Symposium

Song leading – a general cultural practice

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To current knowledge, every culture has music in some kind. The most elementary ones are using the voice to sing, body movements to dance, and using hands and mouth to create and organise sounds with objects or material. Our research focuses song singing, and specifically the intergenerational transmission of songs by teaching and learning formally at pre-school or school. Although we work in a multicultural society and use two local languages - French and Swiss German – and English in international contexts, we do not explicitly study cultural diversity. We use methods that account for the individuals' intentions, biographies, and goals, and hence, implicitly for the participants' cultural identity. Each of the four presentations tackles cultural norms and inherently questions on underlying general human conditions for transmitting cultural achievements.
Presentation 1: Song leading – general features and rules across languages
and regions

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In this presentation, we give an overview on our research on the song leading
capacity that we are currently carrying out in two regions in Switzerland with
French and Swiss German as local languages. We assume that human beings
have a vital interest in transmitting cultural goods to the younger generations,
including songs, music making, stories, dance etc. We do not focus the informal
cultural transmission of songs but the formal one at preschool and elementary
school. In a first part, of the project, we study how pre-service students
gradually integrate occidental norms of song leading into their actions and
thoughts, and how they learn to teach songs to a group of young children. By
connecting subjective standards with conventions on song singing and
teaching, they gradually are expected to become professionals that represent a
specific cultural understanding of this elementary music practice. By filming their
song leading events during their three-years lasting training and by interviewing,
we reconstruct the individual learning pathways. This allows us to account for
the large individual differences in singing and leading abilities. In a second part,
we study the song leading in-situ of experienced teachers in order to make
explicit the underlying conventions at work. Altogether, we aim at reconstructing
general and specific aspects of becoming and being professional in song
leading. We discuss this capacity in terms of a prototypical general as well as
specific cultural practice that are manifested in concrete actions of using signs -
such as voice, gestures, eye contact, movements – to guide children and to induce socially shared affective states. Songs as highly structured vocal forms and corresponding feelings can be transferred to other contexts and generalised as individual feelings, yet socially shared. We propose this assumption to be universally valid and a general characteristic of song singing.
Presentation 2: A case study on how a student teacher copes with her insecure singing in class

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For young children, learning a song is an essential activity for integrating into the linguistic-musical culture and traditional rituals. Research on children’s singing has highlighted the need to prioritise the preparation of pre-service teachers.

Our project aims to contribute to research in the area of song leading. Once a year ten trainees from our three-year course are filmed teaching a new song to children aged four to eight. Immediately afterwards, each of them watches the video with us and comments on subjectively meaningful moments she experienced during the lesson. The video and interview material collected so far allow us to see that the trainees mainly focus on the song’s lyrics and overall rhythm. They pay little or no attention to the other cornerstones of the grammar of children’s songs, namely teaching the melody and modelling it correctly.

This paper presents an ongoing case study with Florence, a pre-service teacher in her second year. She belongs to those who are unsure about singing a melody. In her first lesson the supervising class teacher accompanies her singing with the piano. This helps her to match the pitch level and stabilise the melody. At this time, Florence plans to help herself in the future by learning to accompany herself with the guitar. A year later, in her second song leading lesson, she actually plays an intro with the guitar and accompanies her singing. Does this newly acquired skill support or improve her singing the melody? In order to understand the structural changes in her song leading across these hitherto two lessons, we analyse the key actions in Florence’s lessons by using
a newly developed conceptual framework and corresponding icons. This step yields a graphic overview of her consecutive actions, and it allows to identify the conditions for rather stable tonal song presentations and for poor melodic singing. In Florence’s case, an important question concerns her strategies to present correctly and repeatedly a song to the class, since this is a crucial teaching act. So far, the instrumental accompaniment is not per se beneficial but occasionally. For example, when she sings and plays simultaneously, she feels uncertain about both because of the novice’s lack of automatization and distributed attention. However, the guitar is helpful for getting the starting pitch of the target song.
Presentation 3: On the novices’ neglect of melodic rules while song leading

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Joint singing is known to increase feeling of social and cultural belonging. Hence, a generalist teacher’s capacity to lead songs is important for inclusive music education. The literature on professional song leading reports an insufficient training and poor preparation in this respect. We study longitudinally, how pre-service teacher students develop their song leading capacity during their 3-year-training. We ask them several times to teach a new song to a group of children aged between four and eight years. We film these lessons, and immediately afterwards, we jointly watch the recording and ask the student to comment on intentions, goals, observations, and feelings.

For the analysis of these teaching events, the grammar of children’s songs is an integral and abstract reference system to conceptualize a song as a complexly ruled and coherent unit. This theoretical background allows us to conclude that initially, none of the ten pre-service teacher students addressed explicitly the melodic rules of their chosen song but focused the lyrics and one focused the pulse. Moreover, none of these novices worked specifically on parts and the whole song.

We present the case of Carmen and use micro-genetic analysis to describe the specific ways she neglects the melody in the two lessons we so far recorded. The first time, she intends to give clear verbal instructions and to work with the song’s pulse, and the second time she wants the children to learn the lyrics of the new song with support of pictures and tasks with the written words. In both lessons, Carmen sings the melody in a reduced ambitus and a low voice. Although she was given feedback on this the first time, she still pays no
attention to this aspect of her singing, and during the lessons, she does not notice the problems her inconsistent and low singing creates for the children while attempting to imitate. In the second interview, with the video recording, and by our hints, she realizes discrepancies as a model and understands and accepts our suggestions for improvements. Now we wonder how she proceeds next time.
Presentation 4: How to learn leading songs in elementary school – historic and contemporary views

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In music pedagogical literature, there is a general consensus that leading songs in class is the core competence of generalists in music teaching, especially in early education, kindergarten and primary school. In accordance with our national curriculum in Switzerland, primary and kindergarten teachers should enable pupils to use their voices in various ways and to establish a personal relationship with their singing voice. The pupils should experience their voices in choral and solo singing and acquire a rich repertoire of songs. Teachers in kindergartens and primary schools should be able to develop "singing and speaking skills" both among students and within themselves. Therefore, teacher training aims to prepare students to teach and perform children's songs and to improve their knowledge, skills and self-confidence, to act independently, responsibly and appropriately in different situations. Teacher training must therefore ensure that students say at the end of their studies: "I can sing, teach and lead songs. I enjoy it, I would like to pass this on, and I know how to do it in the classroom".

My presentation gives an overview of how music didactic literature in German language deals with the question: "How do I teach music - focused on leading songs - in the classroom". I analyse an important, yet seemingly forgotten source on basic knowledge on song leading: "Liedführung in der Grundschule" since Heinz Lemmermann (1977). This analysis gives rise to discuss the general and maybe enduring and even culture-independent aspects of song leading as a basic cultural practice. Finally, I present the actual concept of "Song leading training" at the Schwyz University of Teacher Education, illustrate
it with a short insight into practice, and discuss connections to historical and cultural levels and beyond.