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Book review

Children's Home Musical Experiences Across The World

Edited by Beatriz Ilari and Susan Young. 2016. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 186 pages. ISBN: 9780253022103 .

How do seven-year-old middle-class children use and enjoy music of all sorts? What difference does it make that they live in Singapore, Brazil, South Africa or the USA, or that they live in a very religious or non-religious milieu? What is the nature and extent of parental influence on children's musical lives? These are among the fascinating questions which this volume sets out to explore. From Disney tunes to traditional drumming, piano lessons to improvised song writing, all aspects of children's 'musicking' are examined. Previous research had suggested that children of this age (at least in the US) hear an hour of music every day. What they do with this hour seems very much worthy of our attention.

The book has a number of original aspects. The children are studied in their complex home environments, and the interviews and descriptions of home musical resources are very loosely structured: we are not in the presence of carefully designed laboratory listening exercises. The children, at seven, are older than those who are most frequently the object of study, and the use of an online collaborative wiki set-up allows a rich form of cooperation right around the world at low cost. Finally, the approach taken is one of 'childhood studies' and not one of developmental psychology: the children's agency is at the centre of the study, and they are treated as young people, as "being" and not merely as "becoming". One of the researchers underlines, nevertheless, the importance of avoiding both traditional conceptions of children as "non-agents" and idealized romantic views of them as ultra-agentive.

The nine chapters, each written by a different researcher based in a different country, are varied in focus, but some preoccupations stand out. By far the most important of these is the desires of parents. They strive to find a balance between allowing their children some freedom in choosing music, while avoiding "over-exposure" to music considered excessively commercial or otherwise inappropriate. Parents also wished to allow their offspring to discover prestigious forms of musicking, while attempting to be sure that they were not just imposing additional chores on their children through the piano or cello lessons they were paying for. They put some effort in finding appropriate music for their offspring, and recording companies offering specialized collections of music for children were much in evidence. The leitmotif: "Some parents showed a high degree of anxiety regarding their own roles in children's musical development and growth" (p99).

Parent's anxieties and, indeed their performances of social belonging were also visible in the family interviews carried out. Children asked to sing for the researcher would often choose different songs if choosing alone than if prompted by their mother or father present in the room. The social meaning of taste in songs, so much explored in Popular Music Studies, is already very much a factor in the life of a seven-year-old, beginning their careers as listeners or as music-makers. The chapter on parental goals and practices in Singapore, which involved a sample of 16 children, was particularly interesting. All from middle-class Christian families, parents saw the Western classical music tradition as an essential part of their children's upbringing.

Gender is dealt with by examining differences between boys and girls both in instruments chosen by or for the children, and in favourite musical activities. It was noted that, at the age of seven, it was considerably more difficult to persuade boys to sing for the researcher than it was to persuade boys.

Concerning “commercial musical childhoods” we are reminded that although these may pose legitimate questions for all concerned, it was crucial to examine what children actually do with the musical material provided, rather than jump to conclusions about its alleged negative effects. A chapter on eclecticism in musical taste was exceptional in that the children interviewed as seven-year olds were again questioned three years later. In every case, their interest for classical music had weakened and their interest in popular music had increased.

The only disappointing aspect of the book is that the chapters are rather short, and there seems to be only space for an initial view of the chosen question in each case. There also seems to be perhaps insufficient clarity concerning the definition of “middle class”, since both well-off and poorer families are present in the sample. Nevertheless, further work on other social classes is suggested in the work and would be fruitful.

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