

Songs of Their Lives: Similarities in Interviews with Elders about Singing and Songs

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Overview & Methodology

Previous studies have focused primarily on the effects of aging on music cognition (Halpern & Bartlett, 2002), music therapy for aging populations (Halpern et al, 2000), and issues concerning music, wisdom and spirituality in aging populations (e.g., Neyzi, 2002). Yet, less attention has been paid to discussing current singing practices of and songs sung by elderly people.

The purpose of this study was to identify, collect, analyze, and discuss pedagogical implications of songs of elderly persons living in a large, ethnically diverse urban center. Of particular interest was the sung repertoire and its meaning for elderly men and women, as well as their relationships to cultural transmission and intergenerational learning.

Two fieldworkers interviewed eight elders over the age of 65. Videos and recorded interviews were then transcribed and data analyzed. Korean, Hispanic, and Anglo ethnic groups living in Los Angeles participated in this study.

Research Questions

- What do elders recall about singing at different times in their lives?
- How, when, and where did they learn these songs?
- What are repertoires situated in chronological time and do elders attribute special moments to them?
- What types of songs do elderly person choose to sing as elders?
- Do elders sing to younger generations in their families or communities?

Findings:

Songs & Artists Remembered by Elders

English Pop-Songs

Autumn Leaves
Que Sera Sera
Changing Partner
Moon River
Can't Live Without You
Green Green Glass of Home
I Can't Stop Loving You
Oh Danny Boy
Too Young
You Are My Sunshine
High Noon

American Singers

Yves Montand
Jim Reeves
Nat King Cole
Patti Page
Elvis Presley
Frank Sinatra
Mario Lanza

Mariachi & Garden Musicians

Jarave dance music

Songs Sung in Church

Ave Maria
Amazing Grace

Folksongs

Santa Lucia
Swanne River
Carry me back to old
Virginny

Songs from School

Happy Wanderer
Rock Around the Clock
Red River Valley

Participants

#	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Country of Birth	Occupations	Formal Musical Experiences	Interested in Singing in a Group as Elders
1	93	F	H	Costa Rica	Flight attendant	Church choir (childhood)	Yes
2	88	F	H	Guadalajara	Grape picker; Packing company	None	Yes
3	75	M	W	United States	Air traffic controller	Trumpet	No
4	74	F	A	South Korea	Educator; Business person	Auto harp lesson (60s); Church choir (40s-now)	No
5	72	M	A	South Korea	Business person; Pastor	Church choir (30s; 60s-now)	Yes
6	70	M	A	South Korea	Educator; Pastor	None	Yes
7	69	M	W	United States	Electronics assembly	Voice lessons as elder	Yes
8	67	F	A	South Korea	Educator	Piano lesson (40s)	No

Data Highlights: Similarities

Elders want to be social and involved with music, but do not know how to find opportunities.

"There should be a place for old people to go and enjoy music..."

Elders feel lack of common songs to be shared with their children/ grandchild.

"I wish I can do something musically with my grandchildren, but their things are just so different from our things..."

Primary listening device for some elders is RADIO; for others it is computers-MP3s.

"We never listened to anything but the radio when we were growing up - the electricity was on only in the morning and at night, never during the day..."

Challenged by trying to remember titles of music they love or have loved.

"[humming a tune] you know this song?... la la la~ it's you, it's you... Well... I don't remember..."

Elders have little trouble describing what they do not like.

"I don't like rap..."

Interviewees who do not have music in their elder lives wish for it.

"Music is only for young people because young people don't like old music..."

Discussion

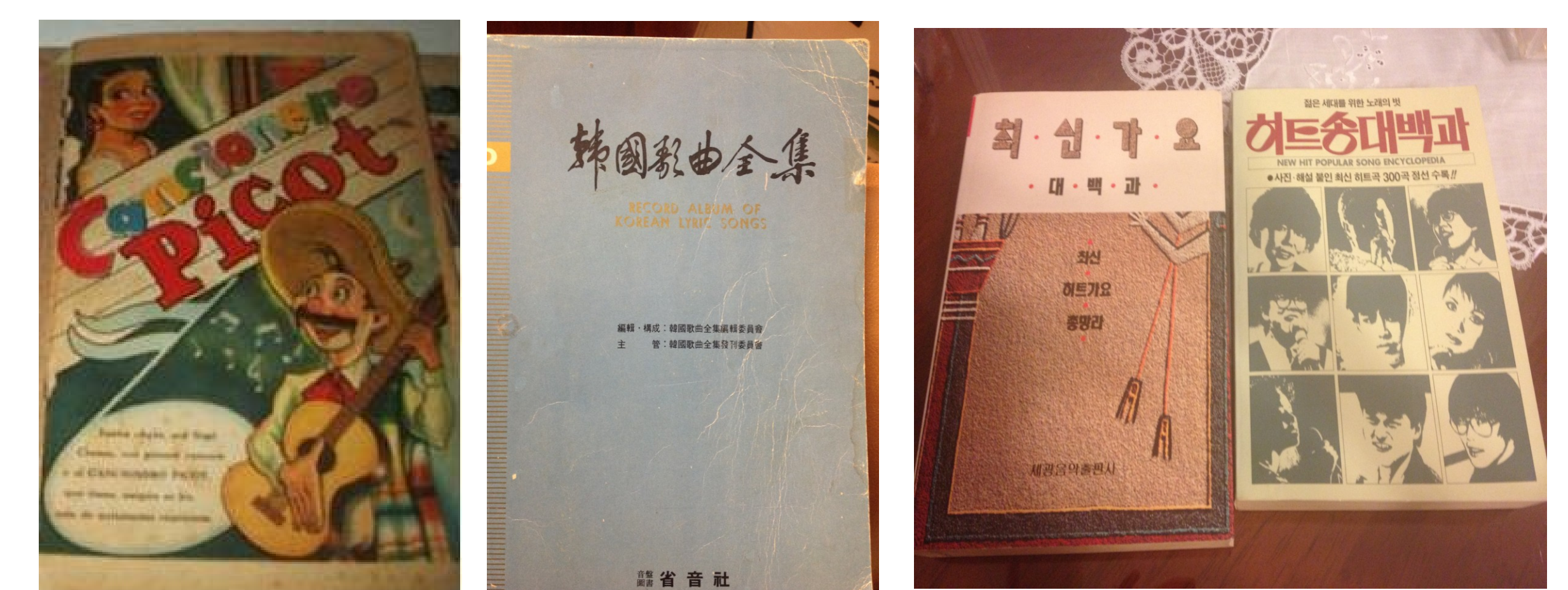
❖ In spite of the many claims regarding the prominence and importance of music in the daily lives of the elderly (Gibbons, 1998), little is known about current singing practices of aging populations.

Interviewees reported little interaction with singing as elders while some elders have made music a lifelong focus. Many expressed their wants to expand their musical experiences.

❖ Very few studies have centered on musicological descriptions of repertoires that the elderly who live in urban centers choose to sing or the reasons for such choices.

Some interviewees brought songbooks that were printed more than 50 years ago. These were the songs of greatest importance to them in their youth and remain so today.

❖ Despite having liked various genres of songs over their lifetime (Harrison & Ryan, 2010), **elders' song preferences seemed to settle as they reached older age. In many cases, their current song preferences matched with their musical taste in their youth.**



Implications for Further Study

❖ With the dramatic increase of aging populations, various music programs in which elders may socially engage and make music may be needed. Also, since many interviewees expressed a lack of information about community music programs, ways to make the information accessible to elders should be carefully considered.

❖ Musical interactions between older and younger generations appeared to be very limited, even within a family, however, some interviewees expressed a desire to have some common musical interests with younger generations. Music educators may consider creating opportunities for transmission of elders' musical tastes and expertise to younger generations, which may nurture communicative musical experiences.

❖ More research related to elders' current singing practices as well as musical taste may be needed. Further research may greatly inform music educators related to elders' current musical needs and wants, which may help design and prepare more adequate music programs for aging populations.

❖ Most of the songs elders remembered were from their youth. Some interviewees recalled specific memories along with the emotions associated with songs.

❖ Many interviewees responded that those songs are still their favorite songs, which they often listen to, think about, or can still sing.

❖ Other songs mentioned during interviews were children's songs, popular songs from their immigrants' homelands, religious songs, and Western classical music.