

THE CHILD VOICE AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Sociology provides a contextual milieu for pedagogy and provides a cultural explanation for pedagogical motives and method. In the world of sociology, the figurative “voices” of women and other minority groups have been thoroughly examined via feminist theory which deal with the oppressor and the oppressed. Within the last twenty years, children’s “voices” are now included in this paradigm with much research and writing focused on the agency and empowerment of children, adult control, and the plasticity of children’s behaviour.

From a musician’s perspective, I was curious about the correlation between the figurative and literal notion of “voice” which prompted many questions that pertain to the true nature of the child singing voice. What social attitudes exist that concern children’s singing voices? Who defines the child singing voice? Who decides and what controls the acceptable nature of the child singing voice?

The child singing voice can be placed within a social context that follows a certain logic:

- The human singing voice embodies and reflects the society and culture that surrounds it.
- The human singing voice can be creative and original, but it also imitates and mirrors the predominant society or culture in which it resides.
- Because childhood is a stage or time of life created within a societal and cultural framework, the child singing voice can consequently be considered a reflection of childhood within society.
- As Western society changes, so do attitudes toward children and their childhoods; therefore, perceptions of the child singing voice change alongside shifting attitudes toward children and childhood within society.

My research stemmed from simple observations that concern the vocal range of children’s music published in both solo and choral settings:

- Music found in graded music series is published in higher keys in the early to mid-twentieth century than graded music series published in the late twentieth century.
- Solo songs designed for children are published in higher keys in the early to mid-twentieth century than solo songs published in the late twentieth century.
- School choral music distributed by publishers in the late twentieth century explores extremely low tessituras.

As my choral and pedagogical background is highly conservative and traditional, my initial reaction to these observations was to implicate popular music; however, when I examined popular music available to children during the course of the twentieth century, I noted that even popular music for children had experienced the same “downward” trend!

To demonstrate this phenomenon, I surveyed the evolution of popular music for children distributed by the Walt Disney Corporation as Disney’s recordings were essentially the first popular music recorded and specifically designed for children. An analysis of two versions of “Someday My Prince Will Come” recorded at the beginning and end of the twentieth century provided an excellent example of trends within the realm of children’s popular music.

The voice of Snow White, originally recorded by Adriana Caselotti in 1937, can be described as high, soft, trembling and light. The vocal range of the original recording of “Someday” is wide, encompassing an interval of a 12th between d1 and a2. The song is sung in G major supported by light, orchestral accompaniment. In 2002, the pop star Anastacia covered “Someday My Prince Will Come” for a Disney recording entitled *Disneymania: Superstar Artists Sing Disney—Their Way!* Anastacia’s remake of the 1937 classic maintains a semblance of the original tune set in a hip-hop/updated rhythm & blues/urban setting. Anastacia’s “Someday” is sung in F+, one octave and one tone lower than Caselotti’s recording. Anastacia’s version maintains a dramatically wide vocal range between f and f2 but she uses belt voice throughout the entire vocal range. By this comparison, it is obvious that Disney soundtracks throughout the twentieth century reveal remarkable transformations in musical style, vocal quality, and sound ideal. The vocal range has lowered and sound ideal has also changed significantly.

The evolution of sound ideal led me to examine pedagogical practices between 1850 to the present day. An overview of vocal pedagogy for children during the twentieth century reveals an exponential increase in the interest, research, and number of literary contributions dealing specifically with the training of the child voice (Ries, 2004). Research conducted during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is primarily quantitative, directed at measuring the size of children’s larynges and vocal folds, or calculating the compass of their vocal range (Welch, 1979). The large number of vocal range studies which appear throughout the course of the twentieth century reach a number of conclusions:

- A wide discrepancy exists between the vocal range of repertoire published for children and their natural vocal range. Reflecting a child-centered approach to voice education, published music should be transposed downward to take into account the comfortable vocal range of children (Jersild & Bienstank, 1934; Drexler, 1938; Cary, 1949; Hartzell, 1949; Cleall, 1955; Lobatto, 1960; Wilson, 1970; Smith, 1973; Stofft, 1979; Welch, 1979; Apfelstadt, 1982; Rutkowski, 1990; Moore, 1991).
- Desires to achieve ideal tone quality and artistic objectives often take precedence over suitable vocal range (Van Oordt and Drost, 1963).

- Positive correlation exists between pitch matching ability and comfortable vocal range (Geringer, Nelson and Koska, 1981).
- Vocal register coordination is closely related to vocal range (Brown, 1988; Wurgler, 1990; McGraw, 1996).

Pedagogical practices in the nineteenth century were based primarily upon the notion of sound ideal upheld by the Western classical music canon. Upper adjustment vocal production or “head voice” was considered exclusively the authentic, safe, and true voice of the child. Children of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were asked to conform to prescribed ranges that were considered appropriate, usually within a one-octave range between e1-e2 or f1-f2. The lower register (below e1) was to be strictly avoided.

While vocal range philosophies established in the nineteenth century Western musical canon continue to be firmly entrenched, a pedagogical shift was noted in the mid- twentieth century. Rather than dictating the vocal range for a child to conform to, a child-centered vocal approach was encouraged. Vocal range research during this period concludes that the comfortable singing range for a child is actually between c1 and c2, a major third or perfect fourth lower than once thought at the turn of the nineteenth century. Now, in the early twenty-first century, many respected music educators increasingly encourage the exploration of the lower register and use of belt technique, once considered to be coarse, uncultivated, and dangerous. Today, more inclusive language is used in reference to the lower register, simply referring to it as “a different way to sing” (Bond et al, 1995; Goetze, 1998, 2004). The lower register is no longer considered off-limits for children’s singing (Edwin, 1995; Thurman & Welch, 2000; Edwards, 2002).

My personal reaction to this shifting sound ideal, specifically in regard to the exploration of the lower register, was one of condemnation. Could this shift in sound ideal reflect general societal malaise in the West or the “dumbing down” of children’s singing? Was society responsible for changing the sounds we make, and if so, how?

The connection of society to vocal sounds was an intriguing one that led me to examine diverse writings dealing with feminist theory, film studies, and childhood sociology. In regard to feminist theory, were children’s voices manipulated by society? Were children oppressed and disempowered, and if so, was this manifest in their singing voices? As women achieved more status and equality throughout the twentieth century, the tessitura of their speaking voices has descended. Did children’s voices follow the range of women’s voices throughout the course of the twentieth century? From a historical and sociological perspective, how do attitudes concerning childhood affect their vocalizations?

“Childhood” has long been accepted as a period of fragility, vulnerability, innocence, incompleteness, a time of development and socialization or even a shifting set of ideas (Cunningham, 1995). Viewed in this light, “children” have often been described in

similar terms, and considered to be passive members of society, incomplete, dependent, homogenous, asexual beings in the process of reaching the fully developed, complete world of adulthood. Prior to 1960, children were examined primarily from physiological, psychological, behavioural, and developmental perspectives but were not considered to make an important enough contribution to society to be examined within a social or cultural context. Children were therefore a “muted” group akin to women and other minority ethnic groups (James & Prout, 1997).

The concepts of “children” and “childhood” (which are not synonymous) became worthy areas of academic discourse during the last decades of the twentieth century into the first decades of the twenty-first. James (1993) observes that: “the childhood characteristic of modern Western societies is an historically specific institutional form. It is just one among many possible ways of seeing and classifying children” (p. 72).

A comparison between the social history of childhood (Cunningham, 1995) and the child singing voice reveals many striking parallels. (See *Table 1*.)

The Social History of Childhood and the Child Singing Voice

Childhood	The Child Singing Voice
<p>17th & 18th Centuries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children considered to bear original sin 	<p>17th & 18th Centuries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are taught to sing psalms, hymns & songs with moralizing texts
<p>19th & early 20th Century</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morality is expressed through discipline • Children are closely connected to innocence or experience • Special materials are designed for children • The establishment of standardized education is based on a homogenous notion of childhood • Explicit boundaries between what is adult & what is child 	<p>19th & early 20th Century</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music is used to promote morality • Singing, especially choral singing is used as discipline • Upper register evokes innocence & lower register evokes experience • Lower register exploration is forbidden • Special songs designed for children • A homogenous voice is encouraged for all boys & girls to conform to • Explicit boundaries for vocal range
<p>Mid-20th Century</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child centered education • Popular music revolution 	<p>Mid- 20th Century</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child centered approach to vocal pedagogy • Use of the less formal ‘song approach’ to teach children to sing

1980s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative social environment through the policies of Reagan & Thatcher 	1980s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renaissance of formal training for the child voice • Choral discipline
Late 20th & early 21st century <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-modern deconstruction of canonic ideals • Globalization 	Late 20th & early 21st century <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting sound ideal; acceptance of belt voice & use of the lower register • Inclusion of world musics

SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD AND THE CHILD SINGING VOICE

The groundbreaking work of Phillippe Ariès (1962) created fertile ground for the study of childhood sociology. Through his interpretations of representations of children as seen in works throughout the history of Western visual art, Ariès came to the conclusion that childhood did not exist in the medieval world, but that medieval children were merely considered little adults. According to Ariès, childhood is a construct that gradually evolved in European society between the 15th and 19th centuries. By the nineteenth century it was apparent that a wide division between the adult and child world existed. For Ariès, *childhood is not timeless but an ever-changing, shifting societal concept.*

Another important concept of childhood based on the work of Ariès was that of Lloyd DeMause (1974). DeMause agrees with the principal thesis of Ariès, adding his own theory: *The care and concern for children has steadily increased so that at no other point in history have children been treated so well as they are in present-day society.*

Other views of children and childhood consider cultural influences such as religion, the industrial revolution in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the electronic age in twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For some scholars, the relationship between children and modern technology is a negative one, i.e. that children and their childhoods are assaulted by the media (Meyerowitz, 1985; Postman, 1994). For others, the relationship is viewed as positive, providing opportunities and abilities for children. Buckingham (2000) labels these contrasting perspectives as the *death of childhood* (pessimist) and the *communications revolution* (optimist) perspectives.

The Death of Childhood

The “death of childhood” theory is based on the notion that the creation of print media (which separated adults from children between) was responsible for the creation of our contemporary conception of childhood and that electronic media (namely television) in the twentieth century are “disappearing” it (Postman, 1994). Postman considers the three conditions of literacy, education, and shame as necessary for the existence of childhood. Postman contends that the disappearance of childhood is caused by attacks on literacy (culture is increasingly visualized); school (no education is needed

to understand pictures); and shame (television has no regard for decency or secrets). For Postman, childhood was firmly established by 1850 and reached its zenith in 1950 before television was firmly implanted in the family home. The appearance of electronic media removes the barrier between what is *adult* and what is *child*. Adults and children have equal access to information disseminated via radio, television, film, sound recording or other electronic means. On a basic level, formal education is not necessary to look nor to listen. A plethora of information is widely available in an unprecedented quantity and can be accessed in a domestic environment by both adults and children at the flip of a switch or a click of a button. Ready access to information communication technologies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries enables children to conquer adult modes of behaviour; conversely, through shared technology, adults are essentially becoming overgrown children. Children are no longer prohibited from adult social spaces and parental authority has declined. This lack of separation blurs the boundary between what is adult and what is child.

Communications Revolution

The optimist ‘communications revolution’ perspective claims that children are empowered by new media technologies. Children are seen as active participants, benefiting from and enabled by their use of the media. Buckingham (2000) summarizes:

Far from being passive victims of the media, children are seen here to possess a powerful form of ‘media literacy’, a spontaneous natural wisdom that is somehow denied to adults. In particular, new media technologies are seen to provide children with new opportunities for creativity, for community and self-fulfillment. While some have voiced concern about this growing generation gap in media use, others have celebrated these new media as a means of ‘empowerment’ or even ‘liberation’ for children (p. 41).

A comparison between the perspectives of the sociologists discussed above and the child singing voice reveals many striking parallels. (See *Table 2*.)

Childhood	The Child Singing Voice
<p>Phillipe Ariès The notions of childhood change over time</p>	<p>Phillipe Ariès Sound ideals change over time</p>
<p>Lloyd DeMause With each succeeding generation, relationships between children & parents improve</p>	<p>Lloyd DeMause Stronger pedagogical foundations with each generation of teacher makes for better singers</p>
<p>The Death of Childhood The boundary between adult & child is blurring</p>	<p>The Death of Childhood Children are singing more like adults</p>

Communications Revolution

Children are empowered by electronic technology

Communications Revolution

Through information technologies, children are given better tuition & a better understanding of singing at an earlier age

Tables 1 and 2 clearly indicate that the manner in which children sing is intricately linked to both social history and sociology. Just as the notions of childhood change over time, so do sound ideals. If we combine the optimist theories of Lloyd DeMause and that of the Communications Revolution theory, it is evident that from pedagogical generation to another, music educators have the potential to access more information and are given more opportunities for training; therefore, children today have the potential to be exposed to better pedagogy and better teachers.

From the negativist perspective, parallels abound between the death of childhood theory and the child singing voice; however, it is crucial to note that the parallels drawn are not all negative. To begin, there are many indications which show that the division is blurring between the way children sing and the way adults sing. For example:

- In 2002 the National Association of Teachers of Singing published an official document entitled “Teaching Children to Sing” which encourages and supports early private training of children’s voices. In the twenty-first century it is now common to see the inclusion of vocal masterclasses for young children at NATS conventions. These gestures support the singing excellence through choral pedagogy apparent in children’s and youth choirs during the last thirty years.
- The virtuoso children’s choir movement was established during the last three decades of the twentieth century. These choirs tackle demanding multi-part choral works that once would have been sung by adult women’s choirs at early parts of the twentieth century. The desired sound ideal for these highly trained choirs no longer focuses on the predominant use of head voice, but is far more visceral, exploring the entire vocal range. Extremes in vocal range for both sopranos and altos are explored in the virtuoso children’s chorus. Altos in these choirs are often required to sing in a range that relies on thyro-arytenoid vocal production.
- Children are capable of producing accurate and sophisticated imitations of vocal mannerisms and singing styles of adult singers either in classical or popular styles. Charlotte Church and Alex Prior are fine examples of children reaching a certain level of stardom for their precocious classical vocal abilities, while in the popular music realm, the ‘Idol’ phenomenon clearly reveals the mimetic abilities of children.

The sound of a child imitating adult vocalizations creates a certain level of discomfort for adults. For nearly a century, music educators have tried to protect children from explorations of the lower register primarily for physiological reasons; however, there are

social explanations for this protection as well. In Western culture, the long established expectations and boundaries concerning adult and child behaviour can be applied to expectations and boundaries placed upon the child singing voice. When children sing like adults, a behavioural boundary is crossed. By keeping children within social boundaries, the belief that children are asexual beings, innocent, sweet and pure can be maintained. Within the realm of vocal behaviour, the maintenance of innocence, sweetness and purity can be achieved through the exclusive use of head voice. The semiotics of the head voice are closely connected to spirituality (particularly Christianity), social class and education. For some educators, allowing children to explore the lower register challenges basic pillars of our society. For others, it is considered safe and acceptable and a new, area of exploration for children's singing.

Does all this mean that music educators should allow their students to growl away in their chest voices? Does the 'empowerment' of the child voice mean that children should sing whatever they want, in a manner and style that they are free to choose?

The answer to both questions is a resounding 'no,' but what this does mean is that music educators need to be aware that, in light of changing times, pedagogical practice must keep pace with the shifting nature of society, children, their childhoods and the shifting nature of their voices. Tensions exist between those who consider traditional methods of teaching as elitist, restrictive and oppressive and those who consider teaching methods which include the training of the lower register and belt technique as harmful, substandard pedagogy. It is important for music educators to acknowledge these tensions and fully understand the social context from which they originate. By concentrating on pedagogical differences and ignoring or failing to explore new pedagogical practices and ideas, music educators are essentially limiting both themselves and their students; however, ignoring tradition and concentrating exclusively on popular vocal idioms and techniques provide severe, if not dangerous limitations. Ultimately, the pedagogical vocal canon must continually be studied and reviewed, allowing for change while at the same time adhering to those principles and traditions which are essential for fine singing. Critical thinking, education, and awareness are essential tools to assist us in allowing young singers to develop to their full, individual potential.

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