

Staying in Tune: Music Picture Books for Children Ages 4-8

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Abstract:

The article discusses the use of music-themed picture books to engage children, aged 4 to 8, in the activity of reading, and promote children's emergent literacy. The author looks at several children's picture books which she recommends for teaching literacy, including "The Philharmonic Gets Dressed," by Karla Kuskin; "Drummer Hoff," the 1969 winner of the Caldecott Medal, written by Barbara Emberley and illustrated by Ed Emberley; and the book "I Like the Music," written by Leah Komaiko and illustrated by Barbara Westman.

Keywords:

Picture books for children, emergent literacy, music in literature

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Staying in Tune: *Music Picture Books for Children Ages 4-8*

Educators have argued for many years that music can be beneficial for teaching children language and reading skills. For this reason, I set out to create a selective bibliography of music-related picture books for beginning readers age 4–8.

At this key stage of development, picture books about or containing music can help young children develop language skills, vocabulary, literacy, critical thinking, and imagination while fostering a love and appreciation of music. It is my hope that librarians, parents, and educators will use this list in choosing the best music picture books for young children.

Since there are so many, I limited this project. For the most part, I omitted picture biographies of musicians because there are so many. However, I did make four exceptions: Stephen Costanza's *Mozart Finds a Melody*; Holly George-Warren's *Shake, Rattle, and Roll*; Deborah Hopkinson's *A Band of Angels*, and Carole Boston Weatherford's *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*. I felt each of these books not only gave biographical information about the musicians, but also employed tools and information (such as onomatopoeia in *Mozart Finds a Melody* and *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, or under-represented historical content in *Shake, Rattle, and Roll* and *A Band of Angels*) that would be beneficial to young readers beyond those in a good biography.

The books on this list are meant to educate and facilitate literacy, musicality, and general creativity, and I felt that these four biographies did so far better than any of the other music

biographies I examined.

The rest of the books range from nonfiction books about instruments and ensembles (but sometimes still fanciful, featuring animal performers) to fictional stories about performers or music lovers. My criteria for fiction was that the book must show an inherent musicality through rhythm and language that could enhance literacy, such as through the use of onomatopoeia and stories about finding music in everyday life.

The first book I selected, before I had even narrowed the target audience for this list or the types of books I wanted, was Karla Kuskin's *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed*. One of my favorite books as a child, it may very well be what first intrigued me about the life of a musician—a life I now lead complete with the special black and white clothes the characters in the book don for performances.

To create this bibliography, I analyzed what was so special about this book and then tried to find nineteen others like it. After re-reading the book as an adult, I think now that it is Kuskin's inherently lyrical approach to writing—there is a gentle rise and cadence to the prose that it is almost imperceptible—along with her clean, quirky illustrations and use of an entirely approachable subject (getting dressed) for what could be a completely alien one for children (a symphony orchestra), that makes this book unique. Therefore, I wanted the books on my bibliography to be written with a musical rhythm that could engage children and teach something about music that the reader may not have known before.

Much has been written—both in scholarly journals as well as elsewhere in print and on the Internet—about the benefits of using song picturebooks in emergent literacy. Songs can be used to teach sight vocabulary and punctuation.¹ Song picture books, such as Raffi’s *Songs to Read* series, encourage children to sing their favorite songs “while being exposed to print in a natural and motivating framework.”² Through repetition and predictability, young readers become involved in “authentic, holistic literary experiences.”³ Using picture books enables the reader to engage in vocal play and practice difficult rhythms; these books can also be used specifically to encourage movement, experimentation with instruments, vocalization, and literacy.⁴

Most of the scholarly articles I read included lists of recommended books, and I was happy to see Kuskin’s *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed* on many of these lists. In addition to the aforementioned articles, I looked at winners of the Newbery Medal, the Caldecott Medal, the Coretta Scott King Book Awards, and the ALSC Children’s Notable Media Lists (Book and Media Awards)⁵, as well as The American Musicological Society’s general list of music books for children⁶ (the website also includes separate lists of books about composers and performers).

While I did not choose books based solely on their inclusion on one of these lists, or based on awards they had won, I did consult these sources to locate books to read and evaluate based on their ability to provide the educational benefits previously discussed.

Emily Sotherden published an extensive and comprehensive bibliography of music-based picture books in 2002 which included categories ranging from styles of music to musical humor; I found her sections on “Instruments” and “Ensembles” to be particularly useful, but unfortunately many of the books she selected are now out of print.⁷

While some of the books on this bibliography are clearly fiction (*The Jazz Fly*) and others clearly nonfiction (*Ah, Music!*), I chose not to divide my list into fiction and nonfiction sections. Some of the books fall into an in-between area (like Raffi’s *Songs to Read*), and all of the books offer the same educational opportunities, regardless of whether they are fictional or not.

Instead, I simply have a ten-book core list—those books which I feel are absolutely essential to a collection of music picture books—and a recent titles list of ten more books, which are excellent representations of the genre and have the potential to become classics. I have personally read each of the books on this list and found them to meet the standards I set for a selective bibliography of music picture books. The common thread running through all twenty titles is the potential to encourage children’s literacy through music.

Core Titles

Note: Information is for hardcover books unless otherwise noted.

Aliki. *Ah, Music!* 2002. Illus. by the author. Harper Collins, 2005. 47p.

For young readers, this is the quintessential introduction to music. The book begins with a description as simple as, “What is music? If you hum a tune, play an instrument, or clap out a rhythm, you are making music.” The book provides easy explanations of rhythm, melody, pitch and tone, volume, and feeling. It also explains conductors, instruments, voice, dance, and provides a brief history of music. All of this is done with colored illustrations of children playing and listening to music. *Ah, Music!* is an excellent initiation into the foundations of music which will be both visually appealing and intellectually stimulating to children.

Emberley, Beverly. *Drummer Hoff*. Illus. by Ed Emberley. Prentice-Hall, 1967. 32p.

Winner of the **XXXX** *Caldecott Medal*.

Drummer Hoff tells the story of seven military personnel building and firing a cannon. The book ends in an explosion of color, and the last page shows the cannon in disuse, overgrown with flowers. The brilliantly colored illustrations resemble woodcuttings. The story carries a message of peace. The repetitive nature of the book (“And drummer Hoff fired it off” ends each stanza) imbues the nontraditional narrative with an inherent rhythm that makes it easy for children to chant along with and subsequently to memorize.

Fleming, Candace. *Gabriella’s Song*. Illus. by Giselle Potter. Atheneum Books for Young

Readers, 1997. 32p.

ALSC Notable Book

This book uses onomatopoeia to represent the sounds Gabriella hears as she walks through the streets of Venice—the “slap slap” of laundry, the “flap-flap” of pigeons, the “ting-aling-ling” of church bells, and the “jing-aling-ling” of the lire. Gabriella uses these sounds to create a melody, which she hums while buying a cannoli. Everyone who hears the tune begins to hum it as well, and soon it has passed through the entire city. The famous composer Giuseppe Del Pietro hears it, ending his writer’s block so he can finish his new symphony. At the premiere of the symphony, the Venetians eventually trace the origin of the tune back to Gabriella, and she receives a standing ovation. This is both a simple and inspiring story, with beautiful earth-tone pictures, which illustrates that music can be found in everyday life, not just in a concert hall.

Hayes, Ann. *Meet the Orchestra*. Illus. by Karmen Thompson. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, paper, 1991. 32 p.

This book introduces children to the instruments in the orchestra, and, which many children enjoy, the musicians are animals! The book takes the reader through an evening at the symphony, beginning with buying tickets and ending with the audience and musicians going home. The concept of instrument families is explained, and the sound of the instruments is put into words easy for a child to understand (the viola reminds you of “evening shadows, cloudy skies, and the color blue”). The conductor is a lion, and the musicians are dressed in formal tails and dresses. This is a decent introduction to an orchestra, and the silly illustrations will be alluring to children.

Komaiko, Leah. *I Like the Music*. Illus. by Barbara Westman. Harper & Row, 1987. 32p.

A little girl does not like to go to the symphony although her grandma thinks it's "a treat." Instead, she likes the music of the streets, where the garbage man "shabops-it on the tops-it of the garbage cans." Her grandma takes her to an outdoor concert, where the little girl is selected by the conductor to replace him, and she begins to understand what the big fuss is about. This book also uses onomatopoeia to represent the sounds the little girl hears, as well as rhythmic rhymes that encourage easy memorization. The illustrations mirror the vibrant city the little girl hears so musically.

Koscielniak, Bruce. *The Story of the Incredible Orchestra: An Introduction to Musical Instruments and the Symphony Orchestra*. Illus. by the author. Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 40p.

This picture book, featuring elaborate and detailed illustrations by the author, tells the history of the orchestra, beginning with instrumental ensembles pre-1600 and detailing the construction of the instruments ("Viols, lutes, harps, and zithers used gut strings"). The illustrations show the musicians in period dress playing their instruments in venues varying from courtyards to concert halls. The book also provides descriptions of the periods in music history and uses specific pieces by composers as examples of the growing ensemble over time. While some of the information presented might be too detailed for younger readers, they will still enjoy the illustrations and be able to learn the names of the instruments.

Krull, Kathleen. *M is for Music*. Illus. by Stacy Innerst. Harcourt, 2003. 56p.

This is an alphabet book featuring music-related terms. “Aa is for anthem and accordion,” and also *allegro*, *alto*, *aria*, *a capella*, and Armstrong (Louis). This book seamlessly combines the worlds of jazz, classical, and pop music (Elvis, The Beatles, Beethoven, Prokofiev, and Frank Zappa all make appearances) to provide an education of the alphabet and of musical terms, song lyrics, musicians and unusual instruments. Most of these terms will be new to children; a glossary defines many of the words floating in the watercolor illustrations. This is a rare book that celebrates the diversity of music.

Kuskin, Karla. *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed*. Illus. by Marc Simont. Harper & Row, 1982. 44p.

The Philharmonic Gets Dressed tells the story of the New York Philharmonic as ninety-two men and thirteen women bathe, dress in black and white, and head downtown to work. The tension builds throughout the story as the reader is taken through every single step the orchestra members take before they are completely ready. At exactly 8:30 pm they are joined by a man with wavy black and white hair, and begin to work—by playing music. The suspense created throughout the story lends an air of mystery and excitement to what could be a very boring process for children, and the lyrical prose imitates a musical phrase in a gentle and subtle way. The cartoonlike illustrations show the musicians throughout the evening. This book introduces children to the orchestra in a very unusual and creative way.

Moss, Lloyd. *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin*. Illus. by Marjorie Priceman. Simon & Schuster Books for

Young Readers, paper, 1995. 32p.

ALSC Notable Book 1996

Caldecott Honor Book 1996

This rhyming picture book introduces the reader to the names of instrumental chamber ensembles—such as solo, duo, trio, quartet, etc—one by one while also introducing the look and sound of the instruments through clever alliteration (“the flute sends our soul a-shiver”). The illustrations are big and bright and tell the story not only of the instruments, but of the musicians who play (and also in some cases resemble) them. Reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec, the pictures show the musicians in their formal attire but they still appear approachable as they swoop across the **pages**. Again, this book uses rhythm to create easily memorized verse for children and is useful both as a counting book (“TWO, now THREE-O, what a TRIO!”) as well as an introduction to the orchestral instruments.

Raffi’s *Songs to Read* series. Currently in-print books include:

***Down By the Bay.* Illus. by Nadine Bernard Westcott. Crown, paper, 1988. 32p.**

***Shake My Sillies Out.* Illus. by David Allender. Crown, paper, 1988. 32 p.**

***Wheels on the Bus.* Illus. by Sylvie Kantorovitz Wickstrom. Crown, paper, 1990. 32p.**

***Baby Beluga.* Illus. by Ashley Wolff. Crown, paper, 1992. 32p.**

***Five Little Ducks.* Illus. by Jose Aruego and Ariane Dewey. Crown, paper, 1992. 32p.**

***Spider On the Floor.* Illus. by True Kelley. Crown, paper, 1996. 32p.**

***If You’re Happy and You Know It.* Illus. by Cyd Moore. Knopf, 2007. 32p.**

Raffi’s music and books are wonderful tools for young readers and singers. Using repetition,

rhyiming, and rhythm, these songs are easy to learn. The illustrations help the young reader associate words with what they see in the pictures. Melody line and chords are included so the songs can be played. Many of the songs (particularly *Down By the Bay* and *Shake My Sillies Out*) encourage creativity through making up new verses. The illustrators vary from book to book, but the pictures are consistently bright and quirky. The same qualities that make Raffi's songs easy to sing also make them easy to read, and introduce readers to the principles behind beginning reading: "story, sequence of events, rhyme, and rhythm" (from the back cover of *Spider On the Floor*).

Recent Titles

Costanza, Stephen. *Mozart Finds a Melody*. Illus. by the author. Henry Holt, 2004. 40p.

When the young Wolfgang Amadeus has writer's block, he tries everything to find inspiration. He sings standing on his head and plays the violin in his bathtub. It is not until his hungry pet starling, Miss Bimms, begins to sing that Mozart has an idea for his piano concerto.

Unfortunately, Miss Bimms escapes through the window, and Mozart sets off to search Vienna for his pet. The sounds of the city—carts, geese, vendors, and other noises—inspire Mozart to write his piece. During the premiere concert, Miss Bimms recognizes her song and flies to the concert hall to be reunited with Mozart. In addition to introducing young readers to Mozart, this book is also another good example of finding music in everyday life. The story is enhanced by Costanza's sepia-tone illustrations, and the cartoonish boy Mozart (who one reviewer compared to a "Cabbage Patch doll") is easily relatable to children.⁸

Garriel, Barbara S. *I Know a Shy Fellow Who Swallowed a Cello*. Illus. by John O'Brien. Boyd's Mill Press, 2004. 32p.

I Know a Shy Fellow... is a variation on the traditional ditty "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly," but this time the protagonist has accomplished the even more unlikely feat of swallowing an instrumental ensemble. He starts with the cello but moves on to the saxophone, the fiddle, the kazoo, a harp, and a bell. Garriel uses the ditty to describe the sounds of the instruments; when the main character swallows a cello, the narrator muses, "Perhaps he'll bellow." When his stomach has finally had enough, he begins to belch (music notes, of course) until the offending instruments come out. Out of his mouth "buzzed the kazoo" and so forth until at last "out cha-chaed the cello!" The shy fellow's shape changes with each bell and harp he imbibes, but by the end of the story he has returned to his svelte self. This is a fine book for memorization, and the amusing illustrations will engage young readers.

George-Warren, Holly. *Shake, Rattle, and Roll: The Founders of Rock & Roll*. 2001. Illus. by Laura Levine. Sandpiper, paper, 2004. 32p.

While many picture books introduce young readers to classical musicians and their instruments, this is one of the few about rock and rollers. This collective biography gives brief overviews of fourteen rockers, from Bill Haley (and the Comets) to James Brown. The illustrations are folk-artsy and set in "found object" frames. The individual bios avoid some of the racier episodes (Elvis's pelvis, Jerry Lee Lewis's controversial marriage, Chuck Berry's later-life scandal) and focus on their childhoods and hit songs. A great introduction to the pioneers of rock.

Gollub, Matthew. *The Jazz Fly*. Illus. by Karen Hanke. Tortuga Press, 2000. 30p.

This is yet another story that shows the music of everyday life, but this time the “music” comes from animal sounds. A fly is running late to a gig and asks for directions from a frog, a pig, a donkey, and a dog. They all speak different languages, so the fly is left to himself to find the club. Once there, the Queen Bee demands a new type of beat, “or this band is OUT!” The fly remembers the “Rrrribit” and “Oink” of those he met earlier that night, and turns their directions into a scat which makes his band famous. The nonsense animal words in this story will be fun for children to recite out loud, and the suit-wearing fly is an excellent guide to the musicality of the animal world. The book is accompanied by a CD with jazz music and narration by the author.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *A Band of Angels*. 1999. Illus. by Raul Colon. Aladdin, paper, 2002. 40p.

This book is a fictionalized biography of Ella Sheppard Moore, a freed slave girl who accompanied and sang with Fisk School’s Jubilee Singers. In 1871, music teacher George White took the singers on a tour to raise money to keep Fisk open. The choir significantly increased their popularity when they began singing “jubilee” (spiritual) songs. The Jubilee Singers eventually sang for Queen Victoria and President Ulysses S. Grant, and raised enough funds to build Fisk University and Jubilee Hall. Told from the point of view of Ella’s great-great-granddaughter, this book not only shows the power of music, but also gives readers a historical lesson in post-Civil War black history. Told from the voice of a child, it is relatable to young

readers. The illustrations beautifully show the choir in action.

Johnson, Angela. *Violet's Music*. Illus. by Laura Huliska-Beith. Dial Books for Young Readers, 2004. 32p.

Violet was literally born a musician—she began banging her rattle within hours of her birth. Growing up, she thought about and played music all the time, from her self-made horn to her guitar a few years later. Violet saw that other children had passions too—like arts and crafts or playing in the sandbox—but no one cared about music quite like she did. Her family encouraged her to keep playing.

One day while playing her guitar in the park, she met a drummer, a saxophone player, and a singer. These children also never gave up playing their instruments or looking for others like them. Johnson includes onomatopoeia and rhythmic verse to move the story along in a musical manner, and the bright illustrations add to the energy of the book. This book also spreads the message that moving to your own beat is OK.

Lach, Dr. William. *Can You Hear It?* Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006. 39p.

Produced with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this book pairs great works of art with great works of classical music. The included CD has twelve short pieces on it and asks readers to listen for specific sounds, like the “gun battle” in Aaron Copland’s *Billy the Kid* with a painting by Frederic Remington, or the buzzing bees in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Flight of the Bumble Bee* paired with Utagawa Hiroshige’s painting *Chrysanthemums*. This book helps young readers

make connections between the sounds they hear and the things they see, and is as much an introduction to art history as it is to classical music. Factual information about instruments, artists, and composers is also included.

McPhail, David. *Mole Music*. Illus. by the author. Holt, 1999. 32p.

After hearing someone play a violin on TV, Mole wants to learn how to play too. At first, Mole's screechy playing almost kills the tree that grows above his hole. But soon Mole is playing even better than the musician from the TV, and the tree above him thrives. Mole imagines that his playing will make people happy and maybe even spread peace throughout the world. Little does he know that he has already accomplished his goal; the tree above his hole is so calm and happy that people and animals flock to be near it.

Most of McPhail's beautiful watercolor illustrations split the page between Mole's home underground and the world above. This book encourages young musicians to keep practicing and carries the message that music can powerfully affect the world.

Weatherford, Carole Boston. *Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane*. Illus. by Sean Qualls. Henry Holt, 2008. 32p.

ALSC Notable Books List

Coretta Scott King Honor Book 2009

The large text sprawling across the pages in this fictionalized biography of a young John Coltrane will remind the reader of jazz itself. "Before John was a Jazz Giant" is a repeated

refrain throughout the book, like a jazz melody. John pays attention to the sounds around him: hymns, trains, dancers, and the sounds of his busy Southern house. The book ends with “Before John was a jazz giant...he was all ears,” a lesson to readers that John was a listener before he was a performer. This book is yet another example of the music we can find in our everyday lives, as well as an introduction to a true jazz legend. The use of Coltrane as a curious child will relate to young readers, as will the simple collage-style illustrations.

Wheeler, Lisa. *Jazz Baby*. Illus. by R. Gregory Christie. Harcourt, 2007. 40p.

ALSC Notable Books List 2008

Jazz Baby is a rhythmic, song-like book that should be read aloud to be fully appreciated.

“Grandpa TOOT-TOOTS, Grandma sings scat. Bitty-boppin baby goes RAT-TAT-TAT.” The entire family joins in the song until the baby is tired and has to take a nap. This is another book that will be easy for children to chant along with thanks to the repetitive rhyming structure. The text appears in bold letters all around the characters and will be easy for beginning readers to identify. The illustrations show brightly colored and happy people moving and making music, and young readers will want to do the same.

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