

Musical Books for Kids

by **Hilary Field**

One way to be musical with children is through books. There are illustrated books of songs, books with strong rhythms and lyrical poetry, and for older children, informative books about the history and styles of music. Here are some that my family has enjoyed.

Sandra Boynton has wonderful board books to share with the youngest set. Boynton uses words that are so rhythmic and musical they practically dance off the page. As the animals gather to swing and sway in *Barnyard Dance*, it is hard not to feel like a square dance caller while reading: “stand with the donkey, slide with the sheep, scramble with the little chicks — cheep, cheep, cheep! With a Neigh and a Moo and a Cockadoodledoo, another little promenade two by two!” Dance with the animals as they prepare for bed in *Pajama Time*: “Pajammy to the left. Pajammy to the right. (Jamma jamma jamma jamma P! J!) Everybody’s wearing them for dancing tonight. (Jamma jamma jamma jamma P! J!)...It is Pajama Time, (Hush, Hush) it is Pajama Time, (Hush, Hush.) It’s Pajama Time! (Shhhhhhhhhhh.)”

The partnership of Eric Carle and Bill Martin Jr. has produced classic children’s literature. The very well known *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See* has a lovely lilt to the text, accompanied by Carle’s outstanding illustrations. Another Bill Martin Jr. book, this time written with John Archambault and illustrated by James Endicott, is *Listen to the Rain*. This lyrical book is a poem describing the sounds of the world when it rains, from “the slow soft sprinkle, the drip-drop tinkle, the first wet whisper of the rain” to “the lightning-flashing thunder-crashing sounding pounding roaring rain, leaving all outdoors a muddle, a mishy mushy muddy puddle.”

Mother Goose is always a favorite. Many of these very familiar nursery songs and chants use a strong sense of meter and rhyme. Bouncing infants or toddlers on your lap while reading helps them to absorb the steady beat and sense of meter. Preschoolers will have fun substituting words and rhymes while they start to understand the concept of phonics. Of course, some Mother Goose rhymes are politically incorrect for today’s world, such as the rhyme about the old woman who lived in a shoe, who would certainly be a candidate for a call from children’s social services. We just skip over those.

From recitatives to rap music, words have always played a major part in the rhythm of music. There are a number of children’s books that are strongly rhythmic and fun to read aloud. There is a definite feeling of duple time in the alphabet book, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, written by the aforementioned team of Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault, and illustrated by Lois Ehlert. “A told B and B told C, I’ll meet you at the top of the coconut tree. Whee! Said D to E F G, I’ll beat you to the top of the coconut tree. Chicka Chicka Boom Boom! Will there be enough room?” In Bruce Deegan’s *Jamberry*, the rhymes lilt in three-quarter time as a bear and a boy romp in berry fields. “One berry, Two berry, Pick me a blueberry,...Raspberry, Jazzberry, Razzmatazzberry, Berryband, Merryband, Jamming in Berryland.” In *Freight Train* by Donald Crews, the text chugs along like a train, with very simple and rhythmic words. “A train runs across this track. Red caboose at the back. ” Trains are a favorite with children and they will love following the train as it moves along to the end: “Moving in darkness. Moving in daylight. Going, going... gone.”

Iza Trapani has a series of books of familiar nursery rhymes and songs that she has retold and illustrated in delightful and whimsical ways. *Shoo Fly, Don’t Bother Me* tells the story of a little mouse and a terribly bothersome fly. Twelve new verses follow the mouse and the fly through their day, until their parents finally tuck them into bed (“I belong to somebody.”) In Trapani’s *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, the star answers a little girl and takes her on a magical journey. Trapani’s series includes other classic nursery songs, such as *Itsy Bitsy Spider* and *I’m a Little Teapot*. This is a fun spin on these very well known songs, and a nice way to add interest to your children’s song collection.

Another great thing about illustrated books of songs is that you do not have to remember all the words, just sing them as you read the book! *Going to the Zoo*, a classic Tom Paxton song, is available as an

illustrated book by Karen Lee Schmidt. Kids love to go the zoo and the catchy chorus is likely to get them to sing along. Dad and kids take a trip to the zoo and visit the bears, lions, kangaroos and others, until an exhausted family heads home and decides “Mommy’s taking us to the zoo tomorrow, zoo tomorrow, zoo tomorrow.”

All the Pretty Little Horses, a Traditional Lullaby, stands out for its sheer aesthetic beauty. Linda Saport illustrates this famous American lullaby with gorgeous scenes of a mother rocking and comforting her child with images of “when you wake, you’ll have cake, and all the pretty little horses.” Another beautiful book is *My Favorite Things*, illustrated by Renée Graef. Graef does a wonderful job illustrating this Rodgers and Hammerstein song from the beloved musical movie, “The Sound of Music.” Unlike some children’s books, where the illustrations are somewhat like cartoons, these two books have an artistic value that children and adults will find attractive and moving.

Zin, Zin, A Violin, written by Lloyd Moss and illustrated by Marjorie Priceman, begins with the “mournful moan and silken tone of one trombone” and continues to add instruments to the chamber ensemble. “The strings all soar, the reeds implore, the brasses roar with notes galore. It’s music that we all adore. It’s what we go to concerts for.” This colorful book is a playful and musical way to teach the instruments of the orchestra and the names of different musical groups. Another fine book to help introduce children to the orchestra is *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* by Anita Ganeri and Ben Kingsley. This book comes with an accompanying CD of Benjamin Britten’s composition as well as Dukas’s “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.”

For a taste of jazz, try *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* by Chris Raschka. The text of this book is inspired by a recording of Parker’s “A Night in Tunisia” — “Charlie Parker played be bop. Charlie Parker played saxophone. The music sounded like be bop. Never leave your cat alone.” The phrases and refrains bring out the syncopated rhythms and riffs of jazz: “Alphabet alphabet, alphabet, alph, Chickadee, chickadee, chickadee, chick, Overshoes, overshoes, overshoes, o, Reeti-footi, reeti-footi, reeti-footi, ree.”

These are just a sampling of the many musical and rhythmic books for children. Many of these books include the music and some have accompanying recordings. Books are a wonderful way to engage in musical play with children, regardless of one’s own musical experience. Many adults naturally read to children with a sense of rhythm, accent, dynamics, tempo and inflection, all of which are important parts of a child’s musical development. Have fun reading while you chant, bounce, sing and play!

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For additional titles of children’s books about music and dance, see Becky Nankivell’s article “Dance and Music in Literature — with Pictures” in the CDSS News, #138 September/October 1997 and the letters from Emily Flouton and Susan Booker in issues #139 and #140, respectively.

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