Reflections on Participatory Music in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Participatory music—music made with others *rather than presentational concerts given* for others—*is illuminated through a series of events in Japan, throughout which simple musical structures invite all to take part, exemplifying the values of group cohesion and social bonding. In this article, the author discusses participatory music relative to Orff Schulwerk and describes opportunities that help teachers implement a participatory framework to emphasize values helpful in today's schools.*

By Matthew D. Thibeault

Six years ago, just as I was liberated from a job, my wife was recruited for a visiting professorship in Toyama, a rural city on the Sea of Japan known mostly for fishing and rice farming. As a "trailing spouse," I planned to teach only a little, while caring for our 3-year-old son and immersing the family in Japanese life. We started to learn Japanese as we sold our home and shipped a dozen small boxes to this country we had only ever imagined.

My family's experiences with everyday music in Japan inspired us to share what we learned and how teachers might consider these ideas in their teaching practice and pedagogic imaginations. These experiences were exemplars of Turino's (2008a) framework, in which he draws a distinction between *presentational* and *participatory* music, with presentational being concerts for others and participatory typified by events where all can participate through singing, playing, and dancing. Based on Turino's fieldwork with the Aymara of Peru (2008b), the Shona of Zimbabwe (2000), and experiences as a string band and folk musician, he documents how participatory music builds group cohesion and promotes social bonding through easily learned music making built to be joined: simple song forms, repetitive vocal choruses, chords that

still leave room for excellent players to embellish and improvise, flexible harmonies that allow all voice ranges, and wide intonation so one need not hit a part perfectly. To use an analogy, participatory music is to an orchestra concert what a potluck dinner is to a formal banquet or what a pick-up game of basketball is to an NBA game. We want both realms and understand that the potluck need not be measured by the standards of a banquet. Despite this, many music educators focus only on specialization in presentational concerts with their bands, orchestras, or choirs. Participatory experiences, when offered, are typically either relegated to early grades as preparation for "real" music or sidelined in upper grade classes for "non-musicians," what Nierman unfairly and derisively called the "not-so-talented many" (Thibeault, 2015, p. 58). Scholars in music education have come to embrace Turino's ideas because they can help us foster a sense of what participatory music teaches, how teachers may notice it, and the important values it can embody (Lee, 2011; MacGregor, in press; Monteiro, 2016; Regelski, 2014; Waldron, 2016). Participatory conceptions also support educators asserting the values of this vital and important strain of music for human flourishing (Thibeault, 2019).

Turino's ideas were central for me before I left the United States: I led a participatory ukulele group (Thibeault & Evoy, 2011), co-taught a course with Turino for two summers, and was his clawhammer banjo student for a year. It was in Japan, a culture that holds group togetherness as a core value (Nisbett, 2003), however, where participatory music worked its magic into the life of my family, helping us bond, make friends, grow close, and find ways to enjoy life in a culture vastly different from any we had ever known.

A Rough Landing but a Welcome Festival

There is the dream of doing something, and then there is actually doing it. My family expected an adventure, and like adventure movies, we anticipated our move would include some stress and drama. Our early weeks were full of challenges, one being the demise of our plan to buy a used car and go apartment hunting. We learned you cannot purchase a car in Japan without documenting where it will be parked, and we couldn't go apartment hunting because our cats disqualified us. Instead, we found a simple old home in *Asahimachi* (sunrise neighborhood) with *tatami* floors and *shoji* windows located right next to the neighborhood park. We left our shoes in the *genkan* (entryway), ate while sitting on the *tatami*, and slept on *shikibuton* that we set up each night and put away each morning in an attempt to feel just a little bit less foreign. The neighborhood was absolutely silent most of the day, and during the first week we sensed our neighbors quietly watching us—a mutual curiosity. One day someone left a note in Japanese. My wife brought it to work and learned it was an invitation to our first social event—the neighborhood association annual rice harvest *matsuri* festival.

Figure 1a. Children Dressed in the Neighborhood Happi Blow Their Whistles as They Pull the Drum that Leads the Procession.

Figure 1b. Carrying the Shrine.

SOURCE: MATTHEW THIBEAULT. USED WITH PERMISSION.

On the morning of the festival, a neighbor brought each of us a headband, a *happi* top with the *Asahimachi* emblem, and, puzzlingly to us, a plastic whistle on a string. In the park, the adults assembled a small portable shrine, carefully placing fresh cut greens on it and securing a golden bird on top. They also mounted a large *taiko* (drum) on a wheeled cart. My son and I were invited to join in carrying the shrine while other children pulled the drum. The oldest child in back drummed a *don-don* cadence, and we realized the whistles were for everyone to respond to the drum. We walked and tooted a half mile to the area's *Shinto* shrine, where several neighborhoods, with residents dressed in their distinctive happi, had assembled to have their shrines blessed by the priest as the children played in the adjoining playground (see Figures 1a and 1b, p. 37). (A video that captures many of the events described here has been published to accompany this article and is available at the *Media Journal in Music Education,* www.mjme.net).

We then began a slow journey around the neighborhood. At each home, we pulled up, invited the household members out, then chanted "*wa-shoi!*" three times over the drum while hoisting the shrine to bless the household. Then the drum sounded to help us resume our journey. The relaxed pace allowed time to meet our new neighbors, to try out a bit of Japanese, and let our neighbors brush off the English they had learned in secondary school—each of us working to start sharing our stories. My son began to establish some new friendships, particularly halfway through the morning when we took a 30-minute break at the park and playground. We finished our parade through the neighborhood by returning to the park for a shared lunch in the *kominkan*, the neighborhood meeting house. As we took apart the shrine to be stored, the head of the neighborhood honored our family with the fresh green clippings to be put in our home *kamidana* shrine.

Figure 2. Preschoolers Enjoy a Musical Interlude in Their Daily Walk Past Our Home in Japan.

SOURCE: MATTHEW THIBEAULT. USED WITH PERMISSION.

This experience exemplified participatory musical structures, ones built to be open, accessible, welcoming, and easy to join. At the festival, we all could play the whistles accompanying the drum, and the *wa-shoi* chant allowed our family to participate fully, despite having been in Japan for only a few weeks. Our physical differences were lessened by wearing neighborhood clothes. Additionally, the event allowed time for socializing throughout the day.

The following week, my son and I came across a very cute kitten while out on a walk. We called inside to the owner to ask if we could pet it, trying to explain in Japanese that we were neighbors. She simply smiled and, showing she remembered our stopping there, raised her arms and chanted, "*wa-shoi!*" As she introduced her kitten, we had a deep feeling of acceptance. The festival's participatory nature had supported our bonding with our neighbors, and in a limited way, we were starting to belong.

Music Everywhere at Preschool

Participatory music includes the entire age and ability spectrum, with all afforded meaningful opportunities to join. One day I heard a group of what sounded like toddlers outside our home. Childcare workers were pushing two large strollers with four or five children each, taking them for a walk. They stopped to admire our cats sunning themselves in the window, but they were even more surprised when I stepped outside with my banjo to play a few songs for them. Soon they began clapping

Figure 3. Singing Along at a Summer Music Festival.

SOURCE: MATTHEW THIBEAULT. USED WITH PERMISSION.

along. Over the years I often played for them, adding in the Japanese children's songs I learned from my son. When they heard we were moving, they left a goodbye card with drawings by the children.

The educational philosopher John Dewey (1901/1983) wrote about the tension between specialists who know their area to a higher level and classroom teachers who have a better sense of the totality of a child's growth across the curriculum. Although much of the developed world favors specialists, every preschool teacher in Japan must pass a music and piano exam and be ready to teach music (Ogawa, 2013). My son attended a particularly musical preschool run by *Risshō* Buddhists (Hebert, 2012). Since all the teachers could lead music, it happened across the day: a good-morning song and an oath to Buddha in countryside Japanese dialect, a song and prayer before lunch, and a goodbye song at the end of each day. They also had dedicated music class, and my son's preschool years were filled with simple songs, hand plays, and dances—often with percussion instruments. These provided a relaxed atmosphere where music created a sense of community. Knowing I was a music teacher, the school gave me the honor of leading a sing-along, a Japanese-language version of Disney's *Let it Go* and *anime* songs for dancing.

When *every* teacher is required to lead music instruction, some who are not musically accomplished will be in the mix. My son's second year teacher banged out blocky piano chords to the best of her ability, but her modest efforts also taught an important lesson: Even those who have difficulties with music have a right and a responsibility to be musical. Turino (2008a) notes how participatory approaches often benefit from roughness and noise as this makes room for all voices, helps cover occasional mistakes, and keeps things playful.

My son will always have red hair and blue eyes, but through living together and especially singing songs with his classmates, he did metabolize Japanese culture. One day I arrived on my bike to pick him up, and he could not wait to tell me about *Niji*, a song his class had learned. As he started to explain, he shifted into singing it, finally stopping to smile and ask, "Isn't that beautiful?"

The Okinawan *Sanshin* and the Gift of Music Shared

As luck would have it, I made a new friend, Kenji, my first year. We met at a party when he sat down to play his snakeskin-covered Okinawan *sanshin* while I strummed my ukulele. He then invited me to a concert his teacher had organized at a local restaurant. Okinawan music frequently includes audience response phrases like "*Ha iya*" or "*sa yui yui,*" and the lines between audience and performer blur as others join by playing hand percussion, singing along, or getting up to dance. From time to time the cook stuck his head out of the kitchen, smiling and whistling encouragement. As the night went on, players tuned up or down to suit the vocal range of the singer, and several times my son was scooped up by someone to dance. At the end of the night Kenji's teacher invited me to his studio to become a member of the "shamily."

While studying *sanshin* out of the teacher's small studio in the *Iwase-hama* village not far my home, I also maintained an informal exchange with Kenji, who came over every month so we could cook dinner and then sing and play. He helped me with my *shamisen,* and I helped him with ukulele. He also taught me Okinawan pop songs, and later we played together with an Okinawan group that led sing-alongs at community centers, summer festivals, and other fairs or events. The concerts typically encouraged singing throughout and often ended by inviting all to rise and dance—my wife and son often grabbed a hand drum and danced along too. I learned more about Okinawa, and eventually we began to spend days on the beach and nights listening to and participating in Okinawan music together.

Figure 4. A Summer Party *Shamisen* Singalong With Kenji (Yes, Down by the Seashore).

SOURCE: MATTHEW THIBEAULT. USED WITH PERMISSION.

An Aside: Karaoke

Most people know of karaoke*;* in Japan the approach to it is particularly participatory. Toyama seemed to have more karaoke parlors than fast food restaurants, and I spent many nights sharing a meal and songs with friends. In Japan, singing is too important to exclude anyone, and at karaoke events *everyone* sang with real joy despite their limited abilities, a wonderful sound I have never heard outside of Japan.

The Schulwerk and Participatory Music

During our time in Japan I played music every day and shared it often, but never gave a concert *for others*. Instead, I enjoyed participatory musical experiences like those described here—always making sure my music was *with others* rather than *for others*. Whereas our family experienced the same stresses and challenges as other outsiders to the country (Walsh, 2004), this was truly a magical time for us.

Although these stories locate participatory music across Japanese culture, similar opportunities exist within schools and their communities in the United States. All concerts can include sing-alongs, schools can have clubs for students to learn the music they love in an informal atmosphere, school groups can build partnerships to connect with senior centers or other organizations, and music making can be woven across the school day (Thibeault, 2015).

Japan's wealth of participatory experiences exists because the society values them and makes room and sets aside time for them. Schools and teachers can, in modest but profound ways, help contribute to the development of participatory values, which Orff Schulwerk teachers will likely recognize firsthand from the programs they lead. Indeed, Orff and Keetman seem to have drawn from a well similar to participatory music in conceptualizing *elemental music*, and the turn towards music of various cultures by Orff practitioners in recent decades provides even more overlap with participatory music.

The social side of participatory music can also remedy new challenges the onslaught of technology

has brought to our culture. Turkle (2011) documents how technologies like phones and screen time can disrupt the development of empathy, connection, and intimacy. She calls for reclamation of social interaction through face-to-face moments that echo what participatory music provides (Turkle, 2016).

Japanese people likely would not use the term *participatory* in Turino's sense to describe the events presented here. Turino's ideas, however, helped me notice the participatory when it appeared, to join in ways that emphasized social benefits, and to remember and recall the similarity between events that otherwise might not be grouped together. Further, what we acclaim as teachers can depend on what we know how to notice. The participatory concept can help teachers perceive, celebrate, and appreciate this music.

Conclusion

We seem especially to need participatory values in this time. Music making can often focus on commercialized aspects: professionals, specialists, and music as a way to become a "star." This happens in schools through chair auditions or competitions where most must fail and a few shine. This is a tension Labaree (1997) located at the core of American schools, between schooling as a public good versus schooling for private gain. Participatory approaches that foreground cooperative and social benefits can help restore the public good side of music.

The hope in sharing my family's stories is that more Orff teachers will be inspired to amplify the participatory aspects of their teaching and embed music into life as it is lived, to help songs connect to each day, and to let singing songs nurture friendships and strengthen bonds as experiences turn into memories of meaningful musical time spent together. While writing this article, I talked with my son, now 9 years old, about our experiences. Hearing my basic ideas, he said, "Papa, I have an ending for you: 'Anyone can make participatory music; the world is waiting for you.'" ■

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