

Building Bridges: Using Orff Practices to Increase Reading and Music Literacy

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ABSTRACT

As a music teacher, you can have an impact on children's reading skills without sacrificing active music making. Similarly, classroom, reading, and Title I teachers can improve children's musical abilities while working on reading skills. Playfully making connections between these subjects helps students improve in both areas. This article explores specific approaches to connect music and reading for the benefit of students' literacy in both subjects.

By Carol Huffman

A common frustration for music teachers is the time required to review skills and concepts between nondaily music classes. With cooperation from classroom and reading teachers, music can become a daily subject when linked to reading, which is studied every day. The benefit to students' musical skills is obvious.

But what about the impact on students' reading? The International Reading Association (1998) describes an approach to teaching reading and literacy that encourages play:

Many researchers suggest that the logical translation of the research to practice is for teachers of young children to provide an environment that encourages play with spoken language as part of the broader literacy program. Nursery rhymes, riddles, songs, poems, and read-aloud books that manipulate sounds may be used purposefully to draw young learners' attention to the sounds of spoken language.

When students manipulate all of these elements in a fun and playful way, they improve their reading skills. We do the same with musical elements in Orff Schulwerk classes. Linking the two approaches may enable both skills to develop together.

When classroom and reading teachers include musical activities in their reading classes, the teachers become interested in music class. Many then take the time to inquire about what the music teacher will be doing with their students. Some even pick up their students from music class a little early, to find out what happened that day. This is a win-win for students and teachers (including music teachers).

Understand Language Basics

As an Orff teacher, you know the basics of teaching music. If you want to affect reading literacy as a music teacher, you must also understand and use these important elements of spoken and written language as defined by the National Reading Panel (2001).

- **Phoneme:** A phoneme is the smallest part of spoken language that makes a difference in the meaning of words. The English language has about 41 phonemes. A few words, such as *a* or *oh*, have only one phoneme. Most words, however, have multiple phonemes. The word *if* has two phonemes (/i/f/); *check* has three phonemes (/ch/e/k/), and *stop* has four phonemes (/s/t/o/p/). One phoneme can be represented by more than one letter.
- **Phonological awareness:** This is a broad term that includes phonemic awareness. In addition to phonemes, phonological awareness includes being aware of and identifying rhymes, words, syllables, onsets, and rimes.
- **Syllable:** A syllable is a word part that contains a vowel (or, in spoken language, a vowel sound): Examples include *e-vent*; *news-pa-per*; *ver-y*.
- **Onset and rime:** These elements are parts of spoken language that are smaller than syllables but larger than phonemes. An onset is the initial consonant(s) sound of a syllable. For example, the onset of *bag* is *b*, and of *swim* is *sw*). A rime is the part of a syllable that contains the vowel and all that follows it. Thus, the rime of *bag* is *ag*, and the rime of *swim* is *im*.
- **Word segmentation:** There are three types of word segmentation: phonemic, syllabic, and

whole word. The latter refers to the number of words in a sentence.

Link Words to Song

Integrating reading and music learning is possible in both reading and music classes. Each discipline's teacher needs to know the basics of the other, but for Orff teachers, it is relatively easy to link the two.

In music class, post the reading material on charts and have students read aloud as the teacher flows a hand under the sentences. The students simultaneously develop sight vocabulary and reading fluency, and understand the text. If we choose material that is rhythmic, repetitive, and rhyming (which Orff teachers tend to do), students are intrigued by the rhythmic phrases. They also remember the meanings of words because of the rhythms, rhymes, and repetition. If we choose predictable text (so students can tell what comes next from the pictures on a chart or repetitive language), students feel a sense of accomplishment from "reading" the text.

Singing in particular is an ideal tool for developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in a holistic way (Harp, 1996). It develops personal meaning for the child by relating specific vocabulary to his or her schema (background experiences). As Harp noted:

Music and reading go together because singing is a celebration of language. Children's language naturally has rhythm and melody. Children bring this natural 'music' language with them to the task of learning to read, and so using singing to teach reading draws on this natural understanding.

Specific Strategies for the Music Teacher

Timbre

Contrasting timbres are useful to highlight rime patterns and rhyming words. Underlining, circling, boxing, or noting the rime patterns in familiar nursery rhymes, songs, or poems, and connecting sounds or movements to each, reinforces awareness and decoding of the rimes.

Body percussion and instrument timbres can also highlight rime patterns within original poems and stories composed by students during creative writing activities. Incorporate movement by, for example, asking students to stand up and sit down on like-rime patterns. Use musical speech

playfully by asking students to whisper all the words except the rime patterns, which are said out loud for contrast. Alliteration provides ideal opportunities to use this strategy.

When students begin to write more complex forms of poetry, including haiku, cinquain, and ABA, or stories with repetitive characters and dialog, encourage them to add sound effects to emphasize expression and meaning of the written work. This is a great opportunity to collaborate by asking the classroom teacher to select original poems for students to use in a musical way.

Focusing on segmentation through rhythmic exploration is particularly beneficial for improved reading achievement.

Through the process of making musical decisions, students become sensitive to common literary techniques.

- **Alliteration:** words that have the same beginning sounds; for example, “Susie sold snakes.”
- **Assonance:** The similarity of two or more vowel sounds or the repetition of two or more consonant sounds, especially in words that are close together in a poem.
- **Consonance:** Similarity between consonants or groups of consonants, especially at the ends of words; for example: strong and ring.
- **Onomatopoeia:** a word or a grouping of words that imitates the sound it is describing, suggesting its source object, such as click, bunk, clang, or animal noises.

Rhythm

Focusing on segmentation through rhythmic exploration is particularly beneficial for improved reading achievement. Transferring phonemic, syllabic, and whole-word segmentation into physical experiences helps to build syllabic awareness and musical skills. Students may use techniques such as clapping, bilateral patting on laps (moving both limbs in unison), alternating motions, or using mallets bilaterally then alternating mallets.

Similarly, ask students to finger-snap word syllables and then transfer the syllabic rhythms to a color sound. Use authentic musical percussion instruments or environmental sounds (such as a metal chair, keys, pencils, or book). This is a useful strategy for developing language and music skills. A great way for beginners to feel syllabic segmentation

is to ask them to hold the backs of their hands under their chins and count how many times their hand goes down to discover how many syllables a word has (Learning Today, 2012).

Vocal Arrangements

Choose literature that contains contrasting moods, sections, or words. From the selected piece, ask students to read specific words or sections in various combinations: as a group, solo, duet, all males, all females, altering the voice, and so on. Give students many chances to explore and decode literary elements while developing their skills as composers and arrangers.

Onomatopoeia is particularly fun to explore using this strategy.

Weather Is Full of the Nicest Sounds by Aileen Fisher (1988) is a superb poem to use to reinforce onomatopoeia and add sound effects, as is Jill Bennett’s collection, *Noisy Poems* (1988). The latter’s illustrations are wonderful predictors of each poem’s subject. E. E. Cummings’ *hist whist* (1989) is a marvelous poem for onomatopoeia and dynamic expression. You can find more poems on the Internet by searching for the term, “kids’ poems with onomatopoeia.”

Ostinati

Ostinati enhance repetitive stories that are based on cumulative language. Any rhythmic, rhyming verse that fits a steady beat works well with this strategy. Ostinati can include speech, song, body percussion, instruments, and/or movement. Each ostinato should complement the main rhythm of the line or verse it accompanies. When layering ostinati, create contrasting patterns based on words from the text. The musical use of words is great fun for students, and adds joy to the reading of the story.

Conclusion

Trained Orff teachers often incorporate children’s literature into their classrooms. How they use the literature, however, determines if they make a difference in a child’s reading achievement.

- Give students many opportunities to hear you read fluently and with expression. Students love listening to an enthusiastic reader. Read a favorite book aloud.
- As you read, change your voice for different characters, and/or invite your students to

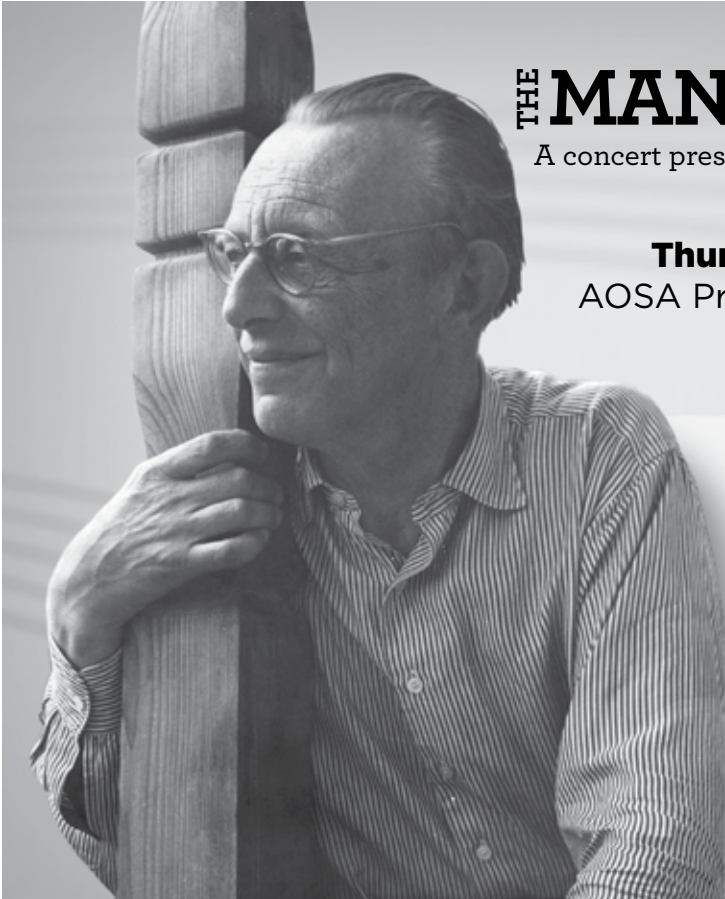
portray different characters when a word or phrase repeats throughout the book.

- Most importantly, use the words as a springboard for musical exploration based on specific reading skills and concepts. This will reinforce both music and language arts.

As Orff teachers, we can make a case for daily music learning when we explore both reading and musical skills and concepts in our lessons. By combining the two, we can reinforce both without sacrificing the integrity of either. ■

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