

# Working with Literature: Choice, Process, Performance

by Lisa Mandelstein, San Francisco, CA

As a child my first love was reading, even before music. Now, after 29 years of teaching music in the elementary grades, children's literature is still a great love of mine, and a place I often turn for inspiration. My students, who also love books, are immediately motivated when presented with literature as a musical prompt. For other students, still emergent in their relation to reading, books in the music room can be a different way to enter the imaginative world opened through words and illustration.

Using literature in the music room supports literacy in general. When the books come from the general classroom, I can bring a different life to classroom units. Sometimes, books don't tie to other established curriculum, but explore areas not usually encountered during the year. I may use a text or book simply because it catches my wonder; through the beauty of the art and illustrations, the humor or heart, the rhyme or pattern of words, or because it introduces a culture or style I want to investigate myself. Whatever the reason, books I choose must support musical learning.

When I am considering a book I pour over text and examine illustrations critically for musical touchstones. I look for:

1. Subject matter and text with sound or movement elements; for instance rain, wind, city traffic, monsters or giants;
2. Illustrations that evoke movement, line or color;
3. Repeating lines or stanzas that can be developed into a rhythmic chant, set melodically, fit to a piece from the Orff Schulwerk volumes, or used as a refrain or an A section of a rondo;
4. A strong, simple, repetitive storyline that can be expanded; adding more characters to create new scenes and opportunities for solo or small group responses;
5. Books with explicit sound, music or movement connections upon which the text is based;
6. Stories that have associated folk songs or games.

In deciding whether to use a book with a specific class, I consider my students' musical development, and the goals and grade level objectives for the year. I think about whether activities can be developed to help:

1. Introduce a musical concept;
2. Practice concepts previously introduced such as mode, meter, timbre, or style; and apply or synthesize these concepts through improvisation, composition, and group explorations;
3. Work on specific skills such as tuning up singing or solidifying steady beat;
4. Provide more opportunities for exploration with a specific modality such as movement, barred instruments, or recorder.

In addition to musical connections, I think about how a book might support what's happening in other curricular areas such as math, social studies, art or science. A book might support larger themes, for example, inclusion or social-emotional learning. In these regards I ask:

1. Is there quality and depth to the writing and illustrations? While this is obviously a matter of opinion, there are so many quality choices that something trite just isn't necessary or time-worthy.
2. Will the subject matter relate to or expand my students' sense of self, compassion for others, or connection to the greater world?
3. Does it tickle the funny-bone or inspire beauty?
4. Does the book help build respect or are there stereotypes of gender, race, or culture that might make the book unsuitable?  
I loved using the story *Tiki Tiki Tembo* for rhythm play. However, the story was discovered to be an invented "folktale" that is insensitive to Asian heritage. So, even though the text seems fun and contains desirable musical potential, the book is not, in my view, appropriate.

5. What is not being addressed in the book that warrants examination? With the story of *John Henry*, I needed to address the relevance to my students, at an all girls' school, of a story with no strong female characters. This led to developing the character of John Henry's wife through original lyrics as well as songs and games related to the era.

Picture books without words prompt movement, lyric or poetry writing; and musical improvisation reflecting the mood, color or tone of the illustrations (for example, Ezra Keat's *The Snowy Day* or Peter Spier's *Rain*). Picture books with words can be used similarly. *The Squiggle* by Carole Lexa Schaeffer with illustrations by Pierr Morgan, is wonderful for dancing and singing the "squiggle"; creating music for the shapes the "squiggle" assumes and then connecting this lesson to Chinese ribbon dancing with classical Chinese music. If a book contains a repeating refrain, a rondo form can emerge with alternating sections of movement, rhythm, or orchestrated rhythmic or melodic text.

Chapter books and non-fiction offer different treatment opportunities. I usually reserve this attention for books that are used yearly as part of a grade level curriculum. By revisiting activities and lessons, it is possible to develop deeper explorations and connections over time. When working with these types of books, I first consider the larger themes or subject. When my second graders study the Oregon Trail each year, books with pictures of the journey and quotes from women on the trail bring the period to life when paired with folk songs and play-party games of the period. Rhythm and movement explorations can begin with terms pulled from labeled drawings of wagons, lists of food items, maps with geographic landforms and town names, etc.

Another way to work with longer books is to find the "music" in the text itself. My fourth graders read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* every fall in social studies. In a close reading of the book I found many musical links. Immediately, there were many quality songs of the period, from the cultures represented, that contained musical elements I wanted my students to learn. Then I discovered a chapter with musically evocative descriptions and content; a canoe paddling into a cave as night falls, figures with bamboo flutes, the lapping of ocean waves. I took this chapter-length portion of text and began to think about ways students could interact with it. Breaking the text into smaller chunks, I developed activities where small groups could explore the text and create their own musical responses: through a found word poetry project, a rock and wood rhythm writing station, recorder improvisation, and layered barred instrument accompaniments.

Before beginning a book in class, I may announce that I will be "telling" the book rather than "reading" it. "Telling" allows me to tighten up rhythmic phrases or add more sections. For instance, a favorite Kindergarten book is *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* by Linda Williams. I slightly change part of the lady's line from "I'm *NOT* afraid of you" (emphasis is mine) to "I am not afraid of you!" This creates a clearer rhythm (ta-te ta-te ta-te ta) at the perfect skill level for my kindergarteners. In the book's opening imagery; wind, leaves, trees, forest and a sliver of moon invite more chances for movement and sound play when I draw out the scene rather than reading it word for word.

While I often use books for a one or two session "in-house" project, at other times I know I am building toward a larger performance. In this case a new set of questions come in to play:

1. Will the whole story be told or only certain scenes or chapters?
2. How will the story be conveyed? Will there be a script and if so, will everyone speak or will narration be used? Perhaps the story can be revealed through song lyrics or movement pieces. Will any of the original text or pictures be projected?
3. Are there more possibilities for cross-curricular support if the book concurrently is developed in other subject areas?
4. Are there resources within the school or larger community that can inform or deepen the story? Perhaps guest teachers such as parents, storytellers, musicians, dancers, or other artists might be available for workshops or assemblies.

Once many possibilities have been brainstormed, the Orff process comes to life as classes are introduced to and begin working with illustrations and texts, utilizing a variety of musical concepts, materials and modalities. Entry points are carefully chosen and prepared, formed from my prior thinking as the teacher. As in any performance development process, difficulty levels are adjusted to foster student success, serendipity redirects trajectory, and ongoing regrouping based on where students have traveled in their explorations leads toward the final sharing.

In designing the invitation, program, and possibly slide shows or visual backdrops for the performance, consideration of what information from the book will best inform and deepen the audience's understanding occurs. On performance day, most of my students are excited to share what they've developed. When the sharing relates to a text or book, the extra-musical context and

storyline helps the viewer better see and understand the pieces and the learning involved; and to better appreciate the creations so joyfully presented.

### **Some of the author's favorite books for musical exploration:**

#### **Pictures and Words to inspire movement and sound:**

*Rain* - Peter Spier  
*I See a Song* - Eric Carle  
*Yo! Yes?* - Chris Raschka  
*The Snowy Day* - Ezra Keats  
*The Squiggle* - Carole Lexa Schaeffer, illustrations by Pierr Morgan  
*Whistle for Willie* - Ezra Keats  
*Listen to the Rain* - Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault  
*The Quiet Noisy Book* - Margaret Wise Brown

#### **Rhyming Texts, Repeating Refrains:**

*A House is a House for Me* - Mary Ann Hoberman  
*The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* - Linda Williams  
*Possum Come a-Knockin'* - Nancy Van Laan  
*Frank was a Monster Who Wanted to Dance* - Keith Graves  
*17 Kings and 42 Elephants* - Margaret Mahy  
*Shoes* - Elizabeth Winthrop

#### **Adding Scenes and Characters, Building Rondos:**

*Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain* - Verna Aardema  
*Old Devil Wind* - Bill Martin, Jr.  
*Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* - Verna Aardema  
*Northern Lullaby* - Nancy White Carlstrom  
*Goldilocks and the Three Bears* - Jan Brett  
*Night Noises* - Mem Fox  
*Night Sounds* - Anne Miranda

#### **Related Song or Game Connections: (just a few of many)**

*John Henry* - Julius Lester  
*John Henry, An American Legend* - Ezra Jack Keats  
*Abiyoyo* - Pete Seeger  
*Abiyoyo Returns* - Pete Seeger and Paul DuBois Jacobs  
*Let Freedom Sing* - Vanessa Newton  
*Follow the Drinking Gourd* - Jeanette Winter  
*Hello, Hello* - Dan Zanes  
*Hush Little Baby* - Sylvia Long  
*Hush Little Monster* - Denis Markell  
*Froggie Went A-Courting* - Chris Conover (old style)  
*Froggie Went A-Courting* - Marjorie Priceman - (New York City style)  
*I know An Old Lady Who Swallowed a Pie* - Alison Jackson  
*There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Bat* - Lucille Colandro

#### **Miscellaneous, Poetry and Chapter Books:**

*Rice is Life* - Rita Golden Gelman  
*Caps for Sale* - Esphyr Slobodkina  
*Frog and Toad Together* - Arnold Lobel  
*The River That Gave Gifts* - Margo Humphrey  
*The Way to Start a Day* - Byrd Baylor  
*Joyful Noise, Poems for Two Voices* - Paul Fleischman

*Hailstones and Halibut Bones* - Mary O'Neill  
*Island of the Blue Dolphins* - Scott O'Dell



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