



Music Manifesto Case Study #1 - William

- William is three
- He enjoys singing *Old MacDonald* and *Zoom, Zoom, Zoom, We're Going To The moon*
- His favourite mealtime music is anything by Louis Armstrong, and a jazz version *In A Persian Market*
- Sounds he likes include pipes, trumpets and real pianos. close up
- Sounds he doesn't like include toy pianos – and nursery rhymes played on the lute
- His favourite musical game is choosing the playing order of the tracks on his CD of songs

The first sounds William 'heard' were probably the vibrations of a lute body on his mother's belly. He was inside at the time... William's mum is a professional lutenist – not your everyday sort of occupation, but one which brings an interesting perspective to early childhood musical experiences. His parents are resisting any temptation to put William in a musical hot house and they would be the first to spot any inkling of musical precocity. It's early days yet; William is only just three.

But he's learning fast. He understands that musical activity is the one thing which diverts his mother's attention away from himself and so he's worked out some diversionary routines which aim to put her right. **"If my parents enjoy this, then it's not for my benefit,"** thinks William. So he vociferously objects to 'plucky' sounds, either live or on disc – except, oddly enough, for banjo and guitar, neither of which can be found in the house.

Attention-seeking is fair enough at this age; what is more interesting is his emerging musical independence. It's not just an anti-parent stance but specific preferences, expressed with increasing sophistication. And in-car entertainment appears to be a major factor in this, perhaps because that's where much of the daily routine takes place. When William first began to talk he would ask for his children's song album incessantly, the multiple repetitions of *How Much Is That Doggie?* driving his mum mad.

Is this the comfort of familiarity or intensely detailed exploration? "The doggie song" came to mean either the song itself or a generic name for any CD of 'his' music. Very soon **"the doggie song"** became **"my song"**. The flip side of his musical possessiveness is an increasing rejection ("switch it off", "don't like it", "hate it") of anything outside his familiar repertoire. Is there a picture emerging here? Long plateaux of comfort listening interspersed with short bursts of exploration – being caught unawares.

After about a year, William began to exercise his emerging DJ skills, asking for specific tracks in a certain order (displaying both a significant grasp of basic CD technology and



Music Manifesto Case Study #1 - William

an encyclopaedic memory): “**First I want the *Magic Dragon ... after Lily The Pink I’m going to tell you to switch it off***”. As his mum says: “He soon picked up that he could command me to play the songs in any order. You may wonder how I managed to drive the car too but we haven’t crashed yet”.

Songs he can call his own – clear beat, clear tune, clear harmony. Classical music – especially vocal – baroque and trad jazz. “**Louis Armstrong is loved and guaranteed to quell all but the most resolute of tears,**” says mum.

I used to play nursery rhymes on the lute for us both to sing. Then I was told just to sing them and not play. Stupidly I used to sneak in the odd cadential formula as a way of practising for two seconds but William soon realised what I was up to as the versions on CD or at playgroup don’t have Elizabethan-type trills in them. “**Bye bye lute**” was one of his first connected phrases, aged about one and a bit’.

Lute? Here’s where things take an unusual turn, for William lives in a family where lutes and theorbos and recorders and all the common technical language of the professional early music world is the lingua franca. And it is for William also. He knows what everything is and how it’s played. He’ll correct an unsuspecting adult who mistakes a theorbo for a chitarrone, and he’ll express opinions: “**Don’t like Rameau,**” for example. This is the musical bath in which he floats. He probably assumes that the rest of world knows all this as well. He sings in tune and keeps a beat simply because he’s never heard any examples of poor singing or bad time-keeping.

Yet it’s not the bath of his choosing! His toy piano is used only for exploring the different timbres possible on the autoplay mode, with no interest in actually working the keys. He’ll make for a real piano with enthusiasm, though – possibly to enjoy the physicality of the resonances. And he loves singing in playgroup – early awareness of ensemble attractions? Especially when he gets to choose which songs: *Old MacDonald, Zoom, Zoom, Zoom* or *Wheels On The Bus*.

Has there been – even at this young age – an ‘aha’ moment? “He was transfixed by a student choir during a summer school I was teaching at. “**I want to hear the singing,**” he said. That more than makes up for “**bye bye lute**””.