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Children's carols and the developing theoretical music skills

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CHILDREN'S CAROLS AND THE DEVELOPING OF THEORETICAL MUSIC SKILLS

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Abstract: *Musical notation has the same origins and the same evolutive process as the inscription of speech in writing, being the expression of the same need. In the first grades the acquisition of musical reading and writing must follow the same steps as the acquisition of reading and writing as such, the stock of knowledge already accumulated being correlated with the new theoretical problems.*

Original composition, children's Christmas carols constitute the primary means to be used in the first steps of teaching and the formation of theoretical musical abilities. Accesible from the point of view of their composition, the carols facilitate the acquisition of musical reading-writing and through their means the student will be able to acknowledge and understand the elements of the musical language constituting the univers of musical creations.

Keywords: *Musical notation, musical folklore, children's carols*

Music education in school comprises two stages: a pre-notation period, corresponding to kindergarten and grades I-II, and the notation period, corresponding to grades III-IV. The main means of achieving music education in primary school is singing. During the first stage songs are learned by ear and are often accompanied by musical games, which make singing very agreeable for children.

When transitioning to the second stage all that has been learned intuitively needs to be correlated with the theory - meaning music notation and reading. The first step in the process of assimilating the new theoretical elements of music language is choosing the most suitable means for the age group.

To this end, the use of **children's folklore carols** is one of the most suitable methods. Being part of a children's musical repertoire, these folklore productions are rich in artistic values, familiar and in very close relation with the age group's mentality and particularities. They are defining for the childhood's musical universe.

The study of folklore works seen as a part of the artistic practice requires a combination between musical and non-musical criteria such as: *the environment* – and in the case of more complex works – *the literary text's theme*.

Depending on the environment, we can define groups named *repertoires*. A repertoire can be unitary – containing only one genre – or heterogeneous –

containing multiple musical genres and even literary or choreographic works. Most repertoires fall into two categories:

1. *Non-occasional*, not related to a particular circumstance, can be performed at any moment;
2. *Occasional*, connected to a particular occasion and performed within the main frame of specific customs;

The non-occasional songs' function is mainly related to aesthetics with its multitude of emotional tones given by the variety of genres: 'doina'¹, song, vocal and instrumental dancing tunes. The musical works from the second category have a ritual wishing function and are a part of customs with complex ceremonials - the bride's song, harvest song, army song, requiems and carols.

Carols constitute the most representative music / literary genre for the winter holiday repertoire. Now associated with the Nativity of Jesus, the custom of singing carols draws its roots from ancestral practices related to New Year celebrations when children would walk from house to house singing hymns and wishing good luck and happiness.

The texts have a significant epic trait and very diverse themes adapted according to the stage in the caroling ritual - on the road, by the window, inside the house, before leaving the house, at dawn when the caroling ends - but mainly according to the social class which they address. The participants choose the carols so that their theme is related to the addressee's occupation or the particular moment in life at which they are.

According to the literary themes and musical character, the repertoire of carols comprises three different forms: *secular carols*, *star carols* and *children's carols*.

Children's carols are an important yet fairly little studied part of the artistic and musical works connected to winter customs. Passed on orally from generation to generation, they preserve an old means of communication and artistic expression which includes an emotional side. These carols also have entertaining and educative values. Children are not only creators and inventors in the field of music, but also lexically and verbally. The subjects, inspired from family and school life or from grown-up works, are adapted to the children's own way of manifestation. The artistic values, while present, are placed in the background because in this case it is the work's content and the function it needs to have in a particular moment of life that matter, not the aesthetic factor.

On Christmas and New Year's Eve children gather in groups and walk from house to house, stopping by the windows, where they cheer or sing traditional songs. They carry satchels in which they put the gifts they receive and in some parts of the country they also hold a stick called "colindă" (carol) or "pițără". This

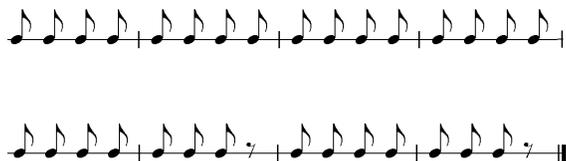
¹ Romanian *Doina* is a poetic and often melancholic song or poem, sometimes compared to the blues. In the Romanian folkloric tradition, "doina" was played mainly orally or accompanied by a single instrument, being the song of elegy, played for self comforting and not intended for festive events because of its sober nature.(Wikipedia)

The perception of melody is a fundamental issue in children's musical education. Singing notes having the same pitch correctly is a step which precedes the assimilation of more complex melodies. This also facilitates the development of good diction and homogeneous sound emission and intonation in accordance with the rhythmic design.

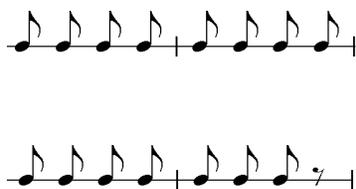
Corindița is a chanted or recited carol, which is why it is recommended to be used as a teaching tool for perceiving and acknowledging the way in which speech can be rendered and transposed into rhythm.

When the melodic structure is constructed by use of a single note which is constantly repeated, it remains for the rhythmic variations to render the carol's expressive value. That is why it is recommended to begin – in the first reading stage – with the rhythmic factor, from 'arranging' the rhythm on melodic lines corresponding to each literary idea.

Written in 2/4 time, the carol has the following rhythmic illustration:

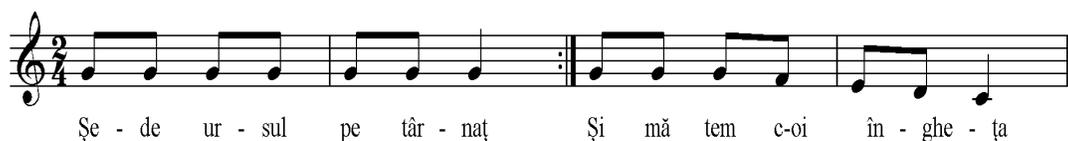


The arrangement illustrates that the song is composed of two melodic lines differing in terms of rhythm.



The half time value (eight-note) around which the carol is built, is very appealing to children, because it inspires pleasant activities suiting their temperament. Consequently, based on this arrangement, several rhythmic games like knocking on desks, playing different percussive instruments or rhythm walking can be initiated, in order to facilitate the assimilation of rhythmic formulas present in the song.

Șede ursul pe târnaț



Şede ursul pe târnaţ
 Scoală, gazdă, dă-mi colac!
 De mi-i da, de nu mi-i da,
 La fereastră nu ţi-oi sta
 Că mi-i scurtă bundiţa
 Şi mă tem c-oi îngheţa.

The bear sits on the porch.
 Wake up good man, give me a loaf!
 Whether you'll give me one or not,
 I will not stay by your window
 Because my coat is short
 And I'm afraid I will freeze.

III. No. 2 Carol *Şede ursul pe târnaţ* (*The bear sits on the porch*) with translation

If *rhythm* is the dynamic element which gives force and vigor to music, the *melody* is the expressive and emotional element in musical arts. Children's sense for melody starts to develop through singing during the oral-intuitive stage. While transitioning to the musical notation stage, the conscious perception of musical elements must be based on a series of musical activities, through which children can sense the melodic structure starting from the most basic pitch relations and ending with elaborated musical phrases.

The carol *Şade ursul pe butuc* (*The bear sits on a log*) can be used within the *Musical elements* chapter, as it consists of one repeated melodic line and a conclusive ending, having a rhythmic structure which facilitates awareness of the difference between short (eight) and long (fourth) durations.



III. No. 3. Visualization of a melodic line with repeating the same sound

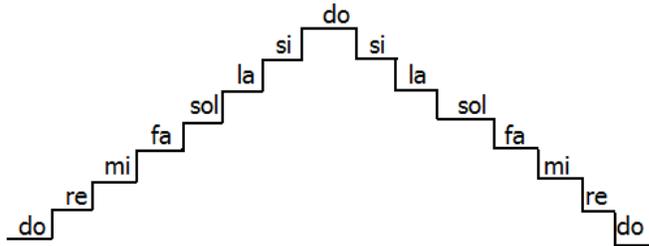
The perceiving the pitch in the sounds which make up a melody needs to begin with understanding sounds with same pitch, the perfect prime (see the first melodic line), and then with perceiving different pitch, tone and semitone (second melodic line, descending).



III. No. 4. Vocalization of intervals that compose the melodic line of the carol: 1P = perfect prime, 2M = major second, 2m = minor second

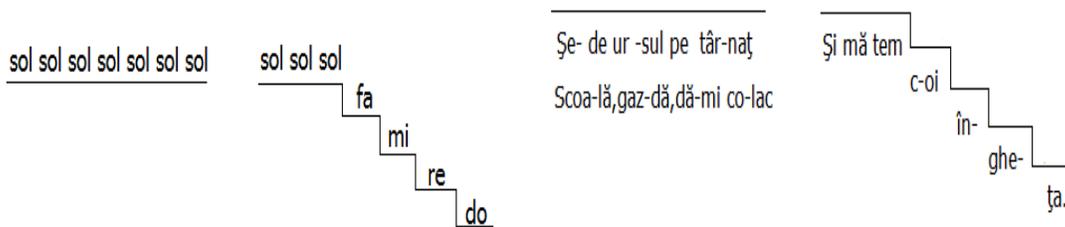
The visual factor is important in the process of learning music notation. While teaching the perception of pitch and note placement on the staff, one can use

the musical scale method. With its help any song can be visualized, drawn, which facilitates the reading-notes and singing process.



III. No. 5². Visual representation of the musical scale do major.

Because there is one sound corresponding to each step, the carol *Şede ursul pe târnaţ* (The bear sits on the porch) can be visually represented like it follows:

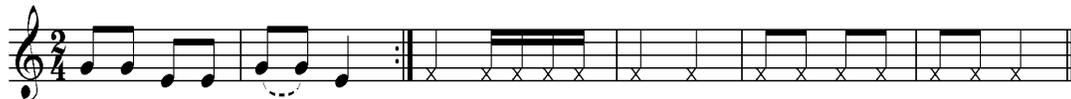


III. No. 6. Visual representation of the pitch of the sounds in the children's carol *Şede ursul pe târnaţ* (The bear sits on the porch)

After the students can easily sense rising or descending sounds, work can begin, in order to perceive the relationship between the notes sol (G) and mi (E), while using the carol **Anul Nou cu bine** (A happy New Year). This is a carol formed by one repeated melodic line and can be included in the *Melodic elements* chapter: *Intervals*.

² The romanian scale is *do-re-mi-fa-dol-la-si-do*, while the english is *c-d-e-f-g-a-h-c*.

Anul Nou cu bine



A - nul Nou cu bi - ne La A-nu și la mulți ani Să ne de - ie mo - șu' bani!

Anul Nou cu bine,
Cu zile senine,
Ploi la timp, noroc la plug,
Sănătate și belșug
Sorocova, vesela
Ca un măr, ca un păr,
Ca un fir de trandafir,
Tare ca piatra
Iute ca săgeata,
Tare ca fierul,
Iute ca oțelul.
La Anul și la mulți ani
Să ne deie moșu' bani!

Have a happy New Year,
With sunny days,
With rains in due time and good luck at ploughing,
Good health and abundance.
Little New Year's sprig,
Like an apple tree, like a pear,
Like a rose,
Hard as stone,
Quick as an arrow,
Hard as iron,
Quick as steel.
Happy New Year and many returns!
Let the old-man give us money!

III. No. 7 Carol **Anul nou cu bine** (A Happy New Year) with translation

Narrowing the sound space by reducing the number of sounds to two (G and E), the listening attention is focused on perceiving and assimilating the intonation of these two notes. The minor third (G-E), interval typical for children's songs in the whole world, is considered a children's melodic formula. Formed naturally and intuitively, the minor third is the interval through which the connection between intonation and its perception as a theoretical notion can be best achieved. The process of understanding the way in which musical sounds make a melody can be later put into connection with the development of skills for analyzing the concordance between text and music.

With reference to the *Melodic elements* chapter - *The relationship between lyrics and melody (verse, refrain and line)* from a structural point of view, there is a visibly close relationship between lyrics and melody. The two elements are merging and conditioning each other, as it can be seen in the carol **Corindă, corindă**. As for the refrains (the carol **Colo, colo după deal**), they are a specific construction element for carols.

With regards to content, they (choruses) do not necessarily have a strong relation with the carol. Choruses like *Florile dalbe* (white flowers) can very easily move from one carol to another and are encountered in different contexts. [BOCȘA p.18]

Corindă, corindă



Co - rin - dă, co - rin - dă Și - o țu - că sub coa - dă
Ba - gă ca - pra-n tin - dă
Și - i dă fân să roa - dă

Corindă, corindă,
Bagă capra-n tindă
Și-i dă fân să roadă
Și-o țucă sub coadă.

Carol, carol
Bring the goat onto the porch
And give it hay to chew
And kiss it under its tail.

III. No. 8. Children's carol **Corindă, corindă** (Carol, carol) with translated text

Colo, colo după deal



Co - lo, co - lo du - pă deal, Flo - ri - le dal - be

Colo, colo după deal,
Florile dalbe
Este-un biet de păcurar
Florile dalbe

Cu fluiерu de arțar.
Toate oile plângeau,
Numai băla săraca
Sta-n genunchi și se ruga
Să vină primăvara
Cu frunza și cu iarba.

Over there, over the hill,
White flowers
Lives a poor shepherd
White flowers
He has a maple whistle.
All his sheep were weeping,
Only the poor white one
Was sitting on its knees and
praying
For the spring to come
With green leaves and grass.

III. No. 9. Children's carol **Colo, colo după deal** (Over there, over the hill) with translated text

Children's carols generally have the function of good will wishing or congratulation and they are always addressed to the householder. There was a good reason for letting the children initiate the caroling ritual. It was believed that the age of innocence offered the prerequisite condition of sacred purity, the solid guarantee of gift efficiency.

It is characteristic for children's carols to present hails directly, in contrast with grown-up's carols where the felicitations come in an indirect form. Children's carols do not have a clearly constructed content describing an action or an episode of life, they generally take the form of an enumeration: a random number of hails or gifts requested from the hosts.

Puică neagră stă-ntr-o labă
Mie doi colaci îmi trabă;
Nu-mi da micu, că mă frig
Și dă-mi mare, bine-mi pare
Ca rotița plugului
Umple straița pruncului.

Black pullet standing on one leg
I want two cakes;
Don't give me the small one, 'cause It's too hot
And give me the big one, I'm so glad
Because the plough's wheel
Fills the child's bag.

Puică neagră la obraz
Scoală gazdă dă-mi colac
Din cornele plugului
Umple straița pruncului
Dă ț-o păre puținel
Pune ș-on cârnaț pă el.
Voie bună ș-o corindă!

Black pullet with dark cheeks
Wake up good man, give me a cake
From the plough's horns
Fill the child's bag
If you think it's not enough
Throw a sausage over it.
Have a good time and a carol!

III. No. 10 Text of the carols **Puică neagră stă-ntr-o labă** (Black pullet standing on one leg) and **Puică neagră la obraz** (Black pullet with dark cheeks) with translated text

Within the motif of asking for gifts and treats, there are almost always exaggerations or humoristic elements which take the form of comical taunts addressed to the hosts:

Colindă, colindă
Bagă iapa-n tindă
Și-i dă fân să roadă
Ș-o țucă su' coadă.

Carol, carol
Bring the mare onto the porch
And give it hay to chew
And kiss it under its tail.

III. No. 11. Text of the carol **Colindă, colindă** (Carol, carol) with translated text

Looking at carol lyrics from a poetic and linguistic perspective, we may conclude that (like the melodies) they are part of a fund of old and primitive works. Being appropriate to the children's way of thinking, it is understandable why they see in them a form of self expression.

Conclusions

Analyzing the carols underlines that using this musical genre (*children's carols*) during the theoretical music education process is one of the few methods through which the teacher can come to understand, decipher and then make good use of the 'secrets' of a work which defines the children's musical universe.

Based on rhythmic and melodic formulas composed by the children themselves these carols are accessible both in that which regards the simplicity as well as the vocal character and range. Children find a real pleasure in singing them and this facilitates the assimilation of theoretical notions afferent to each lesson type. Thus throughout carols children will discover and become aware of notions such as: musical sounds, duration, pauses, rhythmic formulas, intervals.

Besides the musical-formative value, carols are – as a result of their collective character – beneficial for the education process as they provide role models (individual interprets are not excluded) and facilitate the development of team spirit. While including multiple forms of manifestation, caroling increases music's appeal and offers different areas of interest which do not leave room for boredom or monotony.

The carol, a widespread musical genre, has numerous educational values. The necessity for utilizing it in music education is inherently connected with educating a taste for the beautiful with the idea of forming an audience of connoisseurs.

...every scholar's conviction is that only the best songs remain in children's and teachers' conscience, as a result of a conscious and affective process of assimilation. Of crucial importance is nevertheless the interest and good intention shown by the educator in the assimilation of musical language by children. The music which has reached the conscience can be transformed into ideas, attitudes, acts and manifestations with a high degree of civilization. [BĂLAN et al p. 34]

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Diana Todea has graduated the Faculty of Arts, within the "Gheorghe Dima Music Academy" in Cluj-Napoca. Her special field is opera stage management. She has an M.A. degree in Musical Arts, with the specialization of the Arts of Play and working at her PhD-dissertation on problems of directing opera.

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