

***Our whole family was inspired  
right from the start!:***

**Family and preschool experiences  
with the 15-string diatonic zither  
in Karis, Finland**

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## ***Our whole family was inspired right from the start!:*** **Family and preschool experiences with the 15-string diatonic zither in Karis, Finland**

### **Unstructured family musical adventures with the zitheroo as catalyst**

I have long been interested in spontaneous or informal uses of music, the "music in the cracks" which may reveal more about who we are—and how we learn—than institutionalized forms of music making. Bjørkvold studied such manifestations of "the Muse within" in children's play, focusing largely on individual development and pedagogical implications (Bjørkvold, 1989). What fascinates me is the sense of attuned awareness, even intimacy, and experience of community that may arise in group singing or playing, and my special interest has been to explore informal uses of music and social and psychological aspects of parent-child musical interaction in the home. The past 25 years have seen an enormous amount of research on early childhood music from a variety of perspectives, including attempts to measure frequency of parent-child musical interaction (Lutz 1981, Ilari 2002, Custodero, 2002a). However, little if any research has focused on family music in relation to family perceptions of "quality of life" issues such as affective awareness, agency, belonging, and meaning, or on related issues including musical hopes and fears.

The 15-string diatonic zither (also called psaltery or cymbala), here called the zitheroo to distinguish it from the many other instruments in the zither family, has unique pedagogical advantages which allow players from age 3 or 4 (and also many developmentally-disabled persons, emotionally disturbed children and even musically untrained elderly) to successfully play familiar tunes with little or no guidance or previous acquaintance with the instrument. This is due to the fact that sheet music consisting of a series of connected balls or notes may be placed directly under the strings, leading the player through the tune and removing the usual abstractions involved in reading music.

This paper reports on a study of family and preschool experiences with the 15-string zither in Karis, Finland 2002-03, a pilot study connected with my doctoral dissertation (Musical hopes, fears and adventures: Family perspectives and experiences with the 15-string diatonic zither).

### **Flow, agency and possible "larger" issues**

There is a strong tendency among music educators, particularly within the area of early childhood music, to emphasize social and developmental aspects; parents are encouraged to sing and play with their children. Still, many parents consider themselves "unmusical" and keep their musical

impulses in check at least in public. What happens when parents and children are given the opportunity to use zitheros in the home? What do they do, and how do they describe their experiences?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) provides one model for analyzing family music experiences. Flow is defined as an optimal state when one feels highly skilled and highly challenged by an activity in which one is engaged, a state which can be maintained if there is a balance between skills and challenge levels as they evolve, activities providing their own "emergent motivation" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982). Custodero adapted the originally self-assigned flow indicators in a study of preschoolers' musical activities, stating as her first conclusion that "children actively pursue activities from which they can learn" (Custodero, 2002b), also noting "expansion" (expanding musically while engaged in the activity) and "extension" (sustaining or integrating the activity in other contexts). In terms of the present study, a number of flow-related questions might be raised. Would children be motivated to make music at home? Would they sing along as they played? How long would they play? Would they expand or extend their activity in some way? Would parents and siblings become involved?

Even Ruud (Ruud, 1998) offers another analytical approach in his attempt to bring the sometimes overly-individualistic and illness-centered focus in music therapy to a more societal and wellness-oriented perspective linked to "health behavior", including cultural activities. Citing Aaron Antonovsky's "salutogenetic research" on connections between health and how we cope with life, Ruud eventually formulates his own set of four "quality of life" indicators which he sees as applicable in music research: affective awareness, agency, belonging, and meaning. "Agency", our perception of our competence and empowerment, is of central importance for development, including musical development, and closely related to "flow". It may be inhibited by parents' or children's fears, hopes and expectations when approaching music-making situations even in the home. Do parents' reports reflect "agency" issues or Ruud's quality-of-life indicators?

Even more tantalizing to me was the possibility that Ruud's other three "larger" or potentially interaction-based indicators might be reflected in study data, since flow and agency tend to be seen—unnecessarily?—as individual occurrences.

### **Pilot study design: introducing the zitheroo to preschoolers and setting up a home-lending program**

No instrument similar to the zitheroo (i.e. with sheet music under the strings) has been readily available in Finland or indeed any part of Scandinavia, and none were produced in Western Europe before production began in Finland in 2002. Thus, none of the participants in the study had any previous experience with the instrument. An earlier study using zitheros had been carried out in delivery wards, children's wards, centers for the developmentally disabled, and homes for the elderly using Russian-made instruments (Lutz, 1999).

A grant to purchase 12 instruments and permission to conduct the study were obtained, the site being Dalgatans daghem, a large city daycare center with 4 preschool groups (3 Swedish-speaking, 1 Finnish, 8-12 six-year-olds per group) in a bilingual town of 8,000. Every preschool group (and each child in that group) participated in nine 30-minute Friday morning music sessions conducted by the researcher and involving musical movement, singing, and playing the zitheroo (each child had an instrument; sessions were videotaped). During other times, 3

instruments were available in each of the 4 groups' rooms for free play. All children were also involved at least once in performing on zitheroo in a public setting: at a photo gallery's celebration, a children's concert, a Christmas concert with adult choirs, and a Christmas service for children.

Shortly after introducing the instruments, a home-lending system was set up in which children could sign up to borrow a zitheroo either Friday to Monday or Tuesday to Thursday, with one zitheroo available to each group. The box containing the zitheroo also contained a cassette with piano accompaniment to the songs and diary sheets; parents were asked to return a diary sheet each time they borrowed a zither. I had initially designed several questionnaires but decided in the end to make the diary sheets as open-ended as possible. Only the following was requested:

- 1) *How much did you use the zitheroo at home?*
- 2) *Tell in your own words something of what your child/you did, any positive/negative experiences, etc.*

### **Experiences with the zitheroo in preschool music education**

Despite extensive searches, I have been unable to discover any documentation on the use of zitheroo-type instruments in any music education programs, though some instrument distributors make reference to their use in Russian school music. Nor do they appear to be used in music therapy of any kind, if the lack of published research reflects the current situation. At least three American companies do produce instruments on a small scale, and many distributors sell the Belarus-made "Musicmaker", all marketing aimed at individual use as an instrument for young children.

Though the current study was focused on musical activity in the home, it did involve nearly 40 sessions with groups of 6 year olds and thus provided ample opportunity to test and experiment with the zitheroo as a preschool instrument.

Various practical questions arose beforehand:

Will all children be able to successfully play familiar tunes, even without individual guidance? How well will they adapt to a common pulse and keep together? Will they be able to follow the "notation" with short and long notes, repeat signs, play an assigned musical phrase at the appropriate time, sing while playing? Will the zitheroo be useful in teaching about intervals? Will children want to compose on/for the zitheroo?

Of even more interest to me were flow/agency-related questions:

Will children be eager, passive, afraid to play? Will they quickly tire or give up? Will they exhibit increased self-confidence and/or interest in musical activities?

A lengthy discussion of observations is not possible in this paper. It was very clear that children looked forward to playing the zitheroo, sometimes pointing out that we had been singing and dancing awhile and they would like to go to their instruments. Almost all appeared to very much enjoy the sessions and showed real interest in trying to master the songs (10-15 general songs, later 5-10 Christmas songs). Some made a conscious attempt to match the group pulse and rhythm, some had obvious difficulty distinguishing between long and short "notes" and keeping the beat, and a very few seemed unaware of what others were doing, all available attention

focused on their own playing. The groups as a whole were successful and even those who seemed to have physical coordination difficulties did well when given a chance to play a solo (often with the group singing along and guitar accompaniment) at their own speed. On a technical note, since the zitheroo notation is in essence a graph of the melody, children easily located large intervals and could see and discuss melodic structure.

That musical performance is often associated with psychological trauma was aptly illustrated by one participant's initial outright refusal to participate "because I can't play the zitheroo". After a skeptical few minutes, she joined in and seemed happy to take part. The preschool teachers who sometimes took part were if anything more unsure of themselves and self-conscious than the children, but the project as a whole was very well received, as illustrated by the fact that the daycare center took the initiative in applying for a grant to continue the zitheroo project along the same lines the following year. Many individual families purchased zitheroos, and when the children entered elementary school in the fall of 2003, the zitheroos soon appeared in school programs and were incorporated into the school music program without my ever contacting the school or its teachers. (Zitheroo teaching materials for elementary school use are currently under development, with some schools already using them and workshops for teachers in Norway arranged for 2005 through the national school music organization *Musikk i skolen*.)

### ***Our whole family was inspired by the zitheroo right from the start!:* reports from parents**

The home-lending system set up soon after zithers were introduced was popular and 20 reports from parents were returned during a 6-week period. (Unfortunately, the Finnish-language group kept their zithers away from the children and those parents seemed unaware of the zitheroo program.) Many parents wrote on both sides of the diary form (despite only 2 straightforward questions, as given above) and in some detail. Reports were all positive, surprisingly so despite my rather high expectations.

Many parents reported that the children's self-confidence improved and that children played for hours at a time in what some described as "skapande glädje" (creative joy). Several composed their own pieces and even notated them, in one case attaching a song to the form. Siblings, parents and grandparents were engaged and shared in musical activities. Many children seem to have taken the proper care of the zitheroos to heart and even prevented older siblings from playing without their supervision. Parents reported that the preschoolers acted as "teachers" for siblings and parents. The only negative comment was that siblings argued about whose turn it was to play.

The sound is described as pleasant, even "relaxing". A number of parents mention that the children showed great concentration: *Right away on Friday evening R played for 3 hours without a break. It was great!* (report no.18, a five year old). Some parents wanted to learn more about the instrument, never having encountered it before. One boy signed up for piano lessons after becoming interested in music through the zitheroo (no. 6). Another example illustrates a rather precocious example of flow "expansion" and "extension" in the transfer of zitheroo experiences to the piano (no. 19): *J played "Christmas is here" because that is his favorite. Then he taught himself to play "Lunka på" on a little piano by counting the strings on the zither and corresponding keys on the piano. He grew so inspired that he even tried to learn other melodies on the piano. In the end, J played piano with Dad on the zitheroo.*

It seems that all siblings and parents played, many of them surprised to be able to do so: *We are not exactly a musical family. Big brother and mom like to sing, but none of us play instruments or have ever even tried.* Diary no. 12 is rather typical: *Our whole family was inspired by the zitheroo right from the start. We listened to the cassette and played along. Soon the children wanted to play the zitheroo without listening to the cassette, just with the notation. After we got started, it went so well that the children wanted to play without notation (even Mom). Finally, we got so excited that we made our own compositions and notation.*

Interestingly enough, almost all comments have to do with parents' observations of children's psychological well-being and the family's joy in sharing music. *Dad videotaped the concert* wrote one family (no. 7), obviously caught up with the musical experience and not bogged down in correcting any technical problems the child may have made. In fact, the only parent who mentioned that the child made a "mistake" or played "correctly" turned out to be a professional musician.

## Conclusions

Though I have met similar reactions among children and adults for many years, it was encouraging to receive written documentation of this sort from parents I have never met. The results might best be described as "inspiring", since the zitheroo obviously acted as a powerful catalyst in bringing out musical creativity in the home environment and helped bring about positive musical experiences and associations which are likely to encourage children toward active participation in music in school and later life. Strong indications of "flow" and "agency" (as well as Ruud's other quality of life factors—*affective awareness, identity, and sense of belonging*) were present in almost all parental reports.

In view of other efforts among music educators to support and encourage early childhood music and music in the home, it seems surprising that the zitheroo remains relatively unknown and unused both in music therapy and education. If we are serious in the often-stated view that musical experience should precede and lead to musical concepts and theory—not the reverse—the zitheroo might be a fitting tool. Unassuming and low-cost, the zitheroo could help us get over hopes and fears which disturb the flow, allowing us to fully concentrate on our "muse-ical" adventures.

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