

Localizing the Orff Approach: The Design of Experiential Music Teaching Using the Chinese Folk Song Jasmine Flower

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Abstract

How to transform the teaching of Chinese folk songs from a singular mode of oral transmission with inner comprehension into an experiential learning process aligned with children's cognitive developmental patterns is an issue of dual significance in children's music education, encompassing both cultural heritage and pedagogical reform. This paper takes the Orff Approach as its theoretical framework and the classic Chinese folk song Jasmine Flower as its teaching material, designing a three-stage progressive curriculum plan consisting of rhythmic perception, instrumental ensemble, and creative composition and performance. It provides an actionable teaching design exemplar for the localized application of the Orff Approach in the context of Chinese traditional music education. It also explores the adaptive pathways of the pentatonic scale and the barred instrument system in localized teaching.

Keywords

Orff Approach, Jasmine Flower, Music teaching.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, primary school music education in China has undergone three paradigm shifts: from singing class to aesthetic education to core competencies. The *Art Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)* explicitly designates aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding as the four core competencies of the music discipline, marking a transformation in the goals of music education from skill acquisition to the cultivation of comprehensive competencies.[1] Nevertheless, a significant gap remains between curricular standards and instructional practice: in most primary school music classrooms, the monolithic mode of teacher demonstration—student imitation—collective unison singing persists, while students' active participation, improvisational expression, and creative experience remain marginalized. How to translate the competency objectives set out in curriculum standards into actionable classroom practice has become the central challenge confronting contemporary primary school music education.

The Orff Approach was founded in the 1920s by the German composer Carl Orff and the dancer Dorothee Günther. Its core philosophy centers on the concepts of the elemental and the integrated in music.[2] It advocates the fusion of speech, movement, dance, and music, enabling children to enter the world of music naturally through improvisation, rhythmic movement, and instrumental ensemble. This philosophy aligns notably with the developmental patterns of young children: children aged six to twelve are in a critical period for the development of motor coordination; their thinking is predominantly concrete-operational; and they possess a natural affinity for rhythm and bodily expression. The body percussion training proposed by Orff (clapping, stomping, finger-snapping, and other forms of body percussion) and the instructional sequence that prioritizes unpitched percussion instruments provide exactly the

natural transitional pathway from bodily perception to symbolic representation for young children.

At present, existing research largely focuses on the exposition of the philosophy and the introduction of the teaching methods of the Orff Approach, with relatively little systematic investigation, from the level of classroom practice, into its specific modes of application and effectiveness across different teaching domains (rhythm, singing, instrumental music, and creative composition). Meanwhile, some classroom practices have reduced the Orff Approach to the mere addition of percussion instruments or the enlivening of classroom activities, failing to grasp the intrinsic logic of its elemental nature, improvisatory character, and participatory orientation, thereby trapping music lessons in the pitfall of formalistic imitation. How, then, can we prevent the Orff Approach from being used in a merely instrumentalized fashion and ultimately degenerating into formalism? To address this question, Chapter 2 of this paper elucidates the core conceptual system of the Orff Approach from its four dimensions: the elemental, the integrated, the improvisatory, and the participatory. Chapter 3 takes Jasmine Flower as a case study and, through four types of classroom practice: rhythm training, singing instruction, instrumental experience, and musical creation: analyzes the concrete pathways for applying the Orff Approach in the primary school classroom. Chapter 4 presents implications for music teaching practice.

2. The Core Conceptual System of the Orff Approach

2.1. The Principle of Elemental Music Education

The concept of the elemental is the logical starting point of the Orff Approach. The primordial state of music is an integrated, holistic mode of expression naturally unified with speech, movement, and dance. Under this conception, the starting point of music education is not score reading or technical training, but the rhythmic instincts and expressive impulses that already reside in children's bodies.[3]The principle of the elemental thus establishes the methodological keynote of the Orff Approach. The core task of instructional design is not to transmit musical knowledge to children, but for the teacher to create conditions and provide materials that allow students' intrinsic musicality to emerge and grow.

This principle serves a dual analytical function within this paper. At the conceptual level, the elemental provides a fundamental criterion for evaluating teaching practice—no matter how dynamic a classroom activity may appear, if it deviates from the elemental principle of starting from children's own musicality, it falls into formalistic imitation. At the operational level, the elemental requires that the instructional sequence in lower primary grades conform to a logic of body—sensory perception—symbol progression, rather than moving in reverse from symbols. This constitutes the fundamental principle underlying the instructional design of the "Jasmine Flower" curriculum in this paper.

2.2. The Principle of Integrated Teaching

In the Orff Approach, integration places emphasis on the primacy of rhythm. Using rhythm as the connecting thread, the cadence of speech, the motion of the body, and sonic expression are woven together as three dimensions of a single teaching process.[4] Concretely, speech provides the semantic anchor for rhythm (e.g., nursery rhymes, name games, word rhythms), movement provides the bodily anchor for rhythm (e.g., clapping, stomping, walking, running, jumping), and music endows rhythm with dimensions of pitch and timbre through singing and instrumental performance.

This principle suggests that, when designing classroom activities, one must consider whether the design achieves an organic integration of speech—movement—music, rather than presenting these three as separate links delivered in temporal succession. Specifically, in

rhythm training: does the verbal rhythm naturally lead into body percussion, and does body percussion further transition into instrumental performance? Do the three form a continuous unity rather than fragmented steps?

2.3. Improvisation and the Mechanism for Cultivating Creativity

Integration is the external organizing principle of the Orff classroom; improvisation is its internal driving mechanism. Orff regarded improvisation as the fundamental pathway through which children enter music: improvisation is not the ultimate goal of instruction, but its starting point and its constant mode. Within the framework of the Orff Approach, improvisation manifests in a progressive sequence: from simple call-and-response rhythmic improvisation (the teacher claps a rhythmic pattern, a student responds with a variation), to melodic improvisatory completion (short melodic creations over an ostinato accompaniment), and onward to collective improvisational structures (group improvisation based on a given theme).[5]

Within the analytical framework of this paper, improvisation serves a mediating function connecting philosophy with outcomes. In the case study design of this paper, attention will be directed to the manner in which improvisation is introduced, whether the gradient of difficulty in improvisational tasks matches the cognitive level of young children, and whether improvisational activities effectively stimulate the emergence of creative expression. This dimension directly concerns the alignment of the Orff Approach with the "creative practice" core competency stipulated in the New Curriculum Standards.

2.4. Participatory Learning and Collective Collaboration

The elemental, the integrated, and the improvisatory together point toward participatory, collaborative, collective teaching. In the Orff classroom, the individual is not an isolated learning unit but a single voice within a collective musical texture. Multi-part Orff instrument arrangements, body percussion canons, collective creative composition, and similar activities all take ensemble rather than solo performance as their basic form,[6] enabling students, while preserving space for self-expression, to adjust themselves through sustained listening to others and ultimately integrate into the whole, thereby achieving the synchronous development of individual creativity and collective collaborative capacity.

2.5. Core Teaching Strategies of the Orff Approach

The four conceptual dimensions described above are realized in classroom instruction through four core strategies, forming a complete chain of transformation from philosophy to practice.

Body percussion training is the entry-level strategy for implementing rhythm instruction within the Orff Approach. Using the human body as a natural instrument, it transforms abstract durational note value relationships into perceptible bodily actions through four fundamental percussive actions: clapping, stomping, patting the thighs, and finger-snapping.[7] In lower primary grade classrooms, body percussion training typically begins with single-voice imitation and progressively transitions to two-voice or even four-voice canons—for instance, the hands and feet respectively undertake different rhythmic patterns, or groups enter at staggered intervals—forming a multi-part texture of body percussion.

The Orff instrumentarium provides a distinctive stratified pathway for instrumental instruction. This instrumentarium consists of two categories of instruments: unpitched percussion instruments (claves, triangle, maracas, tambourine, etc.) are placed at the front end of the instructional sequence, their function being to enable children to experience rhythmic ensemble without having to confront the difficulty of accurate pitch; pitched barred instruments (xylophone, metallophone, glockenspiel, etc.) are introduced subsequently, with the design of removable tone bars allowing teachers to customize configurations in accordance

with differing ability levels.[8] This progressive sequence from rhythm to melody allows instrumental initiation to take collective ensemble as its starting point rather than relying on the prior accumulation of individual performance skills.

Verbal rhythm instruction uses the natural prosody of the mother tongue as the precursor to melodic learning. The rhyme patterns in nursery rhymes, the syllabic stress in vocabulary, and the rhythmic units in name games are all transformed into rhythmic pattern materials. In practice, the teacher extracts rhythmic motives from linguistic materials familiar to students, passes them through the mediating stage of body percussion, and ultimately guides them toward melodic singing expression. This strategy is especially suited to the lower primary grades—students at this stage have not yet established a stable sense of pitch but already possess prosodic perceptual ability in their mother tongue.

Movement and improvisational games integrate spatial movement and creative expression.[9] Students respond synchronously to the actions of the teacher or a peer. For example, the teacher presents a rhythmic motive, and the students respond with improvised variations; in spatial exploration, students freely adjust their manner of walking in response to changes in the tempo and dynamics of the music.

The logical relationships among the four strategies correspond to the conceptual dimensions: body percussion training and verbal rhythm instruction are the direct realizations of the elemental and the integrated in the domains of rhythm and singing; the progressive design of the Orff instrumentarium embodies the "from easy to difficult" principle of participatory learning; movement and improvisational games are the core vehicle for the improvisatory. Together, they constitute the essential elements of the music classroom. This paper applies the Orff Approach to instructional design, aiming to enhance students' classroom participation and transform the music classroom into a musically engaging, creative, and open-ended interactive learning environment.

3. Instructional Design Applying the Orff Approach: The Case of "Jasmine Flower"

Jasmine Flower, one of the most recognizable Chinese folk songs, possesses instructional value on three levels. At the melodic level, the alternating appearance of stepwise motion and perfect fourth leaps within the pure pentatonic scale (gong-shang-jue-zhi-yu) provides a clear model for pitch perception and modal cognition. At the rhythmic level, the abundant use of dotted rhythms (X. X) and syncopated rhythms provides progressive instructional anchors for rhythm training. At the cultural level, as a folk song that has been transmitted across regions and is widely circulated, it possesses both artistic quality and cultural representativeness, making it an ideal introductory work for children's engagement with Chinese traditional music.

There exists a profound logic of compatibility between the Orff Approach and the teaching of Chinese folk songs: the melodic generative mode of Chinese folk songs is built upon the pentatonic scale as its core skeleton, which is intrinsically consistent with the design of the Orff instrumentarium, where tone bars are arranged on the basis of the pentatonic scale. The linguistic rhythms embedded in folk song lyrics naturally constitute material for body percussion training, and the collective aesthetic experience borne by folk songs resonates seamlessly with the Orff pedagogical pathway of learning through ensemble.

This curriculum design is targeted at the cognitive developmental characteristics of fifth-grade students. It expands music learning from the singular activity of learning to sing a song into a four-dimensional experiential process integrating rhythmic movement—body percussion—instrumental playing—creative composition, corresponding to the cognitive features of Piaget's transitional stage from concrete operations to formal operations. Taking the melodic and rhythmic elements of Jasmine Flower as its foundation, this paper guides students to

undertake creative recombination on the basis of imitation, implementing the Orff pedagogical pathway of from imitation to creation. In the instrumental ensemble and musical creative composition activities, a stratified, interest-differentiated arrangement strategy is adopted, enabling students with diverse musical foundations and musical interests to find suitable roles, ensuring universal participation and individual senses of achievement.

3.1. Curricular Teaching Objectives

This curriculum is set for two class periods, progressively completing the entire process of rhythm training, instrumental creative composition, and comprehensive musical theater performance. In the course of instruction, the aim is to cultivate students' ability to accurately grasp the 2/4 meter rhythmic patterns of Jasmine Flower, to master the song's melody, breathing points, and diction, and to be able to sing "Jasmine Flower" naturally, gracefully, and completely. Through verbal rhythm training, body percussion and movement exercises, and instrumental accompaniment experience, students develop a stable sense of beat, timbral perception, and musical collaboration skills, while continuously deepening their sense of affinity with Chinese folk songs. Ultimately, through situational creative composition, role assignment, and musical theater performance, students' musical creativity and expressive capacity are stimulated.

3.2. Curriculum Content Design

3.2.1. Body Percussion and Movement: Entering Music Through the Body

The Orff Approach emphasizes that the body is the child's first instrument. In the teaching of Jasmine Flower, body percussion training is not isolated rhythmic drill but directly serves musical perception—students internalize the metrical pulse and phrase structure of the melody through bodily movement. First, the lesson begins with verbal rhythm derived from the lyrics: the lyrics of "Jasmine Flower" are broken into short phrases, and core rhythmic patterns are extracted through recitation of the text. For example, students are guided to recite the first stanza of the lyrics, "Hao yi duo mei li de mo li hua, fen fang mei li man zhi ya" ("What a beautiful jasmine flower, fragrant and lovely, covering the branches"), from which the natural speech rhythm "X X X X X | X. X X. X X |" is derived. This rhythmic pattern is then transferred to body percussion. For instance, in the phrase "Hao yi duo mei li de mo li hua," where the melody ascends expansively and the articulation is soft and gentle, and the two syllables "mei" and "li" are sustained with a gentle quality, students can experience the slowly unfolding rhythm through soft clapping. Finger-snapping is introduced to fill the dotted rhythms within the melody, so that three layers of bodily action (clapping—thigh-patting—finger-snapping) simultaneously correspond to three rhythmic layers. Then, the teacher divides the students into four groups, each undertaking the movement task for one phrase: the first phrase—step forward (symbolizing a flower blossoming); the second phrase—step backward (symbolizing the fragrance drifting); the third phrase—rotate in place (the musical climax zone); the fourth phrase—return to the original position. The four groups enter in sequence, enabling students to recognize the "introduction—development—climax—resolution" structure of the melody through spatial movement, transforming auditory perception into bodily memory.

This approach of treating linguistic prosody as the natural entry point for rhythm instruction, and enabling students to internalize the song's meter through their bodies, is the very embodiment of the Orff instructional sequence of speech → rhythm → movement.

3.2.2. Instrumental Arrangement: Multi-Dimensional Stratified Ensemble

Instrumental ensemble is the core segment of Orff teaching. In accordance with the instrumental development level of fifth-grade students, this curriculum adopts a four-tier arrangement strategy to ensure that every student can participate. First, instrument allocation and voice-part division are carried out. Group 1: alto xylophone—performs the skeletal notes

of the melody (taking only the melody notes on the strong beat of each measure, with simplified rhythm), serving the supporting function of the melodic contour. Group 2: soprano glockenspiel/metallophone—provides harmonic background. Group 3: bass xylophone—plays perfect fifth double stops on the strong beat of each measure, serving the functions of bass support and meter reinforcement. Group 4: small percussion ensemble (triangle, finger cymbals, maracas, tambourine). The triangle punctuates sustained notes with overtone color, creating an airy, fresh timbre. The maracas fill the dotted rhythms with rhythmic motion, simulating the gentle stirring of the spring breeze and the fragrance of flowers, shaken softly on the weak beats throughout, at a gentle volume. The tambourine provides signals at sectional transitions. In the process of instrumental instruction, the melody needs to be simplified to the skeletal notes of each measure's strong beat, so that students can more quickly establish a sense of ensemble, with ornamental notes gradually added in subsequent class periods. This "skeleton first, ornamentation later" strategy enables instrumental teaching to progress from the simple to the complex in a gradual, stepwise manner. In the process of experiencing instrumental accompaniment, students are guided to perceive and express the different timbres transmitted by different instruments and the different feelings they evoke, and are also helped to understand the aesthetic beauty produced by the ensemble of different instruments, cultivating ensemble awareness.

In rehearsal, each voice part may be practiced independently before the instrumental voices are added one by one. For example, one may first initiate the ostinato pattern of the bass xylophone, then add the skeletal notes of the melody, then layer in the sustained harmonic tones, and finally add the percussion color layer. At each step of layering, one waits for the preceding layer to stabilize before proceeding, allowing students to clearly perceive the contribution of each voice part to the overall sound.

3.2.3. Creative Activities

(1) Melodic Call-and-Response Game

The teacher improvises a two-bar "question" phrase on the xylophone using the pentatonic scale (ending on the dominant note to create a sense of openness), and students, in turn, improvise a two-bar "answer" phrase on another xylophone (ending on the tonic D to create a sense of closure). The rule of the game restricts students to using only the five notes D–E–G–A–C, and the rhythms must employ rhythmic patterns that appear in "Jasmine Flower." Orff emphasized that given materials are the starting point for creativity rather than a limitation; [3] the pentatonic scale reduces the risk of dissonance in improvisation, enabling students to focus on the fluidity of the melody and the call-and-response relationship.

(2) Situational Creative Composition and Comprehensive Performance

Taking *Jasmine Flowers in Bloom* as the situational theme, the entire class is divided into an instrumental ensemble group, a singing group, a body percussion group, and a dialogue group. The instrumental ensemble group is responsible for melodic accompaniment. The singing group performs the lyrics of *Jasmine Flower*. The body percussion group arranges simple stage formations and movement transitions—for instance, using wave-like arm movements to simulate petals drifting down, accompanied by vocal humming. The dialogue group enhances the program by adding brief recitation or narration to serve as the prologue or epilogue.

Through creative composition and performance, students are no longer passive listeners and song-learners but actively participate in the creative composition of musical activities and learn to express music, genuinely realizing the aesthetic education philosophy of the Orff Approach: participation, experience, and creation.

4. Conclusion

This paper applies the core concepts and teaching strategies of the Orff Approach, taking the Chinese folk song "Jasmine Flower" as an example, to design a three-stage teaching pathway of "body percussion and rhythmic movement → instrumental ensemble → improvisational creative composition." The curriculum design demonstrates that three profound lines of compatibility exist between the Orff Approach and Chinese folk songs: the pentatonic scale, as the tonal foundation of the Orff instrumentarium, is highly consistent with the modal materials of Jasmine Flower; the linguistic rhythms of folk song lyrics can be naturally transformed into materials for body percussion training; and the collective collaborative pathway in ensemble resonates with the collective aesthetic experience borne by Chinese folk songs.

At the level of teaching practice, the four-tier instrumental arrangement strategy proposed in this paper—melodic skeletal notes (alto xylophone), sustained harmonic tones (soprano glockenspiel/metallophone), bass support (bass xylophone), and percussion color (triangle/maracas, etc.)—enables students with diverse instrumental foundations to obtain suitably matched participatory roles, effectively addressing the demands of differentiated classroom instruction. The bounded improvisation rules—restricting materials to the pentatonic scale and specified rhythmic patterns—played a pivotal role during the creative composition segment, resolving the common dilemma in creative composition instruction in which students are simultaneously "afraid to move" and "moving chaotically." In response to common problems such as voice-part disconnection in ensemble, low willingness to participate among male students, and tight class periods, this paper proposes specific strategies including slowed-down stratified layering and the reallocation of roles, providing actionable solutions for teaching practice.

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