

# ***Research on the Role of Orff Music Education in Music Therapy: The Case of Autistic Children***

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**Abstract:** Since the 1950s, Orff's music education career has developed rapidly in various fields, especially after 1963, when Orff's music education system developed into "music therapy". This article uses the literature research method and the case study method to introduce the "elementary" of Orff's music ideas and how Orff's music integrates language, movement, and music to enable autistic children to develop physically and mentally through feeling and experiencing music. As a result of this paper, it is shown that Orff music therapy is a comprehensive art therapy approach that usually combines singing, composing, and dancing in a therapeutic manner. It positive effects on improving the language expression, physical coordination, and social skills of children with autism.

**Keywords:** Orff music therapy, autism, children, music education

## **1. Introduction**

Music therapy, as an emerging arts intervention, is uniquely effective in intervening with children with autism. Since the 1960s, Orff's music activities have been widely used in educational interventions and treatments for children with autism, and a well-established model of music therapy has been developed. Orff music therapy is a therapeutic model for the treatment of psychological dysfunction in children with special needs, designed to help them better participate in music therapy activities and express their inner feelings. In national and international studies related to music therapy for children on the autism spectrum, the most of the previous researchers in Orff music therapy have studied at the theoretical level, with less empirical research on autism interventions and less research on specific treatment approaches. This study is based on the literature-based research method, which analyzes both theoretical and practical aspects of the collected literature. This study introduces the principles of Orff music therapy and focuses on the practical application of the Orff music method to children with autism, describing the application process in terms of somatic rhythms and game methods.

This study found that the rich activities of Orff music therapy provide children with autism with opportunities for perception, body rhythms, language expression, and emotional resonance, and can effectively promote their development in all areas of language communication, physical coordination, and social interaction.

Orff's therapeutic model is also multi-sensory in that it elicits different stimuli and responses in the auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic senses of the person. In this therapeutic process, each child

has the ability to feel and experience music, and to develop physically and emotionally in a healthy way.

## **2. The Concept of Orff Music Education**

The Orff method of music therapy is based on the Orff system of music education. The core of its ideology is the “holistic art”, which is a musical behavior education method that integrates music, dance, language and rhythm [1].

“Elementary Music” is the core of Orff’s educational philosophy, and Orff refers to his musical ideas in his “Children’s Music Textbook”: “What is elementary?” Elementary Latin is ‘elementarius’, meaning ‘belonging to the basic elements, the original material, the original starting point, suitable for the beginning.’ Elementary music is more than just music. It is a form of music in which people must participate themselves, not as listeners but as performers. “Prior to the intellect, elementary music is close to the soil, natural, organic, learned and experienced by everyone, and suitable for children.” We can learn from this that the “Elementary” concept of music education is the closest to the natural, original human state. It is an integrated art that combines language, dance, and music into one. In this kind of integrated art teaching, students are not only listeners, but also subjects of teaching, actively participating as performers. In music teaching activities, students sing, dance, and play music at the same time. This creative and flexible way of participation can easily stimulate children’s interest in music and allow students to actively participate in educational activities, which greatly meets the needs of children’s psychological development.

In addition, Orff said, “Teaching begins with improvisation, which takes the rhythmic form as its fulcrum, and ends with the fixation of tones and the notation of results.” Improvisation is the oldest and most natural form of musical expression, and is the most direct form of emotional expression. Improvisation is an autonomous act of active exploration and imaginative enrichment, rather than a criterion of whether the child has achieved a passing grade in the activity. Therefore, in children’s music education, it is the process of learning that is important, not just the outcome.

## **3. Characteristics of Children with Autism**

Autism significantly affects verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions, and children usually have symptoms by age 3 [2]. Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by a triad of symptoms: qualitative impairments in social interaction, qualitative impairment in communication, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behaviors, activities, and interests [3].

It has been shown that behaviors such as mimetic synchronization during musical experiences in autistic children activate areas of the brain that coincide with areas of the brain that contain most of the mirror neuron system, making various forms of musical experiences important for the treatment of children with autism and other developmental disorders [4].

Although children with autism produce developmental delays in language development, physical coordination, emotional and affective control, and other developmental phenomena, their sensitivity and memory for music, imitation during musical activities, and other behaviors have guided researchers in a clear direction in finding effective treatments for children with autism.

## **4. The Positive Effects of Orff Music on Children with Autism**

Orff music therapy has many advantages for autism intervention treatment, it can improve the language, cognitive ability, social interaction ability and other advantages of children on the autism spectrum, through the collection of children on the autism spectrum to participate in music therapy activities, in the process of interaction and communication with other children, imitate and follow

each other, so as to improve their communication skills, and strengthen their life skills, cognitive ability [5]. The following paper describes the positive effects of Orff music therapy on children with autism, specifically in terms of verbal communication skills, physical coordination skills, and social communication skills.

#### **4.1. Improve Verbal Communication Skills**

The primary focus of the Orff method is not on the rational transmission of knowledge and skills but on a natural and direct appeal to the senses. The primary focus of the Orff approach is not on the rational transfer of knowledge and skills, but rather on the natural and direct appeal to the senses. Children with autism are actively immersed in direct sensory influences and develop non-musical skills, such as language skills. The flexible nature of Orff teaching, which integrates music into children's songs, poems, rhythms, appreciation, and games to stimulate students' musical potential, is highly relevant and applicable to children with autism. It is highly relevant and applicable to children with autism.

Years of research have shown that about 50% of children with autism never acquire functional language [6]. Children with autism often have problems with speech production, which is characterized by slurred speech, low speech volume and abnormal intonation. According to research, this condition is related to the wrong use of vocal style and breath control, as well as the innate lack of control of the oral muscles for speech intonation abnormalities. Singing training is undoubtedly one of the most suitable training methods. Patients can learn to control their breath, distinguish tones, and acquire more vocabulary through singing songs. The vocal style of singing also improves the tension of the child's oral muscles, allowing for greater control of the oral muscles. These exercises can trigger tactile, neurological and auditory feedback in the child, the final result is to improve the language function of children with autism and to be able to have basic communication skills [7].

#### **4.2. Improve Physical Coordination**

Using the body as a musical instrument, we tap into one's innate sense of rhythm through movement to experience and develop a sharper sense of rhythm. For children, the coordination and response of the body and mind at this age are suitable for this type of rhythmic training combined with movement [8]. Patients perform body rhythms to music to help restore a sense of physical coordination and improve body movement. In addition, the therapist selects different Orff instruments for the patient to quickly integrate into the music according to the designed goals. Orff instruments are relatively easy to master and play very well to quickly capture the patient's attention, so Orff instruments are adapted to children with autism with varying conditions. Patients can exercise the development of upper limb muscles and feel the rhythm of music deeply through playing musical instruments, which brings patients a sense of achievement and increases self-confidence. In addition, Orff music therapy activities include running, jumping, body slapping, and foot stomping. In this activity, patients can increase eye contact with the therapist or other individuals, and also stimulate their own natural rhythmic potential. Bruscia, K. E., believes that these activities can elicit tactile and neurological stimulation and feedback, and improve self-expression and cooperation [9].

#### **4.3. Improve Social Communication Skills**

Music can be used as a backdrop for play activities. The feelings, stories or rhythms conveyed by music can be used as a backdrop for play activities, and children with autism can have a positive effect on social interactions by performing musical activities such as role plays and musical scenarios. Specific studies have shown that the Orff music therapy approach can significantly improve the social interaction of children with autism in a therapeutic setting [10]. Liu Fengqin conducted a case study

on children with autism through musical songs such as “Hello Song” and “Goodbye Song” as well as musical games, and concluded that music therapy was effective in enhancing their social interaction skills and initially establishing a sense of rules [11].

#### 4.4. Improve Ability to Concentrate

Inattention is a symptom that occurs in almost all individuals with autism. People with autism have difficulty allocating their attention to faces and recognizing them, making it difficult for them to search for faces in a crowd compared to normal people [12]. Orff’s musical rhythms enable children with autism to imagine and self-express, while increasing the experience of interaction with people, thus increasing the duration of sustained attention. Rhythmic training is important for the development of long-term attention and joint attention, and for the improvement of concentration skills. In their report after applying music therapy to children with autism, it was noted that music has many effects on children with autism including the ability to replace other activities for persistent or ritualistic behaviors through musical activities and play activities. Selecting activities that capture their interest, engaging their attention and interest in learning can replace poor persistence [13].

#### 5. Conclusion

Orff music therapy provides children with autism with opportunities for expressive communication, emotional empathy, music perception, and music creation, facilitating their positive development in social communication, language training, and physical coordination. Although the use of Orff music therapy as an intervention for children with autism has been commonly used and accepted, it is not well developed and systematic for children with autism whose individual circumstances vary widely. And there is a lack of measurement and assessment methods specifically designed for children on the autism spectrum that could further enrich the measurement and assessment regarding the social adjustment of children on the autism spectrum. This study is mainly about exploring the positive effects of Orff music therapy for children with autism. Due to the limitations of research time and research conditions, this study has some shortcomings in theoretical and practical aspects, and there is still room for improvement.

It is believed that with the continuous development of Orff music therapy techniques, Orff music therapy will be more effective for children on the autism spectrum, which will have better results.

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