Spontaneous singing and musical agency in the everyday home lives of three- and four-year-old children

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Abstract

Spontaneous singing permeates the lives of young children and can provide insights into the social and personal worlds of young children at home. Research into young children's singing has traditionally been dominated by developmental studies. However, developmental approaches run the risk of overlooking the ways in which spontaneous singing is useful and meaningful to young children. Despite increased interest in the musical lives of young children, there exits very little research into young children's musical lives at home, largely because the home is a difficult space to access. This chapter is based on research undertaken from audio recordings of fifteen three- and four-year-old Western children, who were recorded for continuous periods at home using all-day recording technology. I draw on ideas from music sociology and childhood studies to illustrate how children use singing as a tool of agency in their interactions with others and to manage their own experience.

Introduction

Often unnoticed by adults, spontaneous singing is woven into the fabric of young children's lives at home. Young children sing as they go about their everyday routines, sometimes quietly, under their breaths, at other times raucously, filling the space. Their singing flows with their activity, directed inwards, to themselves, or outwards towards others. They draw on their musical experiences to make vocal music which is both meaningful and useful to them. Spontaneous singing is initiated by the child and can include singing, humming, chanting, and vocal play. Studying spontaneous singing can focus our attention on that which is musically important to a child and help us understand the child's musical skills and interests. This chapter draws on my recent doctoral research to explore how young children use spontaneous singing in their everyday home lives and how their singing can be interpreted through a theoretical

framework of musical agency.

The everyday musical experiences of young children have for a long time been relegated to the margins of music education research. Traditionally, research in early childhood music education has been framed within the theories of developmental psychology. Developmental psychology is typically concerned with understanding how children develop to ultimately attain adult standards of musicality and musical behaviour. When considering spontaneous singing and the everyday musical experiences of young children, approaches that emphasise musical development can result in a deficit view of children's current musical abilities. Alternative approaches explore young children's experience of music-making at a single point in time—that is, without a developmental concern—and within specific contexts. Approaches such as these can be found within fields such as ethnomusicology (e.g., Campbell, 1998) and childhood studies (e.g., Ilari & Young, 2016; Young & Gillen, 2007). In this chapter I approach spontaneous singing from a sociocultural perspective aligned with the field of childhood studies. From this perspective, I consider young children to be relatively competent (Sommer, 2012), active in constructing their own experiences and social lives, and able to influence the lives of those around them (Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 1997; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). My approach is influenced by the work of music sociologists DeNora (2000), Batt-Rawden and DeNora (2005) and Karlsen (2011). Although music in everyday life is a fundamental concern of music sociology, music sociologists have largely ignored the everyday musical lives of young children.

Young children's spontaneous singing at home

Research relating to young children's spontaneous singing has often focused on the characteristics of spontaneous singing and how these fit within models of musical development or contribute to the culture of childhood (e.g., Bjørkvold, 1989; Moog, 1968; Moorhead and Pond, 1978; Sundin, 1998). Up until the 1990s there tended to be a focus on seeking universal models, either of musical development or of child culture, that could be applied to all children, regardless of their social or cultural context. The publication of Campbell's study, *Songs in their Heads* (1998), marked an important shift of focus away from this search for universals towards the qualitative study of children's musical experiences within the context of their everyday

lives. Campbell explored the role music plays in the lives of children from an ethnomusicological perspective, drawing on the work of Nettl (2005) and Blacking (1973) and contemporary ideas from childhood studies. Her case studies were based on interviews with 4- to 12-year-old North American children and observations of children singing in a school playground, a school cafeteria, a preschool, a large toy store, a school bus, and a family home.

Campbell was particularly interested in what music meant to children and argued that music holds meaning for children because it is useful to them. The children in Campbell's study used music, both personally and socially, as an activity in its own right and as a means of enhancing other activity. Campbell concluded that children express thoughts and feelings through singing that they cannot express in other ways and that music is important for forming identity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, family environment was found to be very influential on a child's engagement with music.

Most studies of young children's spontaneous singing have taken place in educational settings and therefore reflect young children's musical behaviours when they are in a public space and/or interacting with their peers. There is very little research that specifically address spontaneous singing at home. The home is a very different location to educational settings and is an important location for young children's musical experiences, as young children typically spend a great deal of time at home. For many people in the middle-class Western world home is a place where we can relax and be ourselves. Home is both a physical location and an environment created by the everyday interaction between family members and the interaction of family members with the physical space (Plowman & Stevenson, 2013). As such, unique family cultures are constructed within the home. This has implications for music-making as both the social and physical aspects of the home can afford different types of musical agency.

In contrast to work or education settings, at home we have the opportunity to withdraw and be on our own. In a study involving seven two-and-a-half-year-old girls in seven different counties, Hancock and Gillen (2007) found that because parents considered the home to be a safe place, children could enjoy a degree of autonomy and independence in their play at home. Whilst the children were rarely out of view--or at least earshot--of parents, the children found spaces in which they could experience the feeling of being "almost alone". The idea that the

home is a place where children can attain some degree of privacy and independence, is important as this contrasts with educational settings, where young children often do not have access to private spaces (Markström & Halldén, 2009).

A number of studies have used data collected in the home (e.g. Dowling, 1984; Moog, 1976; Tafuri, 2008) to examine the role of spontaneous singing in musical development. In contrast, researchers such as Young and Gillen (2007, 2010) and Barrett (2009, 2011, 2016) have used small-scale qualitative studies to seek to understand young children's musical experiences within the contexts of their everyday lives. Young and Gillen's research was part of a larger project in childhood studies, the *Day in the Life* project (Gillen & Cameron, 2010). This project was an ecological study of one two-and-a-half-year-old girl in each of seven different countries: Canada, Mexico, the UK, Peru, Thailand, Italy, and Turkey. The girls were filmed for an entire day, and the resulting footage was analysed from a range of perspectives. Music had not initially been intended as an area of focus but was included when researchers noticed a salience of music throughout the girls' days. Barrett (2009, 2011, 2016) explored the role of singing and music-making in young children's identity-building through a longitudinal study of 18 Australian children aged 18 months to 4 years. Data were collected primarily at home through parental observations, which were recorded intermittently in paper and video diaries, and parental interviews. Additional data were collected through observations of the children participating in a *Kindermusik* programme.

In the United States, Sole (2017) examined the solitary singing of nine middle-class toddlers, aged 18–36 months, before they fell asleep at night. Twice a week, over a period of four weeks, parents listened outside their child's bedroom door after they had put their child to bed and made notes about what they heard, and a recording was made for the researcher. While Sole was particularly interested in the developmental functions of this private singing, she also considered its social and emotional function.

Research undertaken in Western homes where parents sing to and/or provide musical resources for their children indicates that all children sing at home (Barrett, 2009, 2011, 2016; Custodero, 2006; Young & Gillen, 2007, 2010). Singing at home can be part of solitary, parallel, or social play (Barrett, 2016). Children sing learnt, adapted, and improvised songs (Barrett,

2011; Custodero, 2006) and sing along with recorded music (Young & Gillen, 2007). Three- to four-year-old children are often prolific singers and seem particularly inclined to produce sung narrative (Barrett, 2016; Custodero, 2006; Forrester, 2010, Tafuri, 2008). Singing and musical play are embedded within a child's flow of play activities, sometimes existing in the background and at other times becoming the focus of the child's play (Young & Gillen, 2007).

These at-home studies highlight the role of music in social interaction, emotional regulation, and identity. Young and Gillen (2010) and Barrett (2009, 2011) demonstrate how musicality continues to influence the way parents interact with their young children beyond infancy. Adults use their own singing (Barrett, 2009; Young & Gillen, 2010;) or recorded music (Barrett, 2011) to regulate their children's emotions and facilitate daily routines. Singing is also an important part of family life and identity. When familiar songs and musical experiences are repeatedly shared between family members, a sense of belonging, security and family unity is established (Barrett, 2009; Custodero, 2006; Young and Gillen, 2007). Young children use singing and musical narrative to explore both their own identities and their relationships with family members (Barrett, 2011; Sole, 2017).

Although several of these home-based studies mention solitary singing and the home is where we might expect to find solitary singing in greater quantity than in more public settings, it is not discussed in any detail and very little insight is provided into how children behave musically when they are alone. Researchers report that young children use both known and invented song when they are alone to accompany their play, as a means of co-ordinating physical action (Barrett, 2009, 2011, 2016), to provide commentary on activity (Barrett, 2011; Forrester, 2010), to express emotion or to maintain certain emotional states (Forrester, 2010; Knudsen, 2008), and to explore personal identity and relationships (Barrett, 2011; Sole, 2017). Young children may also use solitary singing to a provide comfort and companionship (Barrett, 2016), to transition between social and alone-time, and to self-soothe (Sole, 2017). Sole concluded that the time young children spend alone in their cots before they go to sleep is important both for practising musical skills and for musical reflection.

The primary reason for the limited discussion of the more private aspects of young children's musical lives at home, despite an increased interest in this area, is the problem of

access. This also accounts for why studies of young children's spontaneous singing at home remain rare and tend to rely on very small sample sizes and limited amounts of data. Researchers wishing to study young children's singing at home not only have to negotiate access to this private environment, they also face significant methodological barriers. Over the last few years, technological advances have meant that tiny devices capable of making and storing good-quality audio and video recordings are now becoming readily available. These new technologies are beginning to open up the private worlds of young children's singing to further research.

In my doctoral research, I used all-day recording technology to collect continuous audio data from fifteen three- and four-year old English-speaking middle-class Western children in the United Arab Emirates and New Zealand. The children were recorded during their normal everyday activities at home. The following example is a summary of one of these recordings and is presented here as a means of demonstrating how young children's spontaneous singing occurs within the context of everyday life at home.

At home with Alfie

Alfie is an English four-year-old who lives with his expatriate family in the United Arab Emirates. He has two older sisters who both attend school. Alfie and is cared for at home by his mother. This recording begins shortly after Alfie and his mother, Helen, arrive home after driving Alfie's older sisters to school:

Helen helps Alfie put the research vest on and begins the recording. Alfie asks for a cupcake and sings a brief improvised phrase on syllables as he chooses one. He hums as he eats and chants, "I've got mucky fingers."

When he has finished eating, Alfie asks to play outside. He hums as Helen helps him put his shoes on and as he runs across the lawn. Alfie plays outside on his own for about an hour, punctuated by several trips indoors. He engages in imaginary play; talking, singing, and humming to himself as he does so. He adopts different character voices, using his voice expressively as part of his play. Alfie's vocalisations during this time are almost constant—a mix

of self-talk, singing, humming, and vocalising. His singing is largely improvised but he often sings phrases from pop songs that he has learnt from the radio. When Alfie hears his mother whistling a song they both know, he immediately starts singing the song.

Alfie goes indoors because he is hungry again. He goes to wash his hands, singing to himself on syllables as he walks to and from the bathroom and humming while he eats the rest of his cupcake. During a further stint of outdoor play, Alfie's shoe comes off and he goes back to the house to ask his mother to help him put it back on. Helen speaks to him sternly for walking mud through the house. Alfie hums quietly. Once his shoe is on, Alfie goes back outside to play. After a time, Alfie makes his way indoors, singing on syllables as he goes. He goes upstairs with his mother to help her change the bed linen. He asks his mother to throw all the sheets in a pile then lies in the sheets, pretending to be a baby. His baby talk is interspersed with babyish singing on syllables and humming as he pretends to self-soothe.

Helen finishes changing the beds and allows Alfie to watch television. After about twenty minutes, he starts humming intermittently. He hums a known tune, hums tunelessly into his cup, and improvises a tune. He also hums along to the soundtrack on TV.

Helen supervises Alfie as he plays on the trampoline. Alfie bounces and sings a few words from a pop song. He then starts singing, "One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive." He sings the song over and over, changing the words, which get more and more silly. Once, he stops singing to chant, "I can jump the highest."

At lunchtime, Alfie sits at the table and sings, "Oh where, oh where has my baby gone, oh where, oh where can he be?" This turns to self-talk and is then sung again, partly using nonsense syllables. As he eats, Alfie partly hums, partly sings the tune. Helen hums the pop tune that Alfie was singing earlier. Alfie slowly speaks then sings the words. He then immediately starts singing My Ship's Home from China*, a song they both know from a preschool music group they attend: "My ship's home from China, with a cargo of tea, all laden with presents for you and for me. They brought me a fan, just imagine my bliss, as I fan myself, going like this ...like this ...like this ...like ...this." Alfie continues humming the song. Helen joins in humming, then sings the words, "For you and for me." Helen and Alfie then start singing together, spontaneously taking turns.*

Alfie: They

Helen: Brought me a

Alfie: Fan

Helen: Just imagine my

Alfie: Bliss

Helen: When I fan myself, going

Alfie and Helen together: Like this, like this, like this.

Alfie says, "Let's do that again!" This time they alternate on each word until Alfie sings, "Of tea, all laden with presents for you and for ..." and he pauses to allow his mother to sing "me". They continue, alternating on each word until "fan", when Alfie seems to lose his place and Helen steps in to help him. When they finish, Alfie asks to do it again, and they repeat the song in the same way twice more. Alfie giggles when he accidentally repeats a word that his mother has already sung. Helen starts to lose interest, and Alfie has to remind her what to sing, picking up the song in the middle of a phrase. He also encourages her, "Mummy, come on." When they finish for the third time, Alfie says, "Let's do it again," and starts singing. However, Helen seems to be doing something else and says, "Hang on," so Alfie continues without her. Helen tells Alfie, "Eat up, we'll do it in a minute, okay?" Alfie agrees but continues to hum. He then starts singing with his mouth full, and Helen tells him to stop singing and eat, at which point Alfie sings, "growl growl growl." Alfie asks to get down, but Helen insists that he eat more of his lunch. He hums as he eats.

After lunch, Alfie asks to play outside again. As he puts on his shoes, he hums My Ship's Home *from China, then sings the last phrase several times in a silly voice. Outside, he sings a nonsense word repeatedly until, finally, he says to himself, "Oh no, I just had the wrong channel," and he sings, "I found myself going like this." Once again, while Alfie plays he talks to himself using different character voices, hums, and sings. He improvises using the* My Ship's Home from China *tune, and freely improvises on syllables. He also uses tongue clicking and voiced bilabial trills. When he wants to be pushed on the swing, Alfie calls out to his mother, using his voice in many different ways.*

Later, Helen calls Alfie inside as it is nearly time to collect the girls from school. Helen

sends Alfie to the toilet before they get in the car. In the bathroom, Alfie sings a pop tune on syllables. He stops to talk to himself, then improvises on syllables. Helen comes in and gets cross with Alfie because he is being slow. In response, Alfie sings an improvised tune on syllables.

During this four-hour episode, Alfie demonstrates a range of singing behaviours and uses his singing for many different purposes. He hums and sings songs he has learnt both formally and informally. He also improvises is own tunes. He sings using lyrics—both learnt and invented, syllables, and nonsense words. He also engages in vocal play, experimenting with his voice. Alfie sings when he is alone, in the presence of his mother without interacting, and while interacting with his mother. Much of his singing takes place during solitary play outside and while he is engaged in routine activities, such as toileting, washing hands, and eating. This narrative demonstrates the extent to which Alfie uses singing during his normal everyday activities.

Applying a framework of musical agency

How can we go about interpreting the role that spontaneous singing plays in Alfie's day? One way to make sense of singing in Alfie's everyday life, is to apply a framework of musical agency. Agency is a key concept within childhood studies and is essential to the idea that children are active in the construction of their own social lives and contribute to the social lives of those around them and the culture of wider society (Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 1997). While some aspects of agency have become recognised as problematic (Esser, 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012), the concept provides a useful framework for the study of spontaneous singing as it facilitates an exploration of spontaneous singing through the actions and possible intentions of the children themselves. A useful perspective on child agency is that it is both situated and relational. That is, different contexts and circumstances, including social relationships and non-human entities, afford children different types of agency (Esser, Baader, Betz & Hungerland, 2016). As a cultural tool, singing can be considered part of a network of elements that make up child agency at any time.

The concept of agency has been interpreted and applied to music in a number of

different ways. Much of the literature in the field of music education discusses musical agency in terms of a child having personal autonomy in music or having the ability to act musically (Burnard, 2013). In this vein, Wiggins (2015) describes the musical agency of children as "their sense that they can initiate and carry out their own musical ideas and ideas about music" (p. 103). This definition is fashioned on Bruner's (1996) definition of agency as the capacity to both initiate and complete acts. Wiggins argues that children's musical agency is grounded in musical experience and engagement and reflects musical understanding and knowledge. Importantly, she suggests that children's readiness to assert their musical agency "is dependent upon opportunity and upon their belief that their ideas will be accepted and valued" (Wiggins, 2015, p. 115). Here, Wiggins draws on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Bandura (2006) argues that in order to act an individual needs to believe themselves "capable of making things happen." (p. 170). In terms of spontaneous singing at home, this suggests that to act with musical agency, children need to believe they are musical and expect their singing will be accepted and understood. This would depend on their musical experience, and on whether they have been parented in musically sensitive ways. Therefore, the home musical environment and parental attitudes would appear to be crucial to the use of musical agency.

Wiggins (2015) suggests that musical agency is rooted in musical identity. This reflects music psychologists Hargreaves, Miell and MacDonald's (2002) view that self-concepts contribute to a sense of agency. However, working with the sociological concept of affordance, DeNora (2000) suggests that music *provides* the agency through which identity is constructed. While writing about music and agency, DeNora tends not to discuss musical agency as such but music as a tool—or medium—for social agency. She suggests that agency resides in the act of using music to construct identity rather than stemming from identity. These are two similar but distinct approaches to musical agency. One approach stems from the psychology literature and views musical agency as emerging from musical experience and identity and manifesting itself in a personal belief of what can be achieved musically (Wiggins, 2015). The other approach stems from sociology and views music as a tool for the realisation not only of musical agency, but also of social agency (DeNora, 2000). Importantly, in DeNora's approach, music is seen as a tool through which to achieve extra-musical means. Although DeNora's work addresses the

agency of adults, her approach is closely aligned to the relational theories of agency found within childhood studies (e.g. Esser, 2016; Oswell, 2012), as it places music—or the process of musicking—within networked constructs of agency where musicking is one non-human, cultural, element of agency. Whether or not agency provides or is rooted in identity, these different interpretations indicate a reciprocal link between agency and identity.

Inspired by the work of music sociologists DeNora (2000) and Batt-Rowden and DeNora (2005), and music educationalist, Small (1998), Karlsen (2011) developed a framework, or 'lens', of musical agency for use in music education research. Karlsen defines musical agency as "the individuals' *capacity for action* in relation to music or in a music-related setting" (p. 110) and sets out a framework of musical agency that takes into account both individual and collective action. In my own study of the spontaneous singing of three- and four-year-olds, I wished to explore the wider role of singing within the everyday lives of young children. Therefore, I defined musical agency as the capacity to act in or through music. This definition is particularly influenced by DeNora (2000) in that it allows for the use of singing as a means of acting musically to non-musical ends. That is, to act *through* music, using music as a tool for social or personal agency, is as much an aspect of musical agency as being able to act *in* music for purely musical goals. This enabled a focus that highlighted singing not only as a way of acting musically but also as a means of action in the wider sense, as part of being-in-the-world. Taking the view that agency resides in practice (Esser et al., 2016), my interpretation of the data I collected indicated that the practice of spontaneous singing provides a space in which young children can exercise agency to develop their place in the world.

Using the idea of music and singing as part of a networked agency, I found that the children in my study used singing as a tool of personal agency to act on the self, and as a tool of social agency to manage social interaction. The manifestations of agency in young children’s singing are expressed in the diagram in Figure 1. Personal and social musical agency can be explored through the narrative of Alfie's day.

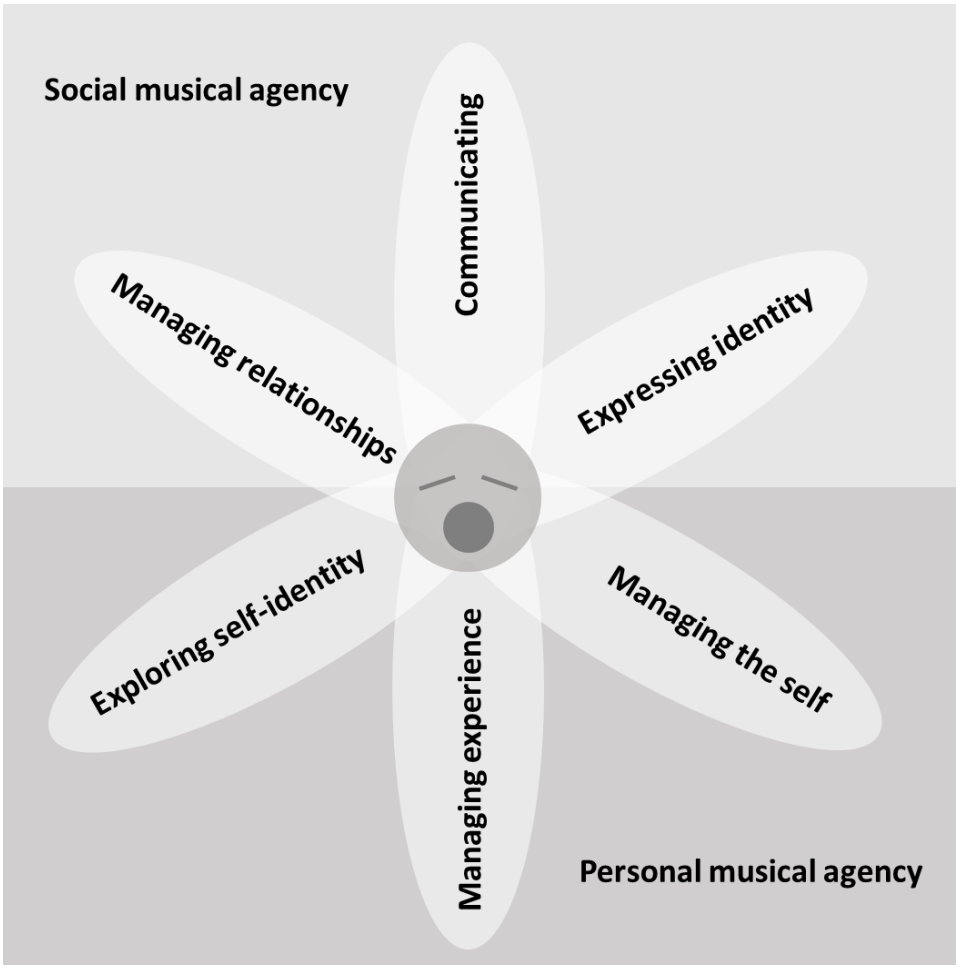

Figure 1. Manifestations of musical agency in young children.

Spontaneous singing as a tool of personal agency

Solitary, or self-directed, singing was abundant in the data I collected. In the narrative account of Alfie's day, we can see that, like many young Western children who are cared for at home, Alfie was expected to entertain himself occasionally while his mother was busy with household chores. Spontaneous singing was a salient feature of Alfie's solitary play at these times. Music is a cultural product and therefore, within the sociocultural tradition, musical engagement of any kind is considered to be a social act. Within sociocultural research, this has led to a strong bias towards social musical activity—and indeed social activity of any kind—

which neglects the commonplace phenomenon of children playing alone at home. The necessity for children to entertain themselves without extensive peer interaction is one element that makes the home an important location for the study of children's spontaneous singing.

In my study of spontaneous singing at home, I found that young children use self-directed singing to manage their experiences, to regulate themselves and their behaviour and to explore their self-identity. The most salient use of personal musical agency was to influence their own experience—that is, to change, manipulate, or enhance it in some way. Mundane experiences were transformed through singing and singing provided motivation to carry out routine activities and chores. Spontaneous singing was also used to intensify engagement with experience, to make sense of experience, and to focus the attention. Alfie can be heard using singing in these ways many times throughout his day. He sings to himself while playing in the garden, engaging with and enhancing his play experience. He sings to transform everyday routines such as washing his hands and he hums while he eats.

These findings reflect observations from other home-based studies. The idea that children use singing to engage with and enhance experience has been suggested by Bjørkvold (1989), Young (2006), and Knudsen (2008). Bjørkvold (1989) describes spontaneous singing as taking an experience beyond the mundane; Young (2006) suggests that singing adds an emotional element to experience; and Knudsen (2008) describes a young girl singing as she eats her cereal, interpreting her singing as engaging with the experience and maintaining a state of mind. Many researchers refer to young children singing to entertain themselves (Campbell, 2010; Custodero et al., 2006; Young, 2006). In addition to this, evidence from my study suggests that children sang to transform experiences such as waiting or having to sit at the dinner table during mealtimes.

As well as managing their experiences, children also use singing to manage themselves. They sing to coordinate their bodies, regulate their behaviour, engage with their emotions, and protect their self-esteem. While the data collection method I chose limited the extent to which I could assess movement, I did collect evidence that supports the idea that young children coordinate their singing and gross motor movement (Bjørkvold, 1989; Young, 2006) and singing

also appeared to motivate movement (DeNora, 2000). For example, Alfie sings as he runs across the lawn, bounces on the trampoline and, in another recording, he sings as he propels his scooter along the street on a hot day.

It is widely acknowledged that music and emotion are closely linked, even though the exact nature of the relationship remains unclear (Juslin & Sloboda, 2011). The data I collected contained many examples of joyful outbursts of singing, indicating the children used singing to express emotion and as an emotional release. There were also several examples of children singing quietly to themselves as they relaxed. My analysis suggests that the children use singing to engage with emotional states and match singing to their mood. I also found that several of the children sang to restore their sense of self or protect their self-esteem when they were faced with parental anger or criticism. We see this in the way Alfie hummed to himself when his mother scolded him about traipsing mud into the house. In situations such as this, it was fairly common to hear the children sing quietly to themselves. This strongly suggests that the children were able to use singing as an agentive tool to change an aspect of their experience and restore a sense of self.

There was evidence to suggest that the children in my study also used singing as a means of regulating their behaviour. Two of the children appeared to sing to inhibit their responses. A three-year-old boy sang to stop himself peeking while his mother hid treasure for a treasure hunt, and a four-year-old girl sang while she waited for the right moment to jump out and surprise her mother. This appears to support the findings from Winsler, Ducenne & Koury's (2011) laboratory-based psychology study, which showed some children sing as a means of controlling their behaviour. Several of the children also sang to focus their attention while carrying out parental instructions, which demonstrates another way of regulating behaviour through singing.

Many of the ways in which the children in my study used singing to act on themselves are likely to stem from experiences of being parented in musical ways. Research shows that mothers use singing with toddlers and young children influence their behaviour, regulate their emotions and entertain them. Parents often sing to facilitate daily routines, such as dressing and brushing teeth (Barrett, 2009; Custodero, 2006), and this was also reported by the mothers

of the children in my study. It seems likely that parental singing acts as a model, which the children emulate once they can undertake these routine activities on their own. Singing then also becomes available to use as a motivational tool to accomplish small chores, such as a child clearing their plate from the table. We see an equivalent among adults, who often listen to recorded music as a source of mental and emotional stimulation to alleviate the monotony of routine tasks, such as housework (North, Hargreaves & Hargreaves, 2004). Parents also sing to their infants and toddlers to distract them, particularly from unwanted behaviours (Barrett, 2009, 2011) and use recorded music to keep them entertained (Young & Gillen, 2010). It seems reasonable to suppose that young children learn how to use singing to entertain themselves from parental example during infant and toddlerhood. Interestingly, I found that the children in my study who engaged in the most self-directed singing had parents who sang to themselves. This indicates that parents model ways of singing to act on the self and the use of singing as a tool of personal agency.

Using singing as a tool for emotional regulation is likely to also be learnt through sensitive musical parenting. Young and Gillen (2010) identify how parents match their singing to the emotional state of their toddlers; singing, for example, upbeat play songs when they are alert, and gentle songs when they are tired. This matching of mood may teach infants and toddlers to regulate their own moods through singing.

Spontaneous singing as a tool of social agency

Alfie, like the other children in my study, also used singing as a means of managing social interaction and exercising social agency. The children sang to communicate, to manage relationships, and to express their identity. Singing was used extensively as a communicative tool. Sung communication was either explicit, as a way of exchanging information, or implicit, as a means of adding meaning or to communicate thoughts and emotions. Singing was also used to seek attention. In the narrative account above, there are many examples of Alfie communicating through singing. At the very beginning of the account, Alfie communicates his pleasure at the idea of eating a cupcake by improvising a joyful phrase while he chooses one. After eating the cupcake, he uses chant to let his mother know, "I've got mucky fingers!" Later,

when Alfie is playing outside in the garden and wants his mother to push him on the swing, he calls out to her using his voice in many different ways to seek her attention.

Singing is a useful means of communication for young children, because, as Bjørkvold (1989) notes, "Spontaneous singing, just like ordinary speech, is capable of being adapted to fit a given social situation" (p. 63). The children in my study used singing to convey information in a similar way to speech, sometimes using chant, as discussed by Moorhead and Pond (1978) and Bjørkvold's (1989), and sometimes improvising. When the children intended to communicate information, their sung phrases were short, and they used clear, understandable words. It is well documented that singing goes beyond communicating information and is a means of communicating thoughts and feelings that are difficult to express through language (Barrett, 2005, 2016; Campbell, 2010). The children in my study used singing as an extension of speech to add emotional content or emotional weight to their communications. They also sang to express emotion, particularly joy and excitement, and to express extra-musical associations in musical ways.

Research has shown that the early communicative exchanges between mothers and infants are inherently musical, and these musical exchanges contribute to the relationships that infants build with those around them (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). It is likely that infants who have been parented in musically responsive ways are able to draw on their musicality to facilitate relationships beyond infancy. As musical agents, singing is a tool that children can use to express themselves in their interactions with others.

The three- and four-year-old children in my study used singing to connect with others and affirm their relationships. Several times during the recording summarised above, Alfie heard his mother singing or humming and joined in, confirming an emotional closeness and sense of belonging. The musical exchange between Alfie and his mother at lunchtime is particularly interesting as a demonstration of how singing can be used during social interaction to affirm and develop relationships. Initially, Alfie takes up a song his mother is singing and uses this to connect with her and capture her attention. Once he has her attention, he draws her into a song of his choice. In the exchange that follows, Alfie and his mother explore their relationship and their identity as singers. They express their shared experience at the music

class where they learnt the song, their shared love of singing, and they demonstrate their musical abilities. Alfie and his mother are both competent singers. They sing tunefully, and they are both able to sing internally, singing alternate phrases out loud. They coordinate their timing and find humour in the experience. As a social musical agent, Alfie is able to draw his mother into the game and hold her there for some time, during which she is completely engaged and focused on him.

In addition to connecting with others and affirming relationships, the children sang to facilitate cooperative play; to attain and maintain control in social interactions; and to negotiate relationships in non-confrontational ways. It is in managing relationships that the children most clearly use singing as a tool of social agency. In these interactions, the children use singing intentionally and skilfully to achieve—or attempt to achieve—a desired social outcome. These interactions often involve the negotiation of power and position. Knudsen (2008) discusses children's sung communications at home from a Foucauldian viewpoint, explaining how improvised vocalisations are used by children to situate and empower themselves as agents. Knudsen's study was based on the analysis of four video clips of five children, aged 3-7 years old, during play at home in Norway. He uses examples of two six-year-old boys and a seven-year-old girl to demonstrate how meaning can be communicated and power negotiated though spontaneous singing. Although these children are older than those in my study, Knudsen points out that children of all ages are engaged in power negotiations throughout their everyday existence, including the struggle to be seen, to be heard, to be respected, and to gain control (Knudsen, 2008).

Music psychologist Cross (2014) considers the communicative strength of music to be its ambiguity or "floating intentionality" (p. 813). He suggests that music may be "an optimal means of managing situations of social uncertainty" (p. 812-3). This idea was clearly reflected in the way the young children in this study used singing to manage relationships. The ambiguity of meaning in singing allows children to challenge parental authority and provides a space for them to exercise their agency. One of the most interesting findings in my study was that the children used singing as a way of expressing disagreement and dissent without putting themselves in a position of direct confrontation. Singing also provided a space in which the

children could behave outside normal expectations. For example, Alfie sings, "Growl growl, growl" as a retort when his mother tells him to stop singing and eat his lunch. Singing allows the children to assert themselves, express disagreement, attain or maintain control of an interaction, and evade or resist control by others.

In the narrative account of Alfie's day, Alfie's mother tries to hurry Alfie to get ready to go out and starts to get cross. Alfie blatantly ignores and evades her irritation by singing. His singing gently but defiantly indicates that he is resisting her attempts to hurry him. Alfie uses singing in this situation because its ambiguous nature allows him to resist in a way that avoids conflict. Adult–child relationships have an inherent imbalance of power and the children in my study used singing as a way to redress this. As previously mentioned, on several occasions the children sang to protect their sense of self when faced with parental anger. In these situations, the children sang to act on something they could control—their own sense of self—rather than their parent's anger, which was outside their control. Power is closely linked to agency as agency implies the ability—or power—to act, although it should be remembered that this ability to act is situated and relational (Esser, 2016; Oswell, 2012). Singing is a vehicle or tool of agency that is situated across the context of the home, the relationships between family members, and the medium of the interaction—the singing. Spontaneous, improvised singing is endlessly pliable and able to be manipulated in ways beneficial to the child. Together with its ambiguity of meaning, this makes singing an important means for young children to negotiate power and exercise agency in their social interactions.

Singing to explore and express identity

Identity exploration and expression is an underlying theme that is evident in many of the ways that the children used spontaneous singing at home as a tool of both personal and social agency. Sommer (2012) claims that children's identities are embedded in everyday interactions and specific cultural contexts, and Hargreaves, MacDonald, and Miell (2017) suggest that musical identities are created on an ongoing basis as part of everyday life. These ideas would suggest that young children's spontaneous singing, embedded as it is within their everyday lives, is a vehicle for identity construction and expression. The children in my study

appeared to use singing as a means of exploring their identity, expressing that identity, and presenting themselves to others. Spontaneous singing also connected them to others and allowed them to explore their group identity as members of their family.

Evidence that the children used self-directed singing to explore their personal identities can most clearly be seen through sung narratives where the children sing about themselves and others who are important in their lives. This exploration of identity through musical narrative is also described by Barrett (2009, 2011, 2017), who has written extensively on the subject of young children's identities expressed through spontaneous song. The children in my study also expressed their self-identity and presented themselves to others. They did this through the expression of musical preference, using singing to assert their musical identities, and performing. The songs the children chose to sing also expressed their identity, both as individuals and members of the family and wider community. For example, Karl was good at beat-boxing, Maggie sang songs from musicals, Oliver loved Fireman Sam, Alfie sang pop songs, and James sang hymns. Several of the children enjoyed enacting the role of performer, either performing learnt songs or improvising songs especially for the performance.

Conclusion

Interpreting young children's spontaneous singing through a framework of musical agency enables a focus on how children make use of singing in their everyday lives. The findings from my study suggest that young children act as musical agents to influence themselves and others. Young children's musical agency occurs through the act and practice of singing within a specific context and in relation to others in that context. To use singing as an agentive tool, children must have experience of singing and opportunities to sing. This includes having a repertoire of songs they have learnt, freedom to sing, being exposed to positive attitudes about singing, and having role models who sing. The agency children draw from singing goes beyond purely musical agency. They not only act within music as a cultural tradition, they also use music as a tool of personal and social agency to act in and on the world around them.

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