

A Study on the Application of Orff Schulwerk

-- Taking the Classroom Teaching of "Little White Boat" as an Example

Yunuo He

Shenyang Conservatory of Music, Shenyang, 110000, China

Abstract

In traditional primary school music classrooms, the modular division of teaching content and the one-way, lecture-based instructional model have constrained the development of students' aesthetic music literacy. The Orff Schulwerk, with Elemental Music as its core concept, advocates the innate integration of music with movement, language, and dance, providing an operational framework to address the aforementioned predicament. Using the Orff Schulwerk as its methodological foundation and "Little White Boat" as a case study, this paper constructs a complete classroom teaching plan encompassing a three-stage introduction of "Speech, Movement, and Song," body percussion, multi-part instrumental ensemble, structured improvisation, and a mini musical workshop. The study proposes that the key to Orff-based instruction lies in the integrative logic of "interlocking links and progressive layering" across teaching segments, rather than in isolated technical training, and that students' creative expression should be guided through scaffolded frameworks.

Keywords

Orff Schulwerk; primary school music literacy; "Little White Boat"; music workshop.

1. Introduction

The cultivation of music literacy is a core task of aesthetic education in primary schools. *The Art Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)* explicitly sets forth curriculum objectives oriented around four core competencies: aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding, thereby establishing a clear mandate for the transformation of basic music classrooms from "knowledge transmission" to "competency generation"[1]. However, everyday teaching observations and literature reviews reveal that current primary school music classrooms remain constrained by traditional teaching models: teachers unilaterally deliver music theory knowledge, sight-reading, and song recitation, reducing music to a set of knowledge points to be memorized, while its inherent aesthetic experience and sensory engagement are marginalized. A problem is that singing, rhythm, and instrumental training are taught in separate, modularized sessions, fragmenting the inherently integrative nature of music and suppressing students' desire for musical expression and creative thinking. Music is, by its nature, a universal aesthetic education intended for all students, yet existing instructional approaches struggle to accommodate the varying learning paces and participatory needs of children with different starting points[2].

In response to the above predicament, the concept of Elemental Music advocated by the Orff Schulwerk offers a targeted pathway toward a solution. This pedagogical approach proposes that music learning should return to the most fundamental elements — rhythm, bodily movement, and language — and emphasizes the innate integration of music with movement, dance, and language[3]. Its progressive pathway of "Speech, Movement, and Song—

Instruments—Improvisation" is well-suited to bridge the gap between skill training and aesthetic experience that characterizes traditional classrooms. This is particularly true in the lower grades of primary school, where bodily expression and the instinct for play remain dominant — a window of opportunity in which the Orff Schulwerk can yield its greatest impact. Based on the above assessment, this study selects "Little White Boat" (a Korean children's song in 3/4 time) as its vehicle and employs the Orff Schulwerk as its methodological framework to design a complete classroom teaching plan. The melody of "Little White Boat" is predominantly pentatonic, with a regular rhythmic structure; its lilting 3/4 meter is naturally suited to body percussion and collective movement arrangements, and its concise, symmetrical phrase structure preserves an appropriate degree of openness for improvisational activities among lower-grade students. This paper translates the core principles of the Orff Schulwerk — integration, improvisation, participation, and localization — into teaching segments in a progressive, layered manner, and further offers reflections and optimization strategies regarding common implementation challenges encountered in Orff-based classrooms at the lower primary level.

2. Core Principles and Educational Philosophy of the Orff Schulwerk

The theoretical foundation of the Orff Schulwerk is one must participate oneself rather than passively receive as a listener. Music is close to the earth, natural, and organic, and particularly suited to children[4]. Building on this foundation, Li Danna offered a systematic interpretation of the concept through the lens of three dimensions of musical existence: behavior, form, and consciousness. At the behavioral level, the child is an active participant in music-making, and learning outcomes reside in the process of educational action. At the formal level, rhythmic instruments occupy a prominent position, with the ostinato providing foundational momentum for improvisation. At the level of consciousness, music is positioned as a medium of spiritual communication, where the primary imperative is to learn to listen to oneself, to listen to one's own heartbeat and breathing[5].

From this ontology, four core educational principles emerge. The first is integration. The innate fusion of music with movement, dance, language, and expression. The second is improvisation. Orff emphasized that one should "begin from improvisation, supported by rhythmic forms," and that improvisation constitutes the foundation of the entire teaching process[6]. The third is participation. Students must experience music through their own singing and playing; the teacher's instruction is subordinate to the students' practice. The fourth is localization. Orff explicitly stated that the Schulwerk should be regarded as a "model" rather than a definitive text, and encouraged educators in every country to engage in creative adaptation by drawing upon their own national languages, nursery rhymes, and folk music[7].

3. A Teaching Design for "Little White Boat" Based on the Orff Schulwerk

3.1. Second-Grade Learner Analysis and the Teaching Suitability of "Little White Boat"

The teaching design targets second-grade primary school students. In terms of musical developmental characteristics, students at this stage are already capable of recognizing and imitating basic rhythmic patterns such as quarter notes, paired eighth notes, and half notes, though their ability to discern compound rhythms and anacrusis is still in its early stages. Most students can, under the teacher's guidance, imitate and sing melodic fragments within a pentatonic range. Students at this stage display a strong impulse for bodily expression and play. Consequently, this period represents an optimal intervention window for Orff-based improvisation and movement instruction. At the same time, the attention span of students at

this stage is approximately 10 to 15 minutes, which aligns precisely with the Orff Schulwerk's rhythm of short, high-efficiency segments with rapid transitions in each teaching segment.

3.2. Designing Tiered Teaching Objectives Based on Core Competencies

In accordance with the four core competency dimensions articulated in the *Art Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)*: aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding — this paper establishes both foundational teaching objectives and challenge-level teaching objectives. The foundational objectives are as follows: (1) students can perceive and describe the lilting rhythmic character of 3/4 time and respond to the metrical pulse through bodily movement; (2) students can sing the melody of "Little White Boat" in its entirety using a natural, legato voice, completing unison group singing under the teacher's direction; (3) students can, with the teacher's guidance, accompany the song's rhythm using at least one body percussion movement (hand-clapping, thigh-patting, or foot-stomping); (4) students can recognize the basic imagery of "a little boat sailing through the night sky" depicted in the song. The challenge-level objectives are that students engage in creative practice — improvising a new set of lyrics to fit into the melody of "Little White Boat," or composing a 2–4 measure coda for the song — and that they gain an understanding of the musical characteristics of Korean ethnic culture through the music.

3.3. Curriculum Design

3.3.1. The Three-Stage Introduction: Speech, Movement, and Song

The classic Orff introductory pathway of "Speech → movement → music" is concretized in this design into three stages: speech, movement, and singing.

Stage 1: Rhythmic Speech Introduction (Language Layer)

Instruction begins not with direct song-teaching but with the core rhythmic pattern of "Little White Boat" as speech material. The teacher first guides students to use the onomatopoeic phrase "rock—rock—rock-a-rock—" in unison speech aligned with the basic 3/4 rhythm:

X - X | X X X - ||

Rock — rock — | rock a rock ——

Once students have established a bodily sense of "three-character groupings" in rhythm, the material is gradually replaced with lyric fragments from "Little White Boat": "Blue—blue—blue blue sky—," "Milky—Way—in the Milky Way—." The teacher employs echo-imitation to create a two-part interplay — the teacher speaks one phrase, the students echo it, with each round of response incorporating a subtle variation (such as altering the accent position of a particular beat or replacing a word with a hand-clap), thereby infusing the core Orff principle that "improvisation begins with small variations" in a game-like manner.

Stage 2: Internalization Through Bodily Movement (Movement Layer)

Once rhythmic speech is stabilized, the rhythmic sense cultivated in speech is transferred into bodily movement. The core task of this stage is to establish a bodily-kinesthetic memory of 3/4 time:

Step 1: The whole class stands. The teacher demonstrates a left-right sway — weight shifts to the left foot on beat one, to the right foot on beat two, and a slight knee bend on beat three for a natural cushion. The movement amplitude builds from small to large, allowing students to experience the "strong-weak-weak" metrical undulation of 3/4 time.

Step 2: On the foundation of the sway, an arm-paddling motion is added, imitating the image of a boat rowing across the water. Students extend both arms forward and trace an arc in synchrony with the beat. This movement not only reinforces the bodily perception of 3/4 time but also lays the groundwork for the subsequent understanding of the song's imagery.

Step 3: Speech and movement are merged. The entire class, while swaying and paddling, speaks "Blue—blue—blue blue sky—" in unison, achieving the dual-channel rhythmic internalization of "Speech + movement."

Stage 3: Bridging to Singing (Music Layer)

The teacher replaces piano demonstration with gentle humming; students listen with eyes closed and respond to the teacher's humming with body swaying. The teacher then hums phrase by phrase. This approach follows the pathway of "aural imitation → bodily response → vocal imitation on a neutral syllable," ensuring that students have established a dual memory of the melody — auditory and bodily — before they ever encounter the lyrics or notation. Only in the final step are the lyrics and complete singing introduced; by this point, the melody is no longer unfamiliar to the students, and their singing attention can be liberated from "learning the melody" and redirected toward "expressing the imagery" and "listening to others."

3.3.2. Body Percussion and Rhythmic Training Arrangement

Once students have established a bodily sense of 3/4 time and melodic familiarity, the lesson moves into the body percussion segment, further developing the body's function as a "natural instrument." This segment is organized around the rhythmic differences between the A and B sections of "Little White Boat," with two progressively layered body percussion parts.

A-Section Body Percussion Arrangement

The A-section melody is smooth and lyrical, with the rhythmic pattern "X - X | X X X -" as its core motif. The body percussion design emphasizes continuity and a lilting quality. Three parts can be arranged for the A section: Part 1 is thigh-patting, both hands alternately pat the thighs lightly, with the rhythm |X X X | pat thigh thigh|. Part 2 is hand-clapping, with the rhythm |0 0 X | rest rest clap|. Part 3 is foot-stomping. Left and right feet alternately stomp lightly, with the rhythm |X 0 0 | stomp rest rest|. In teaching, all students first learn Part 1 (thigh-patting) to establish a stable 3/4 skeletal framework; then Part 2 (hand-clapping) is added, with the whole class synchronously layering the two parts — at this point, each student simultaneously performs the two-part body ensemble of thigh-patting and hand-clapping. Finally, the class is divided into three groups, entering sequentially through a "part relay" approach: Part 1 (thigh-patting) → Part 2 (hand-clapping) → Part 3 (foot-stomping). After four measures, all groups play synchronously, producing a three-dimensional, three-layer body percussion ensemble effect.

B-Section Compound Rhythm Introduction

In the B section of "Little White Boat," the melody rises in register and the mood becomes slightly more animated. The teacher can introduce eighth notes to increase rhythmic density. Part 1 is thigh-patting, performed with alternating pats and an eighth-note flow, with the rhythm |X XX X|. Part 2 is finger-snapping, with the rhythm |0 X X|. The classic Orff technique of "rhythmic dialogue" can be introduced at this stage. The teacher improvises a 2–4 measure rhythmic pattern in 3/4 time, and all students respond with a fixed rhythmic pattern. Individual students are then invited to serve as "rhythmic questioners," with the rest of the class responding collectively. Through this game, students complete their first experience of "creative composition" without self-conscious awareness.

3.3.3. Orff Instrumental Ensemble Arrangement

Orff emphasized the significant position occupied by rhythmic instruments in teaching[2]. Instrumental arrangement should follow the progressive principle of moving "from body instruments to external instruments, and from unpitched percussion to pitched instruments." Based on the lilting 3/4 character of "Little White Boat" and the typical instrumental resources available in primary school classrooms, this paper selects the triangle, maracas, and tambourine for the instrumental ensemble arrangement. Part 1 is the triangle: struck once on

the first beat of each measure, sustained throughout the entire piece. The key teaching point for Part 1 is that the wrist should remain relaxed when striking, and the sound should not be sharp or piercing; students can first practice circular wrist movements in the air before handling the instrument. The teacher should emphasize that the triangle's sound is not a single "ding" but rather a resonant "ding——" with a sustained after-ring. Part 2 is the maraca group, employing an even three-beat shake pattern of "X X X" to provide a continuous granular flow to the musical texture. Part 3 is the tambourine, simulating the gentle undulation of a small boat on the water's surface.

3.3.4. Improvisation and the Integrated Music Workshop

Improvisation is the soul of the Orff Schulwerk. The teacher retains the first verse of "Little White Boat" while intentionally leaving several blanks in the second verse, inviting students to fill in the blanks based on their own imaginative interpretations of the night-sky imagery. The teacher then integrates the various students' contributions into a whole-class collaborative version of the second verse of "Little White Boat," which the entire class sings together. This design breaks down improvised lyric writing into the micro-decision of "filling in one word within a prescribed sentence structure" — every student is able to contribute, and the result of the whole-class collaboration transcends any single individual's imagination.

This study further integrates the aforementioned elements: singing, percussion, and movement exercises into a "mini musical," in which students simultaneously assume the roles of instrumentalists, singers, dancers, and dramatic characters, transforming the music classroom into a music workshop. The Orff music workshop operates on the organizational principle of "full participation and multi-role rotation." Based on the ability differences and interest inclinations of second-grade students, this paper establishes four role categories. Group 1 is the vocal ensemble, which sings the main theme of "Little White Boat" and the collaboratively composed lyrics. Group 2 is the instrumental ensemble, which plays the triangle, maracas, and tambourine. Group 3 is the movement actors, who use bodily movement to depict visual imagery such as the little boat, the Milky Way, and the stars. Group 4 is the narrators, who advance the storyline between acts through brief poetic recitations.

Act 1: Night Falls

Before the curtain rises, the lights in the room are dimmed. Students sit in a semicircle. The teacher slowly plays alternating tonic and dominant tones on a bass xylophone, while the maraca group maintains a gentle shake to simulate a breeze. The narrator, using breathy vocal delivery, recites: "Night has fallen, the wind has come, the river water gently sways." The teacher raises a conducting gesture, and the triangle marks the opening of the act with a single light strike. In this passage, the instrumental ensemble plays only the most minimal sustained tones and continuous sounds, leaving space for the progressive increase in sonic density across the subsequent acts. The movement actors simulate "reeds in the wind" with extremely slow swaying motions, setting the atmospheric stage for the boat's entrance.

Act 2: Sailing the Milky Way

The instrumental ensemble plays the melodic motif of the A section of "Little White Boat," while the vocal ensemble hums the main theme on the neutral syllable "lu." As the singing enters its second iteration, the movement actors enter: extending both arms forward in a paddling motion, they move slowly toward the center in a 3/4 lilting rhythm, simulating a small boat sailing into the Milky Way. Body percussion is transformed in this act into a "paddling rhythm" — the trained thigh-patting and foot-stomping parts are re-choreographed into a three-beat decomposed movement of "oar entering water — pulling through water — oar exiting water," with each movement corresponding precisely to one beat of the 3/4 meter.

Act 3: Encountering Starlight (approximately 3 minutes)

The music transitions to the B section of "Little White Boat." The vocal ensemble switches from the neutral syllable "lu" to singing the full lyrics, and the mood progresses from the tranquility of Act 1 toward warmth and wonder. The movement actors divide into two groups: one group continues the paddling motion to sustain the "little boat" imagery, while the other group uses finger-snapping to simulate "twinkling starlight" — hands raised upward, opening and closing in synchrony with the beat, with the finger-snapping complemented by the bright timbre of the tambourine to create a dual visual-auditory starlight effect.

Act 4: Returning Home to Dreams (approximately 2–3 minutes)

The music returns to a reprise of the A section, but at a tempo slightly more gradual than in Act 2. The paddling amplitude of the movement actors gradually diminishes; the little boat becomes "smaller" and "more distant" in the Milky Way. The instrumental ensemble exits in a "progressive subtraction" sequence that mirrors, in reverse, the layering process of Act 2 — until only the minimal texture of the maracas and triangle remains. When the triangle emits its final "ding——" and the maracas fall silent, the entire space holds three seconds of complete stillness. The teacher says softly, "The little boat has fallen asleep." The lights come up.

The mini musical simultaneously mobilizes multiple musical capacities — singing, instrumental playing, movement, recitation, and sound-effect creation — capacities that are trained in isolation in traditional modularized classrooms but are naturally fused into one integrated musical event within the workshop. What students experience is not "this lesson we learn rhythm, that lesson we learn singing," but rather "in the musical, rhythm and singing happen together." Through the division into four role categories, every student has a clearly defined musical task in every act.

4. Teaching Reflections and Optimization Strategies

The Orff classroom emphasizes students' bodily liberation and improvisational expression. In practice, however, it has been observed that second-grade students' self-regulation capacity is still developing. Once motor excitement is ignited, phenomena such as loss of movement control, competition over instruments, and excessive noise readily emerge, causing the lesson to descend into disorder. The teacher thus assumes the dual role of both "activator" and "regulator" in open-ended creative activities. When employing the Orff Schulwerk, teachers therefore need to find a delicate balance between "ordered liveliness" and "disordered chaos"[8].

Orff emphasized that improvisation is the "foundation and starting point" of teaching[3], yet when second-grade students are confronted with the open-ended instruction "Please improvise something," their most common responses are silence, imitation of their neighbors, or repetition of previously learned fixed patterns — requiring the teacher to make real-time adjustments based on the responses of their particular class.

This paper therefore proposes the establishment of a classroom regulation mechanism based on a set of mutually agreed-upon, non-verbal signals shared between teacher and students for classroom order management. For example: (1) the teacher raises the right hand and gradually forms a fist to indicate "gradually reduce the volume and gradually reduce the amplitude of movement"; (2) a single light strike of the triangle indicates "everyone pause the current activity and return attention to the teacher"; (3) both hands spread flat and pressed downward at chest level indicate "transition from standing movement to seated listening." The design principle of this signal system is to manage the music classroom through musical means — the signals for gathering attention are themselves musical actions (diminuendo, rest, transition), and do not subject the classroom atmosphere to a disciplinary interruption, thus making the act of management itself part of the musical experience[9].

Furthermore, the true core of Orff-based teaching lies not in the training of isolated techniques but in the integrative logic connecting each teaching segment. In this design, speech is not an isolated language exercise but the anchoring precursor to bodily movement; body percussion is not the endpoint of rhythm training but the embodied preparation for instrumental ensemble; the gradual layering method of the instrumental ensemble, in turn, provides the auditory experience of a "texture thickening from thin to dense" that underpins the progressive unfolding of the mini musical's acts. Each preceding segment lays a perceptual foundation for the segment that follows, culminating in the integrated presentation of all capacities within the music workshop.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes "Little White Boat" as an example and constructs a complete classroom teaching plan that encompasses three stages of "recitation - movement - singing", body percussion, multi-part instrumental ensemble, restricted improvisation creation, and micro-musical drama workshops. It is proposed that the core of implementing the Orff music teaching method lies in the integration logic among all the stages. In this design, recitation is not an isolated language practice, but a pre-anchor point for body movement. Body percussion is not the end of rhythm training, but the physical preparation for instrumental ensemble. The gradual stacking method of instrumental ensemble provides an auditory experience of "texture from thin to thick" for the sequential unfolding of the micro-musical drama. Each preceding stage lays the perceptual foundation for the subsequent stage, and ultimately, all abilities are unified and presented in the music workshop.

References

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2022). Art curriculum standards for compulsory education (2022 edition). Beijing Normal University Press.
- [2] Yan, Y. (2025). A practical investigation of the Orff Schulwerk in primary school classrooms under the new curriculum context: A case study of Guanzhong Primary School in Qingxu. North University of China.
- [3] Liao, N. (1983). Carl Orff and his music education system. *People's Music*, (1), 56-61.
- [4] Chen, L. (2024). The practical application of the Orff Schulwerk in primary school music teaching. *New Curriculum Research*, (23).
- [5] Li, D., Xiu, H., & Yin, A. (2011). The thought and practice of Orff music education. Shanghai Education Publishing House.
- [6] Liao, N. (2010). On music education. Central Conservatory of Music Press.
- [7] Tao, J. (2022). An exploration of using the Orff Schulwerk to construct a thinking-oriented primary school music classroom. *Science Consultancy*, (12).
- [8] Wang, Y. (2025). An investigation into the current state of the application of the Orff Schulwerk in primary school music classrooms: A case study of a primary school in Taonan. China National Expo, (24).
- [9] Wang, H. (2024). The practical turn in music teaching under the perspective of core competencies. *Jiangsu Education Research*, (1).