Aesthetics: Repurposed, Transformed, Reconnected

**ABSTRACT**

Interdisciplinary connections play a major role in early childhood and elementary aesthetic education. Interdisciplinary application of an Orff Schulwerk approach to teaching and learning offers rich possibilities for developing children’s skills of perception, creatively engaging them as they actively observe, listen, investigate, evaluate, and create. In this article the author illuminates the promise of interdisciplinary Orff Schulwerk through the lens of a multifaceted, preschool through kindergarten, recycled instrument project.

By Anetta Kotowicz

Observing a group of children during their free play, one quickly notices their natural ability for exploration through whole body movement, senses, vocal expressions, gestures and imagination, the repurposing of items or spaces, or simply quiet moments of wonder (just to be inspired to move freely and experience the world again in their own intuitive style). As music and movement educators, Orff Schulwerk teachers use these organic childhood behaviors as tools for developing aesthetic sensitivity while creating interdisciplinary connections. Beyond just music and movement, we have an opportunity to transform the natural curiosity of a child into multi-level, hands-on experiences in the arts, culture, and science. According to Barbara Haselbach and the editorial team of *Orff Schulwerk Informationen* (1997a):

Long before children are entrusted with or exposed to the disciplines of individual art forms, they find their own worlds of play and expression which are not separated and not differentiated according to music, dance, language, or dramatic media. The idea to play and the need to be expressive uses
everything, seizes everything, that can intensify the playing and serve to illuminate it. (p. 5)

For a child, undertaking new tasks is not easy. It is a step into unknown complexity. We can embrace this from an Orff Schulwerk perspective and bring it to levels our students will enjoy and expand. Interdisciplinary (or in some ways “pre-disciplinary”) application of the arts serves to enrich the world of perception, explain emotions, stimulate conversation about experience and imagination, and bridge the known and unknown. It stimulates and encourages children to actively observe, listen, investigate, recognize, create, and learn.

In Maxine Greene’s (2001) Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education, we read that “... the learner must break with the taken-for-granted, what some call the ‘natural attitude,’ and look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing, and feeling in a conscious endeavor to impose different orders upon experience” (p. 5).

As Orff Schulwerk educators, we also get a chance to experience childhood one more time to wonder, question, temporarily abandon our “natural attitude,” and, with courage, appreciate cross-curricular experience. Aesthetic education, then, is an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed, and to lend works of art to their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened. Persons see differently, resonate differently ... We see it as part of the human effort (so often forgotten today) to seek a greater coherence in the world. (Greene, 2001, pp. 6-7)

**Observing, Analyzing, Repurposing, and Transforming**

Aesthetic education took an eco-friendly curve at the Brooklyn preschool where I teach. Weeks before the school’s Earth Day celebrations, we asked parents to donate discarded, common household items that could make sounds. We also received some materials from a construction crew working in the building. We gathered a very interesting mix of items to explore and re-invent, such as two-by-three wood pieces, mortar buckets, tin cans with lids, K-Cup® pods, to name a few. Children from two to six years old worked together to analyze the

![Figure 1. Three-Year-Old Children Manipulate Objects and Analyze Sound Possibilities.](image-url)
materials, manipulate them to make sounds, and define and sort the sounds. Our goal was to create our classroom instrumentarium by repurposing discarded and recycled materials (see Figure 1, p. 31).

Those can’t be instruments, that’s a trash” one of the children mentioned. Another one called, “I found the scrape-drum.” What a wonderful mix of first impressions! After initially exploring the open-ended materials, the group paused to examine the traditional non-pitched percussion instruments further, analyzing them and vocalizing their sounds using words such as ding, whoosh, tap, bong, and pat. Children then returned to the material center and brought back their “instruments,” which now sounded just like a maraca, guiro, drum, triangle, bells, cymbals, and gong. Guided experiences enhance children’s perception of known materials (in this case percussion instruments) and their knowledge of known materials bridges into deeper understanding of and creativity with the unknown (the new materials).

The youngest children (2 years old) loved exploring the containers and natural materials, turning them into different types of shakers or “shake-drums.” How loud does the woodchip shaker
sound? How loud does the sand shaker sound? Can you make/find a shaker that sounds like mine? The group differentiated and matched sounds, seamlessly crossing into science as they learned about materials and sizes of containers. Could one use water instead of stones? Children were curious, turning jars and containers into rain sticks and the like.

Three- and four-year-old students were motivated to create loud and louder sounds. They loved to explore the cans, lids, and buckets using traditional drum sticks or wooden spoons. Can you play soft and gentle on the same object? As with Orff Schulwerk, questions led students to further exploration, perception, observation, understanding, and creative application. Can you make smooth versus pointy sounds? Could you mix smooth and pointy sounds together one after another using the same repeated pattern?

Five- and six-year-old students’ exploration was more sophisticated—not just “bongs” and “rumbles,” but also more refined “magical” sounds, which they immediately labeled with specific names like “misty-blast.” Guiding their more nuanced perceptions and observations helped lead these children to build more sophisticated structures that could produce more than one tone color.

The repurposed, non-pitched instrumentarium was established. No one played on cans and lids anymore, but on “bong-drums” and “round-o-triangles” instead. The group decided to make a “sound machine” by repurposing an old art easel and attaching some of the newly named instruments to it (see Figure 2, p. 32). To further inspire, ground, and extend our explorations, we read books about creative musicianship such as Max Found Two Sticks by B. Pinkney (2005), Sunny by R.M. Cranfield and J. Steedman (2003), and nature-oriented Spring Song by A. Kotowicz and N. Ezhik (2019).

We sang songs and accompanied the books with newly invented sounds. Children were very proud of their newly built instruments as well as the fact that they could reinvent them over and over again.

The oldest students (kindergartners) wondered if we could use long two-by-three lumber pieces to create xylophones. Beginning again, as the Orff Schulwerk approach does, with exploration, students took apart an alto xylophone to learn about its parts and setup. They compared and measured the length of the bars, organized them visually, double checked the progression of the sound from lowest to highest, and reorganized the “sticking out” bars until the xylophone sounded correct again (see Figure 3, p. 32).

After summarizing their observations, children worked collaboratively, measuring and aligning the lumber on the floor to make it look just like the xylophone. After finishing the floor layout, one of the children used a mallet to tap the bars. One child’s face expressed deep disappointment. A few seconds later another child exclaimed, “We need the air to make it sound right—it will work just like a triangle that we can’t touch.” Through exploration and critical thinking, the known informs understanding of the unknown and leads to an overall deeper understanding. Building a base box for our giant xylophone would take too much time, so we decided to use ropes and hang it up, just like a triangle, by drilling holes, stringing ropes, sanding the wood smooth, and waterproofing it with oil. Everyone worked together (see Figure 4). Finally, two large xylophones were ready, and kindergartners named them the “hammock xylophones.” Hammocks? What if …?
Reconnecting Through Schulwerk Experiences Outdoors

Unusual materials asked for unusual space to play them, so we moved our music classes into the garden. We found the perfect sound-station space between a fence and the trees (see Figure 5). We could not believe our eyes; we had repurposed the school’s playground. Our sound-station was still portable, and we could quickly move it back into the music room on the rainy days or whenever needed.

Figure 5. Portable Music Center in Our Playground.

Figure 6. Folk Song from Poland.

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\begin{align*}
&Mia\text{-}la\ ba\text{-}ba\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}ta,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}ta,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}ta,\ wsa\text{-}dzia\text{-}la\ go\ do\ bu\text{-}ta,\ do\ bu\text{-}ta,\ hej! \\
&Grand\text{-}ma\ had\ a\ roo\text{-}ster\ cute,\ roo\text{-}ster\ cute,\ roo\text{-}ster\ cute,\ put\ it\ in\ an\ old\ brown\ boot,\ old\ brown\ boot,\ hey!
\end{align*}
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\begin{align*}
&O,\ mój\ mi\text{-}ly\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie,\ ko\text{-}gu\text{-}cie, \\
&Oh,\ my\ lo\text{-}vel\text{-}y\ roo\text{-}ster\text{-}roo,\ my\ lo\text{-}vel\text{-}y\ roo\text{-}ster\text{-}roo,\ my\ lo\text{-}vel\text{-}y,\ roo\text{-}ster\text{-}roo,\ my\ lo\text{-}vel\text{-}y,\ roo\text{-}ster\text{-}roo,\ my\ lo\text{-}vel\text{-}y,
\end{align*}
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\begin{align*}
&Jak\ -\ że\ ci\ tam\ w\ tym\ bu\text{-}cie,\ w\ tym\ bu\text{-}cie,\ w\ tym\ bu\text{-}cie,\ w\ tym\ bu\text{-}cie\ jest? \\
&Are\ you\ happy\ in\ my\ boot\text{-}a\text{-}roo,\ my\ lo\text{-}vel\text{-}y,\ boot\text{-}a\text{-}roo,\ my\ love,\ are\ you?
\end{align*}
\]
At first, looking at the flowers blooming, we sang and played our favorite, *Spring is Finally Here*, and other preschool songs. To continue our legato-staccato study, I played on the recorder and sang a folk song from Poland, *Miala baba koguta*, in its original Polish language (see Figure 6, p. 34).

We discussed the articulation and rhythms in the first section in contrast with the second section of the song. Children quickly described part one as happy with many detached, short sounds, and part two as smoother and more connected, except the very last word. We clapped the rhythm of the words “ko-gu-ta” and “do bu-ta” (“ti-ti ta”). Later, we moved to express the articulation of the music, sang, and clapped the “ti-ti ta” rhythm. Some of the children decided to play the “ti-ti ta” rhythm on their new percussion instruments. “But why does it end with staccato?” they wondered. So I sang it in English:

*Grandma had a rooster cute, rooster cute, rooster cute.*

*Put it in an old brown boot, old brown boot, hey!*

*Oh, my lovely rooster-oo, my lovely rooster-oo, my lovely rooster-oo, my lovely, Are you happy in my boot-a-oo, my lovely, boot-a-oo, my love, are you?*

With an extra dose of cheerfulness, children improvised, dancing around as the rooster expressing his feelings. We all sang the song and played “roo-ster cute” and “old brown boot” (“ti-ti ta”) on the instruments. The children took turns, improvising solos and answering the question: How is the rooster feeling in the boot? We had happy staccato roosters, sad glissando (on xylophones) roosters, and magically disappearing roosters with a mix of soft metallic sounds on the sound machine. The children improvised different emotions while creating different playing techniques on the instruments. They were eager to create new verses and pretend to be different animals in the shoe, connecting this song with the nursery rhyme “There Was an Old Woman who Lived in a Shoe,” and performing it with instruments and movement.

Taking Orff Schulwerk outdoors with our own original instruments, students and teacher were not only inspired by the new songs and books, but also we listened to near and far outdoor sounds, recreating them with our voices and instruments and responding to this music with our own moves. We swayed our “body-branches” like trees, moved like birds and even like a fire truck or a helicopter.

Older children performed their solos in rondo form (ABACADA, and so on). They alternated the principal theme, a simple ostinato the drummers played on the mortar buckets, with improvised solos. Soloists could choose their own sounds, but the eight-measure improvisation had to include staccato and legato elements. After studying several examples of modern music notation in the styles of J. Cage, K. Penderecki, and K. Fessmann, the children notated their own staccato-legato compositions in the form of dot marker artworks (see Figure 7, p. 36).

Moving beyond the school boundaries, my young learners told stories about music making to their caregivers. Parents shared that the children “found their voices” and continued to investigate sound/instrument-making at home. They found their playful freedom and repurposed their homes into a new canvas, illuminated by Orff’s process of active and creative music, movement, and aesthetic education.

Barbara Haselbach (1997b) summarized an illuminating observation from a German-language article by Gunther Otto:

> Whoever creates pictures or poetry, whoever expresses him- or herself through music or dance wants to clarify something for himself and transmit something to others. He or she must come to grips with the material and make use of the senses, wants to be open to feelings and situations and to be influential with ongoing processes. (p. 9)

Consider this project as an example for our practice, rich with potential. Building instruments established the basis for interdisciplinary connections through aesthetic experiences—science and experimental discoveries, observations and implications, music, movement, art, literature, improvisation, and performance. It triggered conversations about environmental awareness, recycling, and repurposing. Children of all ages...
Figure 7. Four-Year-Old Soloist Performing Her Notated Music.
treated the new instrument station with a very special respect, with pride of ownership. We explored different playing techniques and notation styles and wrote music. Our sound space was like a wonderful canvas for a musical celebration of Earth Day at our school. Students performed their written compositions for applauding classmates. And still this was not all. Reconnecting aesthetics, we can close one more gap:

Through the awareness, through the wide-awakeness brought about by aesthetic education (or by authentic teaching conducted to that end), our students will in some sense be free to find their own voices, as they find their eyes and ears. They may even find themselves free for a time to possess their own lived world. (Greene, 2001, p. 11)

**Conclusion**

Early childhood is a blank canvas, a discovery of self, experiences, emotions, and expectations. Every September, when meeting my new 2- and 3-year-old students, a few of them greet me with a simple statement, “I don’t like music,” or some have enormous anxiety levels related to music. My soul feels their pain, and I wonder what detached them from the organic behavior of vocalization, movement, and enthusiastic exploration. Usually I learn that music was presented to these little learners as an observation of perfection (music as an absolute) instead of as a creative process. The Schulwerk, with interdisciplinary connections between literature, acting, music, mathematics, science, arts, and experiences through various senses, opens a window for individual intelligence to shine and engage.

Rather than focus solely on left-brain analysis, using numbers and language as the sole forms of access, interdisciplinary teaching ideally should encourage a more broadly experiential approach to learning and acknowledge the unity of mind and body in the learning process. (Abel, 2002, p. 144)

We overcome fears and various emotions, we overcome statements of dualistic thinkers (i.e., “These are not instruments, that’s trash!”), we open the windows of imagination and enchantment, improvisation, interaction and dialogue, understanding, and reflection of critical thinkers. As Schulwerk practitioners, we have the opportunity to guide the aesthetic growth of our students, enriched by broadening our own field of vision, repurposing, transforming, and reconnecting our teaching, and even our communities, along the way.

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**REFERENCES**


