether these impressions are positive or negative, through the physical senses or non-physical, they remain formative for the child. For this reason, a central feature of Steiner early childhood education is the importance placed on the quality of sense impressions the growing child is exposed to. It is this attention to the care of the senses which leads to early childhood settings using natural materials rather than manmade ones; it guides the choice of colour of the rooms, the shape and function of materials, telling stories rather than reading them, and so on.

Play materials, the colours chosen of the walls, telling stories, and so on can be classed as externals. They are important and visible, easy to understand and provide. This may explain similarities which can be observed (and have been commented on, for instance Ashley 2009) in Steiner centres worldwide – similar responses to Steiner’s ideas. Indications which Steiner gave regarding sense impressions which are non-material are not so frequently

written about in the literature (Nicol and Taplin 2017). These are at least as important, if not more so, for being intangible and not so readily noticed. Music is one of these.

Steiner's conception of music

Steiner gave few lectures specifically on the subject of music.⁴ However, he did mention the nature of music multiple times when discussing other topics. His understanding of music has the same monist gesture as that of the human being – that there is both an earthly, audible aspect (the music we hear, traditionally called *musica humana*) and a heavenly or cosmic music (*musica mundana* or *musica universalis*) which is non-audible. *Musica humana* is an echo of *musica universalis*, an idea first put forward by Erigenus in the ninth century (Proust 2011). In Western traditions, this has commonly been referred to as the harmony of the spheres (Godwin 1993), and is a topic which Steiner mentioned in hundreds of lectures while discussing a wide range of diverse subjects. At its most simple, the harmony of the spheres is the sound made by the planets and heavenly bodies as they move through universe. It has been written about for millennia and has been the inspiration for poets and musicians for as long, from Dryden (2013) and Novalis (2022) to The Moody Blues (1968) and Björk (2011).

Such non-audible heavenly harmony is not limited to Western philosophies. It is frequently found in Islamic philosophy, for example the Illuminationist writings of Suhrawardī (Corbin 1990/1998) and is described in Daoist literature as the ‘great harmony’ by Zhuangzi (Chai 2017), and the ‘great note’ (大音) or ‘rarified sound’ (大音稀聲) by Laozi,⁵ and involves ‘listen[ing] to what is soundless’ (Lu and Tan 2024, 81). In Indian traditions, this is called *ahāhata*, unsounded sound (Saraswati 2007). To Steiner and these other authors, earthly music is a reflection of this (to us inaudible) heavenly music: ‘In other

⁴ Steiner gave a total of eight lectures on music 1906-1924. This is a small proportion of the some 6000 lectures he gave during this period. They are published in English as *The inner nature of music and the experience of tone* (Steiner, 1906–1923/1983).

⁵ Also romanised as Lao Tzu, born c. 570 BCE.

words, according to Daoist philosophy, audible sounds originate from the inaudible’ (Lu and Tan 2024, 83) and to Steiner, ‘The melodies and harmonies that speak to us from the compositions of our great masters are faithful copies of [this higher] world’ (1906 & 1923/1983, 18). It is this connection, according to Steiner, which explains ‘why music stirs the deepest strings of our soul, causing them to resound’ (1906 & 1923/1983, 19).

These understandings of the heavenly origins of earthly music and the source of its effects are in contrast to otherwise widespread notions of the main purposes of music being for sensory pleasure, for enjoyment or self-expression.

Steiner on music in early childhood

What Steiner says about music for young children is found in a lecture given in Stuttgart, Germany on 7 March, 1923, in which he said:

Up to the age of nine, the child does not possess a proper grasp of major and minor moods. ... Though it is not readily admitted, the child essentially dwells in moods of fifths [Quintenstimmungen]. ... if one really wishes to reach the child, musical appreciation must be based on the appreciation of fifths (1906 & 1923/1983, 57-58).

There is no further explanation given as to what this music should sound like, how it should be approached or used, what characterises it, or similar helpful and practical suggestions. In order to begin to unpack this singularly cryptic comment and understand why Steiner mentions the fifth in the context of young children in particular, it is necessary to look at what Steiner and others have written about the nature of the fifth.

Steiner’s interpretation of the fifth and its relationship to childhood

Musicians have frequently commented on the different qualities of musical intervals.⁶ Smith

⁶ Intervals are the ‘gap’ between two notes of different pitches.) In the Western system, a C to a D is a second, C to E a third, C to F a fourth, and so on, until from C to the C above is an octave.

and Williams note

Musicians often claim that even small sound units such as musical intervals, which consist of only two notes and are thus the smallest musical phrases possible, differ from each other not only in pitch relationship, but also in ‘feel’, that each has an emotional quality, or meaning of its own and that these emotional qualities are commonly, rather than idiosyncratically, perceived. (1999, 385)

There is a (small) body of research (Costa, Bitti, and Bonfiglioli 2000; Costa and Nese 2020) into the emotional quality of intervals, however, to date this research has not been extended to any extent to explore the potential effects of isolated intervals on the human being.

Steiner noted that the smaller intervals (up to and including the fourth) lie ‘nearer’ the human being, they are ‘close’, breathing in. There is a wish to return to the tonic (or home) note. The larger intervals (sixth, seventh) lie ‘beyond’ the human being, they wish to escape, to breathe out, to resolve themselves in the octave. One gesture contracts, the other expands. He mentions the quality of individual intervals in some depth in his lectures on tone eurythmy⁷ (Steiner 1924/2013).

The significance of the fifth is that it lies between these two tendencies. Steiner states: ‘In the fifth, we experience a kind of midpoint, the ability to breathe in and out’ (1906 & 1923/1983, 55), and that, further, in the fifth, ‘we reach the boundary of the human and the cosmic, where the cosmic resounds into the sphere of the human and the human, consumed with longing, yearns to rush forth into the Cosmos’ (1906/1986, 120), so that ‘with the feeling for the fifth, man [sic] actually feels transported’ (1906/1986, 60).

⁷ Eurythmy is a form of movement initiated by Steiner. It is performed to both the spoken word as well as music. It is a curriculum subject in Steiner schools, is practised as a stage art and has therapeutic applications.

These phrases are of importance in order to gain an understanding Rudolf Steiner's intentions for music in early childhood, that the fifth is a midway point. It is neither primarily earthly (smaller intervals, in-breathing, contracting), nor primarily cosmic (larger intervals, out-breathing, expansive). It exists between the two in a state of balance, a balance in which Steiner describes the cosmic resounding into the physical world and the human being longing to reach up to what is cosmic. This zone of interbeing (Deleuze and Guattari 1987/2013), a place both of the heavens and the earth is for Steiner the natural home of the young child (see Wordsworth quotation below).

The picture of the nature of a fifth, balanced between the earth and the cosmos, echoes Steiner's conception of the development processes of young children, that the nature of the young child is one in transition from primarily cosmic (newborn) to one increasingly involved in earthly activities, as cosmic influences gradually fade away.

A similar picture of the growing child can be found in English-language poetry over centuries from Traherne to Kathleen Raine. Steiner's understanding of this facet of child development, from cosmic to increasingly earthly, finds strong resonance in this extract from Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, published in 1807 (1994, 587).

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,

But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

In poetic form, Wordsworth indicates here the essence of the young, still-incarnating child, a being of both the spiritual and physical worlds, gradually leaving the spiritual world 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy' to become more and more familiar with what is earthly 'At length the Man perceives it die away,/And fade into the light of common day'. What is unusual in Steiner's approach to this is that he takes this understanding as a basis of music education.

What others say about fifths

This is then the theory behind what Steiner writes on early childhood music.

A little over a century ago, Heinz Werner published a Swiss study on the development of children's singing (1917). Interestingly, both Werner and Steiner were active in Zürich at the same time although there is no indication that they ever met or were aware of each other's work. Werner's research showed that when children were asked to create their own melodies, they preferred a limited number of tones, with repeated patterns, small vocal ranges, small intervals, and an overall downward melodic line (Stadler Elmer 2011). Werner developed Interval Recognition Theory, which suggests that humans are inherently able to recognise and process musical intervals in a specific developmental sequence, and that the development of

singing in childhood follows this sequence.⁸ According to this theory, ‘singing emerges around the scale’s fifth note, followed by a descending minor third, then one tone above the dominant is added’ (Stadler Elmer 2011, 14). Interval Recognition Theory influenced research on children's singing for several decades (Kube 1958; Metzler 1961; Roederer 1973).

Subsequent researchers, including Klusen (1970), McKernon (1979), and Dowling (1984), found no fixed sequence of intervals in children's singing development. Nattiez (1977) and Netti (2000) further noted that intervals are not universal, as pitches are neither stable nor fixed. Despite this, aspects of Interval Recognition Theory have continued to find resonance in research on young children's songs, such as Davies' study of songs created by children aged five to seven (1992) and Moog's study on how young children respond to and experience music (1976).

In her study, *The child-song genre: A comparison of songs by and for children* (1991), Campbell compared songs created by children during play with those they are taught or encouraged to sing. She found that most songs taught to children were unsuitable ‘due to extensive ranges of at least one-and-a-half octaves, modulating and/or chromatic melodies with many half-steps, with complex, changing rhythms’ (p. 16). Campbell discovered (like Werner 70 years earlier) that songs created by children (preschool to age eight, recorded in playgrounds) were simple, repetitive, and had a small intervallic range, and were primarily based around a descending minor third. Ten of the fourteen recorded songs were within the range of a fifth.

In addition to the limited range and simplicity of the self-made songs, Campbell confirmed Moog's (1976) observations that

⁸ Interval Recognition Theory has similarities to aspects of aural tests in traditional music exams in which candidates are required to sing back and then name intervals, beginning in the lower grades with the ‘consonant’ ones before moving to those which are classed as dissonant.

As far as awareness of harmony is concerned, the tests give an absolutely unequivocal result: children of pre-school age cannot yet experience any sort of harmony at all. The pre-school child still lacks the ability to analyse notes of different pitch when he [sic] hears them simultaneously, and to relate the individual sounds to one another. (p. 44)

What characterises music in the mood of a fifth?

It is likely the absence of concrete indications by Steiner for creating music in the mood of a fifth which has led to there being little apparent agreement within the Steiner early childhood community as to what music in the mood of a fifth is and sounds like. For every statement made, there appears to be one which says the opposite. For some, the pulse should be free, without a strong rhythm (Ellersiek 2013), for others, a strong rhythm is a vital quality (Long-Breipohl 2013). Some authors claim that there is no fixed form for this kind of music (Beilharz 2022), while others have spoken about it needing to follow the ‘letter of the law’ (Aulie 2013), which suggests the opposite. The word ‘mystery’ is quite frequently used by people writing about music in the mood of the fifth (Ellersiek 2013; Lyman 2013; Winship 2013), while Harshmann is ‘not sure if anyone really knows for certain’ what the mood of the fifth is (2013, 48).

It is clear that there is no commonly held opinion on Steiner’s somewhat enigmatic comments. It is equally clear that Steiner is talking about music at its most intangible and about deeply qualitative elements of music and early childhood education. It is an approach to music in which an understanding of childhood spirituality is profoundly articulated.

The lack of a unified understanding of the musical components of music in the mood of the fifth, whether it be intervallic structure, choice of text, use of rhythm, range or pitch is reflected in the stylistic range of pieces of music (Boland 2019) that have been published as teacher resource material.

Lyman puts it perhaps most simply when she says that ‘[o]verall, the mood of the fifth is just that: a mood, one that carries a quality of being that is gentle, reverent, and respectful

of the children at their stage of development, bringing them to what is soul-nurturing' (2013, 64). Beilharz goes further and identifies a wider set of features which need to be considered in assessing the suitability of music for young children: These include, 'sound quality (timbre), tone, tempo, flexibility of beat [Agogik⁹], form, rhythm, speed of beat, relationship between content and musical 'picture,' the relationship between inwardness and external expression, completeness, [and] correspondence of outer and inner movement' (2003, 1). To these qualities need to be added among other things the choice of text, pitch and intervallic relationships. An exhaustive list would be difficult to compile. Music which appears so simple on first hearing becomes much more complex when engaged with (Boland 2019).

Music in a Steiner early childhood environment

It appears that Steiner was trying to articulate what he understood as the essential, spiritual nature of music in a way in which it could be linked to actual classroom practice. However, he spoke of such practice as an ideal, and stopped far short of clear indications of what to do or examples to work with, and it has been left to those interested in his work to find ways in which to bring his high-level ideals to the classroom.

In practice

How this looks in Steiner widely distributed early education settings is of course not at all uniform. Each teacher has their own approach to the use of music in their classroom.

However, there are a few commonalities which can frequently be observed (Ashley 2009).

Perhaps the most distinctive and widespread characteristic of music in Steiner early childhood settings is that it is always created live with children. Despite divergent practices in

⁹ *Agogik* (German) is a word which is not covered by a single English equivalent and is not in common use. It contains elements of 'rallentando, accelerando, rubato, pause, [and] accentuation' (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music, 2013). I have here translated it as 'flexibility.'

other areas, recorded music is never used, songs are always sung by the teachers or children. Similarly, background music is strongly avoided. Both these characteristics can be related back to the importance given to sense impressions. Although the quality of live singing is understandably highly variable, an important consideration in a Steiner context is that music is performed anew each time by the teachers for, to and with the children.

The pieces written in the mood of a fifth which I am aware of are always simple in nature, using only a few notes within a limited range. They are usually unaccompanied and are not harmonised. If an instrument is used, the most common is a wire-strung, seven-note lyre, tuned to a pentatonic scale (see Fig. 1). These instruments were developed after Steiner's



death and the practice of their use is something which has gradually become more established, although it is a matter of teacher's choice whether to use one or not. Some teachers use the lyre to support their singing while others use it as a solo instrument to be listened to (for instance, as a transition from the everyday to the world of story).

The sound of such a lyre is quiet and delicate; it has a somewhat thin sound due to its metal strings and lack of resonating chamber.

Figure 1. Pentatonic children's lyre

Figure 1. Alt text. Pentatonic children's lyre, wooden with curved design

Rhythmical repetition is another characteristic aspect of the schedule of a Steiner early childhood setting. There are aspects of daily activity in a Steiner setting which are strongly

repetitive and can verge on the ritualistic. These include saying a grace before a meal, the lighting of a candle before the daily story is told, the dowsing of it afterwards, getting ready for ‘morning circle’ activities,¹⁰ the end of the session, and so on. These are recognisable components of everyday practice which can be observed in settings around the world. What is interesting is that they are often carried to a significant degree by music of some sort – ideally, music in the mood of a fifth.

Can things be learned from a Steiner approach to early childhood music?

Rudolf Steiner’s conception of music education in early childhood is characterised by some factors which may be of interest to those beyond the Steiner education movement. I identify three here: music as performance, music and soul health, and music and ritual.

Music is always live

I write from Aotearoa New Zealand, where early childhood environments are recognised as noisy spaces (Bates, Page, and Stover 2021; Grebennikov and Wiggins 2006; McLaren and Dickinson 2005; Rickson, McLaren, and Jones 2007). Studies have identified that over a quarter of children in these environments are exposed to sound levels exceeding industrial safety standards (McLaren & Dickinson, 2005). It is little surprise that the impact of this ‘can be detrimental to the psychological and physical wellbeing of both children and adults’ (Bates, Page, and Stover 2021, 21). It is worthwhile considering this while bearing in mind Steiner’s view of the young child as ‘all sense organ’ (1922/2004, 8), completely receptive to all sensory experiences and unable to shield itself from them. They ideally require a learning environment that accommodates this sensitivity.

¹⁰ ‘A teacher-initiated gathering that occurs regularly in the daily rhythm and contains different songs, poetry or rhymes, drama, dances and other kind of movements, usually based on a certain theme or a story’ (Frödén & Wright, 2018, p. 1414).

Numerous non-Steiner early childhood environments use recorded music, either as background sound (Rickson, McLaren, and Jones 2007; McLaren and Dickinson 2005) or to support or lead singing and other activities. McLaren and Dickinson add that the simultaneous use of multiple percussion instruments raises the noise level and that increases in volume can happen very rapidly. This can be contrasted to Steiner settings in which music (typically unaccompanied singing) is always performed live (Nicol and Taplin 2017). There is currently no research which compares decibel ratings in different kinds of early childhood settings, and if and how sound levels influence children's perception of or openness to music and sound, or if child and teacher stress levels are any lower.

Any kind of background music is, by its nature, not meant to be actively listened to but to occur in the background. This acts directly against the cultivation of listening (as a sense activity) which is consciously encouraged in Steiner settings (as well as, undoubtedly, in many others). It could be worthwhile for centres more widely to work consciously to create environments which promote active listening, even just starting with an audit of the acoustic environment the children are exposed to (Boland 2013) on a regular basis.

Another feature of Steiner music practice which could be considered more widely is the importance of the teacher or practitioner as musician. In creating and performing music anew every day, the teacher models an adult in the act of music creation, someone engaging artistically, often needing to overcome feelings of vulnerability (Bautista et al. 2024) in order to communicate musically with others. It models an adult for whom artistic expression is part of everyday life. Singing has the ability to communicate with others perhaps more deeply than any other human action – it speaks from soul to soul. While using recorded music can be attractive and is in multiple ways easier for the teacher, it does not model artistic engagement, personal striving and inter-personal communication the way live singing does.

Music and soul health

Tolstoy (2023) commented that the power of music does not end when the string ceases to vibrate, it continues to vibrate in the soul once the actual sound is long over. In German, the word *Nachklang* (literally, after-sound) refers to the lingering sound in the ear after the audible tone has died away, encompassing both the effect on the ear and the tone's gradual decay (Duden 2024). *Nachklang* is responsible for music's most potent effects. To me it parallels the process of nutrition. You eat (or listen to music). As an activity, this is often pleasurable. The value of the eating is however not in the act itself, but in the following process, when the food is digested, becoming part of the body. Music follows a comparable path; however this 'digestive' process occurs on a soul level rather than physically. Music is deeply absorbed as it lingers in the listener's ear long after the sound has ceased to be audible. Due to the great sensitivity of children (see Steiner's and others' writing on the importance of sense impressions), this happens with all musical influences, intentional and unintentional.

The ideal musical environment of a Steiner classroom is one in which the overall *Nachklang* is of the interval of a fifth – that it sounds in the air just beyond the threshold of hearing as the after-resonance of the repeated singing of simple pentatonic songs based around this interval. The fifth is chosen because of its open, neither earthly nor cosmic character. This is the ideal – in practice, many kinds of songs are sung. However, being aware of the after-effects of music and learning to observe how they work on the child (and adult) can have numerous advantages in an early childhood classroom.

While the physical environment of young children is increasingly regulated in order to protect their physical health and safety, their soul environment and all the affects what I might call soul health and soul safety, is not generally considered to the same degree, nor is it subject to the same regulations or requirements. It is often intentionally left to the children to choose the content they wish to engage with themselves, in a way that they are not entrusted

to physically (in many English-speaking early childhood environments; in the forest schools of Denmark, for example, this is differently understood).

Steiner environments tend to promote informed physical risk-taking by students (Department of Education 2009) involving supervised use of sharp knives for practical activities, tree climbing and so on, but are more protective regarding this inner space. Considerations of (and concerns for) inner health can be dismissed as hard to quantify or not in keeping with contemporary views of child agency (however restricted child agency is physically). However, if external influences are able to influence us inwardly, it may be worth considering more carefully the effect intangible influences have on the inner world of the youngest of children.

Music and ritual

Rituals have been part of all cultures throughout time. They have a degree of formality and are repetitive and dependable; they have no immediate benefit or purpose; they are moments in which the immediate future can be known and relied on; additionally, they help unite groups and serve to focus attention (Maloney 2000). Particularly following the disruption of the Covid pandemic, there is an increased need for dependability and security. Rituals can assist children (and others) in times of stress and uncertainty, and provide ‘a safe, warm and secure environment where children are able to learn and grow’ (Howell and Reinhard 2015).

Steiner early childhood education frequently uses music in quasi-ritualistic ways to mark changes in activity or mood. Music does this without the need for verbal input; the meaning is carried through music and the practised behaviour of the ritual (see Confucius quotation below). Examples include beginning to sing a song associated with tidying up, beginning or ending mealtime or getting ready for a story. Such musical rituals help bring

moments of structure and predictability as well as emotional security and regulation into the flow of the day.

In times of increased childhood and youth anxiety, rituals are a simple and effective way of quietening uncertainty, of bringing structure and order; using music to do this brings order on a soul level. To quote Confucius, ‘music is the ultimate harmonization, the rites [rituals] the ultimate orderliness; the inner being is harmonized, while the external is ordered’ (Li 2009, 18)

Conclusion

Exploring Steiner's view of music in relation to the developmental stages of young children provides a distinctive lens through which to understand the connection between early childhood music practice and spirituality. Further research is required to determine the extent to which teachers in Steiner early childhood settings adhere to Steiner's musical guidelines, the reasons behind their adherence or deviation, and any perceived effects on students. Additionally, an analysis of printed music composed in the mood of the fifth for use in Steiner settings would be needed to understand how Steiner's concepts have been interpreted in practice. As some elements of Steiner early childhood education—such as slow pedagogy (Attfield 2022), resistance to early academics, and the importance of rhythm, play, nutrition, and oracy—have gained a broader acceptance beyond Steiner-specific contexts (Goral 2009; Nicol 2016), it is worth investigating whether aspects of Steiner's unique approach to music education for young children might also have broader applicability in diverse educational settings.

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