

# **Singing Folk Songs in the Classroom – For the Musically Challenged**

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The choice of song we make and the way we choose to present it often has a direct bearing on the success of that song in the context of a given lesson. Those of us who have been involved in teaching with music in any of its facets can attest to that statement with our own horror stories of great plans gone sour. If we take the time to look at some of the problems we encounter, we can discover a few techniques which will make our endeavors more fruitful.

It will be assumed that the reader has already determined the potential benefits of using folk songs as an extension of one’s regular curricular work. Therefore, there is little need to go into matters such as subject appropriateness according to grade level. There are, though, some specifically musical considerations which might not be obvious to those of us who are “musically challenged” which should, nonetheless, be kept in mind when choosing songs.

Four areas will be discussed in this article:

- singability of the material
- teaching methods
- starting and stopping
- accompaniment

In each section, common problems will be discussed, followed by some concrete suggestions regarding techniques for improvement.

## **SINGABILITY: It Sounded Good on the Record**

The term ‘range’ refers to the distance between the highest and the lowest notes of a given song. Like all instruments, the voice has a specific range of notes within which it can comfortably operate. Unlike instruments, there is a considerable variety in range from voice to voice.

Some songs have a much wider range than others. The smaller the range of notes the song uses, the easier it is to sing. Common sense tells us to select songs, as far as possible, that employ only a limited range – at least at first. How do you figure out the range of a song? The easiest way is to ask the music teacher; he or she will be able to help you. You can also look at the music itself.

Find the highest note on the staff; then find the lowest note. Count all the lines and spaces between them, including the notes themselves. If the distance is eight notes (an octave) or less, you'll probably have no trouble with it. If most of those notes lie in the UPPER part of the range (a high tessitura), then you might want to change the key of the song. (It's not that hard; see below.) The same is true if most of the notes are in the LOWER part of the range.

Songs are hard to sing if they are pitched too high or too low. Try humming a pitch, then singing the song. If it doesn't work (your voice cracks because it's too high, or you're grumbling too low), then hum a different pitch and try again. The trick is to remember which pitch level worked best for you. You might check this using a small, portable keyboard (probably available from your music specialist).

Transposition isn't really that hard (though music specialists would like to make you think it is). If you're using a guitar to accompany a song, and it's too low, you can use a capo to raise the pitch by two or three frets and play using the same chord forms and – voila! – you've transposed the song.

Transposing down to a lower key is a little harder. If a song is written in C and it's too high, you might want to try it in the key of A instead. You'll notice that A is three note names lower than C (C-B-A). So for every chord in the key of C, you simply count down three notes – C becomes A, F becomes D, G becomes E and D minor becomes B minor. Write the new chords in pencil above the given chords and – voila! – you've transposed the song again!

#### TEACHING A SONG: One and-a Two and-a...

The manner in which one teaches a song can have a great impact on the success of its use. In my work as a general music teacher, I have found the following procedures to be very helpful.

Learn the song first. Make sure you can sing the song adequately before beginning to teach it to the students. Choose songs that you like, that are fun to sing, or that have some particular element of interest which your students can grasp.

Plan ahead. Don't try to teach the song and use it for your subject-related work all in the same lesson. If you plan to use the song for a specific learning sequence on Friday, then teach it on Monday, using the procedures outlined below. Review it on Wednesday. Sing through it entirely first, then reteach those parts that need it. You'll find that many songs reinforce themselves as the students hum them down the hallways or on the way home. You may find that no review at all is needed. If that's the case, don't belabor the point. By Friday, the song will be thoroughly learned yet fresh enough for some exciting learning to take place through it. In the process, you'll have eliminated some of the natural frustration that comes from feeling insecure with a song.

When teaching the song, have a copy of the words (and preferably the music too) for each of the students. [*Songs throughout this website can be downloaded and printed for this purpose.*] Sing the song through entirely for the students. This gives them a sense of the continuity of the song. Short attention spans may be bolstered by having the students listen for some specific aspect of the song: an odd melodic turn in a strange-sounding tune, or an element of surprise at the very end.

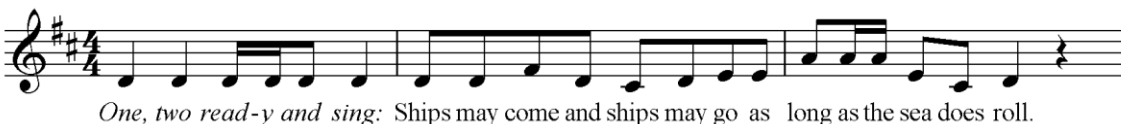
After singing it for them (and making sure they are listening, not trying to sing along while you do), teach the song by phrases. Sing one phrase of the song, and then have the students sing it back to you, repeating a phrase as needed to make sure it is being sung right. (It is much easier to teach a song correctly the first time, even through multiple repetitions of a troublesome phrase, than it is for them to unlearn a faulty phrase which has been carelessly taught.) After one section of the song is taught, sing that section in its entirety. If there is a chorus, teach that first. Then you might want to sing the whole song through again for the students, this time with them joining in on the chorus. (By the way, *chorus* and *refrain* are often used interchangeably to refer to that part of the song which repeats exactly, words and tune, after each verse. However, *chorus* can also be used to refer to the part of a shanty or work song which is sung after each solo line.) The rest of the song may be taught in a similar manner, being careful to note any places where the rhythm is different. Following such a procedure generally will guarantee that the students will know the songs well in a relatively short period of time.

**STARTING AND STOPPING:** Wait for me!

People who lead others in song often take more for granted than they should. Sure, one may know the beat, maybe even feel it internally, and know the starting pitch of the song. But in bringing in other singers, this information is not always passed along. As a result, the singers stagger in, eventually getting up to pitch (with a little luck!).

A few simple steps will largely eliminate these problems.

The beat and starting pitch of a song can be established using a single technique. Get the starting pitch from some source (a piano, guitar, recorder, etc.), and then sing (on the STARTING pitch), “One, two read-y and sing”, with the word “sing” occurring on the beat before the singers are to come in:



One, two read-y and sing: Ships may come and ships may go as long as the sea does roll.

It's that easy. Variations must be made if the song is in triple meter (3/4), compound meter (6/8), or if it starts on a beat before the first beat. For example, if it starts on the beat before the first strong beat, then the preparation will be “one, read-y sing”:



Give careful attention to the speed of the song. A tempo which is too fast can jumble the words, make it sound breathless, and ruin its effectiveness. Likewise, one that's too slow can cause your singers to run out of breath before the ends of phrases. Consider the character of the song as well as the rhythm, and think how that might be conveyed through the tempo.

Many people equate loud, lusty singing with enthusiastic singing. A more accurate way of viewing this is in terms of energy, not volume. If a child sings too loudly, the sound cannot be attractive. He cannot listen to and blend with the other singers, and the experience becomes a contest rather than an aesthetic experience. Encourage energy, but keep the volume of the sound to medium loud. There's no need to have these songs heard in the next room. (Invite them over to join in instead!)

Stopping the group while teaching a song is easily done with a nod of the head or a circular cut-off signal as used by conductors. Direct the students that all singing must stop when they see the signal. This is the only way vital information can be delivered while working on a song.

#### ACCOMPANIMENT: Is This Really Necessary?

The answer to that question, perhaps surprisingly, is NO! With most any folk song, an accompaniment is not necessary for it to sound good. Lois Choksy, a noted Kodaly specialist who uses folk songs extensively in her approach to music education, states plainly that songs should generally be sung with no accompaniment at all (Choksey, *The Kodaly Context* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981], p. 21). Indeed, in their traditional setting (lumber camps, hearth-side at home, or in the pub), these songs were nearly always sung unaccompanied. Singing songs unaccompanied with children strengthens the singers' ears and makes them more secure and comfortable with their singing voices. For variety or for added support when needed, a lightly strummed guitar or autoharp provides the best background for most songs. Use of the piano is to be avoided, especially when working with young children. It provides an inadequate model of tone quality for the children to imitate, and it often masks poor singing and encourages shouting. It would be better to use no accompaniment at all, and give starting pitches with a pitch pipe, a recorder, or by plucking the appropriate string on an autoharp (they're labeled for you).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, listen to what the students are singing, even when you are singing with them. Be conscious of the inherent differences between a mature voice and that of the students with whom you are singing. A song which feels perfectly comfortable to you may be

totally out of the range of the students' voices. Be sensitive to these variables, and to the possibilities for improving the quality of the singing in your classroom. Where feasible, don't hesitate to ask for the assistance of the music teacher.

It is hoped that following some of the tips given in this essay will help make your sessions with folk music in your classroom both more enjoyable and more musical.