# Playing for Change: The Performative Functions of Children's Piano Play

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In an iconic scene from the 1988 film, *Big*, actors Tom Hanks and Robert Loggia leap from key to key on an enlarged foot-operated electronic keyboard as they perform in duet two piano pieces: "Chopsticks" and "Heart and Soul." For Hanks, playing the role of a 12-year-old boy magically transformed into a 30-year-old adult after wishing "to be big," the performance represents an outward manifestation of the inner-turmoil brought on by pre-pubescent size- and age-anxiety. As a child suddenly trapped within an adult's body, this form of play, I call "piano play," also represents a brief moment of liberation wherein for the first time in the film, Hanks appears comfortable negotiating the complexities of the incompatible worlds that he is trapped in, and yet, torn between: the world of childhood, characterized by carefree innocence and play; and the world of adulthood, characterized by work and responsibility.

This scene is effective at conveying Hanks' inner-turmoil because similar impromptu concerts are performed daily, flash-mob style, by children at pianos around the world and are recognized, around the world, as children songs. Search results on the popular video website, Youtube.com, include pages of shaky home videos of children teaching, performing, or improvising versions of "Chopsticks," "Heart and Soul," or "The Knuckle Song." Such results are consistent with my personal experience and observations made as a student of the piano, as an instructor in South Korea, as a father, and as a Boy Scout leader. For example, in 2003 I was teaching English at a South Korean HagWon (Academy) when two boys snuck out of class and into an adjacent, unoccupied piano classroom. When discovered, the boys gave me a mischievous smile and only came back to class after playing a variation of "Chopsticks." More recently, while monitoring the chaos of a recently concluded Cub Scout den meeting, I watched as young scouts ran around in unorganized play. A scout made his way over to a piano, sat down, and began hammering an "F' with his left hand and a "G" with his right hand. The repeating notes reverberating throughout the meeting room were the same notes I heard in the South Korea HagWon and that I watched Tom Hanks play on *Big*. As the boy finished his version of "Chopsticks," he barely had time to stand up before being pushed aside by another boy who sat down and played, in classic one-upmanship, the same song, although this time faster and much, *much* louder.

The universality of this type musical performance brought to my mind many questions. Is this folklore? Is this a musical performance, a form of play, or both? Why do children, especially children without formal piano training, learn and perform these songs on the piano? If these children are musically illiterate, a characterization that suggests the songs are not learned through music primers, how then are these songs transmitted from child to child, group to group? Who do these "pianists" intend to be the audience—in the case of the observed cub scouts, the other scouts or the adults in the room? Finally, what are the performative

functions of "piano play" and how do children use "piano play" to negotiate their social standing among friends, family, and society?

Before continuing, I should clarify what I mean by the term "piano play" and how this term is different from the more common phrase, "playing the piano." By "piano play", I do not mean the physical act of using fingers to depress notes on the piano. Instead, "piano play" is the act of engaging in play through the piano. While for some children "playing the piano" is a requirement set by authority figures, a chore, or a mandatory form of work, "piano play" is voluntary, improvised, and fun. I am not the first to wonder about the meaning children ascribe to their play. Over the course of many decades, folklorists have demonstrated how children use "play" as a mode of education, as a method of negotiating social groups, and as a form of entertainment. While children may use "piano play" for those same reasons, certain aspects of "piano play" appear to be unique and warrant additional query. For example, if there are rules that govern *who* (those who have learned or are learning) and *how* the piano is to be played (think about the mother chiding her son to stop pounding piano keys, "That is not a toy!"), than is "piano play" a form of musical protest wherein children skirt parental authority through engaging in prohibited activities? The piano is not a toy, but yet, in my observations, it is being used as one. Hanks' character in *Big* is clearly using "piano play" as a means of coping with inner-turmoil and as an outlet for self-expression, but is there anything significant about his choice of songs? Does the use and performance of common piano duets like "Chopsticks" and "Heart and Soul" represent an additional layer in his complex ventilation of anxiety?

**Identification and Annotation**

In order to answer these questions, I observed and interviewed a group of children at play on April 7, 2012 at an informal church function at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.[1] While many of the adults sat in the gym eating and socializing, some of the children ran around the church in small groups playing games. Some of these children entered the Primary Room, a familiar room wherein they gather for Sunday school during church. In addition to being a room of spiritual learning and edification, the Primary Room is also a designated space for play as evident by the boxes of toys stacked neatly in the corner. Like many rooms in the church, the Primary room is equipped with a full-size, upright piano. Sitting down, I asked if any of the children could play the piano. One boy, Totten Christensen[2], age 9, said that he had taken piano lessons for two years but that he was not very good. The other chidlren, Brady Nelson (age 9), triplets Adam, Tyler, and Nathan Bryner (age 8), Gracie Oaks (age 10), and Mattie Lewis (age 10) all said they could not. When I pressed them to clarify if they could play any song on the piano, each said they knew *some* songs but did not take formal lessons or know how to read piano music. I asked if they would play a song for me and they agreed.

Brady Nelson was the first to sit down at the piano. After opening the keyboard, adjusting the seat, and looking at his friends nervously, he began to play a song he called "Bubblegum." I had never heard the song title before but as soon as he

began playing, I recognized a familiar tune that I had called, in my childhood, "The Knuckle Song." Brady made his right hand into a fist and rolled his knuckles from left to right over the trio of black keys (F#, G#, and A#) in one sweeping motion. Keeping his hand in a fist, he hammered down twice on the next black key (C#). He repeated this series again, before reversing the direction and playing the trio of black keys from right to left and then hammering twice on the lower black key (B#). The direction was reversed yet again before Brady concluded the song with a quick series of staccato notes played with his index finger.

As soon as Brady finished, Nathan Bryner slid onto the piano bench and told Brady that he played the song "wrong." Nathan demonstrated the "correct" method by likewise making a fist and rolling it along the black keys but then using his elbows instead of his fist to pound the C# and B#. Aside from the method of playing, the song was identical to the one Brady played. I asked Nathan what he called the song and neither he nor his brothers could recall a title. They said they learned the song from their cousin, Caleb, age 10, while visiting Caleb's family in Utah. Other variations I found on YouTube include a boy playing the song while lying upside down on the bench with his head beneath the keys, a child piano prodigy who began his performance by rolling his fists across the keys, playing homage to the familiar and simple, only to diverge into a complex, improvised variation of the "Knuckle Song" as the audience cheered wildly, and a young boy playing the song as a duet with his grandfather.

I asked my informants if they had ever heard of the song "Heart and Soul" and looked down at a group of blank faces. When I hummed a few bars, eyes lit up. "Oh, I know *that* song," said Gracie Oaks. "That song is easy!" Sliding onto the piano bench, Gracie sat towards the lower half of the piano and encouraged Mattie Lewis to join her. Bashfully, Mattie whined about not wanting to play the top hands. Reluctantly Gracie conceded and scooted over on the bench to make room for Mattie who sat to Gracie's left. After flexing fingers and cracking knuckles, Mattie began playing the familiar call and answer of the song. With her left hand she played C – A – F – G while her right hand completing the cord, one note at a time (C – E – G, A – C – E, F – A – C, G – B – D). As Mattie started the sequence a third time, Gracie began playing a harmony in tempo with her right hand.

Like the popular children's song, "This is the Song that Never Ends," where the ending of one stanza is the beginning of another, "Heart and Soul" is written in an infinite-loop motif. The song continues indefinitely, stanza after stanza, until one of the children quits. The repetitive nature of the song aids in mastery and encourages variation as a means to ward off boredom. Mattie was the first to experiment in her playing. Instead of playing the C-, A-, F-, and G-chords one note at a time, she began playing the chords at once in a syncopated, rocking rhythm. Mattie then experimented with other notes, rhythms, and patterns.

Meanwhile, Gracie played a jazzy harmony in the upper-octaves. The melody was very lyrical and, unlike the rhythms Mattie was playing, Gracie's harmony had a set beginning and ending. She played the same learned song over and over again. When Mattie varied her playing, Gracie stopped and watched, trying to pick up the new rhythm. When she felt she had it, she began playing again slightly altering her rhythm to match Mattie's. The girls continued, gradually increasing

in tempo and volume, until the notes began to blur and the harmony became unrecognizable. Suddenly, the music stopped and the giggles began.

When the laughter quieted down, Gracie began mimicking a professional pianist by sitting upright and pretending to play a series of arpeggios with her left-hand while quickly playing nonsense notes with her right. The charade received high-praise from her young audience who laughed with glee at the spot-on impersonation. Having won the approval of her peers, Gracie scooted off the piano bench to make room for Totten, the one child who had taken piano lessons.

Not to be outdone, Totten began to play "Cherokee Dance," the song he had learned and memorized for a piano recital. The song was more complicated than those previously played; Totten maintained a steady drum-like beat with his left hand while the right hand played an unfamiliar, tribal-esque song. Although clearly an accomplished pianist, the more difficult yet unfamiliar tune did not elicit for Totten the same cheers or laughs as did Gracie's tomfoolery. With a determined smile, Totten opened up a nearby hymnal and began playing a fast-paced church hymn. While the song was certainly familiar to the children, again Totten's talents overshadowed the performance. He slid off the bench, clearly the best pianist of the bunch.

What Totten demonstrates is the difference between "piano play" and "playing the piano." While his friends appeared to be having fun on piano, Totten could not separate himself from his learning and as a result, his playing the piano exhibited a different function than the others. Instead of "piano play," Totten seemed to focus on aspects of performance and ability.

Adam and Tyler Bryner were the last two to take a place at the ivories. Both boys stuck out the index fingers of their hands and began playing the song "Chopsticks." The children erupted in muted exclamation as they recognized the song and confirmed to me, each slightly louder than the other, their own ability to play it. Adam and Tyler played the song by repeatedly hammering F and G notes six times in succession, followed by the E- and G- notes six times, the D- and B- notes six times, and concluded by striking C- notes in harmony. The song repeats this pattern once more before resolving into a melody composed of thirds.

Once the boys concluded their song, I asked questions about their method of learning and when these songs are performed. Gracie and Mattie both admitted they learned to play at a friend's home. Gracie's friend had a piano in the house and, while playing together a few years earlier, the friend taught her. The triplets, Adam, Tyler, and Nathan, all admitted learning "The Knuckle Song" from their cousin in Utah. They learned "Chopsticks" from their mother. I asked if one of the boys could teach me to play "Chopsticks" and I was quickly instructed to form imaginary chopsticks with my index fingers and told to play "these white notes like this." At this point, Nathan demonstrated the "correct" way of playing the song. Following his lead, I copied the song phrase by phrase until Nathan told me I had mastered it. I actually had learned to play this and other songs through my interactions with friends when I was a child. This is also the case with some other adults I interviewed. The transmission is often through a combination of oral explanation and physical demonstration.

I next asked the children why they played the piano. Mattie said, "Because it's fun!" "Well, what's so fun about it?" I responded. "It's just fun to play. I like to listen to music and make music with my friends. It's just fun to work together and see who messes up first." Mattie's answer suggests that the piano is a place for children to engage in "piano play." Totten disagreed about the piano being "fun." Each morning before school, Totten explained he must play the piano for thirty-minutes, practicing his scales and learning the assigned songs for the week—tasks that Totten considers boring. Playing the piano was a chore, a required task he was forced to complete. While other children saw the piano as something they got to play, for Totten, the piano was something he *had* to play. I asked Totten why he started taking piano lessons. He explained how everyone in his family "was forced" to play an instrument and he selected the piano. His choice in wording suggested this was something he did against his will. I asked if he was happy he knew how to play the piano. "Yeah, I guess so. I really like playing for my friends and with my family. Sometimes our whole family plays together as a big band. I think that's cool." For Totten, the piano is not a place for "play" as his encounters with it are not with friends but alone and forced.

**Analysis and Interpretation/Explanation**

Folklorists have been chided in the past for failing to offer meaningful explanations for the folklore that define the nature and character of child life. For decades, collections of children folklore sat unexamined and unexplained, providing few hints to what the collected items meant for the children who use them (see Sutton-Smith 1990, 17 and Dundes 1998, 119). However, scholarship in recent years, including works by Simon Bronner, Libby Tucker, and Brian Sutton-Smith, have demonstrated how fruitful the study of children's folklore, specifically children's folklore of play, may be by demonstrating how play helps children develop a sense of personal and communal identity and mediate their standing in a complicated vertical and horizontal social order. In the following paragraphs, I explore folkloric aspects of "piano play" and suggest a few possible functions unique to "piano play" that may provide a framework for understanding its meaning.

In a chapter examining the historiography of children's folklore, John H. McDowell defines children's folklore as encompassing many verbal and non-verbal activities that incorporate "playful or artistic motives with some standing in community tradition" (McDowell 1983, 314). For McDowell, the distinction between the two motives, playful and artistic, is important. He stresses these motives are not "coterminous" and children's folklore is one or the other. Such a binary definition is troublesome when examining "piano play" as it appears to blend the *playful* and *artistic* motives of children's folklore, creating perhaps a hyphenated third motive: playful-artistic. McDowell defines the *playful motive* as producing a sense of make-believe through the "allocation of a special play space, or by a reversal of real-life contingencies, or by some other factor." The *artistic motive* differs in that it is geared towards the "collective preoccupations" of the child and is intended for public consumption (McDowell 1983, 314).

Given these definitions, "piano play" uniquely provides children with both the environment (piano space) and tools (piano) to enter into a secondary reality (that of a talented pianist) while simultaneously encouraging expression intended for the consumption of horizontal and vertical social groups. In so doing, piano play opens up avenues of understanding of how children compete and collaborate with each other and use these functions as a way to mediate the anxiety associated with performance.

In his foundational observations on folklore, Bascom suggests folklore has four basic functions: to entertain, to educate, to stabilize society, and to serve as a release for anxieties (Bascom 1954, 343 – 346). In my experience and through my observations, I propose that, depending on the scenario, "piano play" fulfills each of these functions for the child participant. By situating "piano play" side-by-side with other forms of "musical play," such as hand-clapping rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, and play-ground chants/songs documented in Simon Bronner's *American Children's Folklore,* we can see how "piano play" is an outlet for entertainment, self-expression, and cooperative play. For some of the children I interviewed, entertainment was the primary purpose for "piano play"—"It's fun!" In her study of children at "musical play," Patricia Shehan Campbell points out that on the playground and in the classroom, musical play unites children in purpose and solidifies social groups. By demonstrating knowledge of the music through chants, rhythms, songs, or other means, children form common playgroups and create bonds of solidarity (Campbell 2010, 25 – 30).

This solidarity was evident, for example, in the "Hear t and Soul" duet performed by Gracie and Mattie. As they began playing, the two adapted their performance to fit the tempo, style, and rhythm of the other. In this impromptu collaboration, each performer took turns experimenting and improvising on a musical instrument neither really knew how to play. As one would attempt to embellish their part, the other would diminish the volume of their part. It was as if there was one mind controlling four hands.

However, as the song continued, Gracie and Mattie began showing signs of disengagement—the song itself was no longer challenging and the girls had exhausted their repertoire of variation. With no clearly delineated ending, the girls seemed resigned to playing indefinitely or until someone quit. At this point in the song, the performance turned into a competition of endurance to determine who could outplay and outlast the other. When it became apparent that neither would quit, a nonverbal agreement was made and the performance suddenly became a competition of skill. Traditional rules that governed the performance of the piano piece, such as the suggested tempo, rhythm, and sound dynamics, were ignored. In fact, not only were these rules ignored, but also success in the competition hinged upon the participant doing the *opposite* of what the rules suggested. In this makeshift game, the faster, the louder, and the more non-traditional the piano play, the better. Having an extensive knowledge of proper piano playing technique or a repertoire of songs was not as important as being able to subvert rules, parody expectations, and ultimately have fun. As a result of these improvised rules, the tempo and volume of Gracie and Mattie's version of "Heart and Soul" gradually increased until Gracie could not keep up and was forced to

quit. What had begun as a cooperative performance ended as a competitive game with a clearly defined winner and loser. After winning, Mattie turned to me and provided insight into her perspective, "I like to listen to music and make music with my friends. It's just fun to work together and see who messes up first." In other words, Mattie celebrated the opportunity to make music with her friend because it provided a shared experience for social bonding while allowing for social stratification and the development of hierarchies.

Another aspect of Gracie and Mattie's performance that was shared by other performers was their reliance on variation. On multiple occasions, the children attempted to surprise their audience through the unanticipated or unorthodox variation of a familiar form or method. For example, instead of playing a note with their finger, some children opted instead to use their fist or elbow. Other variations include using one's head, forearm, or bottom. This type of variation calls attention to the performance and to the performer. An analysis of children musical variations conducted by Bronner in *American Children's Folklore* provides insight into possible motives. Children often alter the lyrics of common songs to include obscene, macabre, or violent language and scenes. For example, the song "Jingle Bells," whose lyrics once celebrated the joy of a winter sleigh ride, is altered by children to describe the odors of superheroes and the egg-laying-abilities of their sidekicks. Likewise, children alter the lyrics to "Joy to the World" to celebrate school burning and teacher killing/disembodiment. As children become aware of social norms, these changes in lyrics allow them to dramatize and experiment with the limits of these taboos (Bronner 1988, 81). The changes in these lyrics are intended to elicit reaction from the audience—to make them cringe in disgust or cover their ears. These reactions place the performer in a position of power over the audience. As controller of the medium, the child determines whether to continue or to stop.

Variation is also a way of displaying creativity or feigning mastery. For example, when Brady sat at the piano to play "Bubblegum" or "The Knuckle Song," the audience expected him to play in a manner they had grown accustomed to over time and experience—they expected him to play the piano "normally." By using his fists instead of his fingers, Brady surprised the audience with his variation of form. Brady was performing a song in a unique way, drawing additional attention to the song, his playing style, and ultimately to himself. "Bubblegum" is not a difficult song to play, but by altering the form, Brady made the song appear more difficult. In so doing, he intended for his audience to perceive him as having more skill than he actually possessed. Skill is associated with time and practice. For someone to possess "skill," it is requisite that they must practice for an extended period of time. Skill, therefore, becomes equated with age. If someone possesses skill, they must also be old. By feigning to possess more talent than he actually has, Brady is suggesting he is older than he really is.

For children, "piano play" is a way to pretend to be something they are not, typically older, wiser, stronger, essentially, more adult-like. Gracie demonstrated this aptly after finishing her rendition of "Heart and Soul." In her demeanor, posture, and performance, Gracie the 10-year-old was transformed through the piano into "Gracie the Great," an accomplished pianist performing on stage at

Carnegie Hall. The purpose of "piano pretend play" falls in line with other forms of pretending games played by children. For example, in their collection of children's folklore, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Peter and Iona Opie document a long history of children "pretending games" going back to Ancient Rome that similarly show children attempting to take "shortcuts" to seem older or more adult-like than they really are. The Opies' study includes games where children pretend to be mothers and fathers, schoolteachers, criminals, war heroes, and celebrities (Opie, 1969 330 – 344). Likewise, in her *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*, Elizabeth Tucker writes that she observed children in New York during the 1990s pretending to be firefighters, police, teachers, doctors, Native Americans, and film and television stars (Tucker 2008, 32).

Piano variation is likewise an allowed means of experimentation within the boundaries set by societal norms. Often, the children will establish the right way to play first and then increased variation comes later to highlight specific skills. As Nathan told Brady after Brady finished playing "The Knuckle Song" with his fist, "That's the *wrong* way to play it" and then demonstrated the elbow as a variant. In each child's mind is the notion that foundationally there is a *right* and a *wrong* way to play a song. The complexity grows as we assume the child also knows that the audience knows there is a *right* and *wrong* way to play a song. The *wrong* way and the *proper* way to play are often the same and the *right* way is often in opposition to the *proper* way. By altering the piano performance in song, posture, clothing, and form the child is subverting expectations thereby experimenting with the boundaries of what is socially tolerated and socially unacceptable. The children found through the reactions of the audience that some variation, like playing with fists instead of fingers, to not only be tolerated but celebrated.

Returning to Bascom's original four functions of folklore, how does "piano play" function to provide a release for anxieties? The answer is somewhat paradoxical for performing on the piano, whether for family, friends, or at a concert recital, usually does not *alleviate* or *release* anxiety, but, in fact, *causes* anxiety. Imagine the young child walking to the isolated piano on a lit stage, performing a challenging piece from memorization in front of an audience when the risk of error and public humiliation is high. Although the setting of this piano performance in a concert hall and the "piano play" that takes place in the living room may be different, performance anxiety is likely to exist in both settings as there exists elements of risk and vulnerability. However, in "piano play," the fun, the opportunity for attention, and the opportunity for one-upmanship overpowers shyness and the risk of ridicule. Variation in piano play allows children to sidestep the need to appear competent in order to be successful. Instead, variation makes room for physical comedy, farce, and irony. It allows for and encourages imagination, freedom of expression, and collaboration. Working together to create or compete, children find these positives work to reduce anxiety.

**Mormon Folklore**

Although the children I interviewed are all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), I do not feel that their piano play experiences

are unique only to children of this specific subgroup. Mormon children are first and foremost children and by tracing repetition and variation of piano play among other children, my analysis suggests a universal performative function. I distance my subjects from their religious affiliation in order to argue for broader implications, but I should note that in so doing I do not mean to devalue the importance of their religious identity. These children as Mormons *are* members of a recognized ethnic and religious subculture, and, as such, piano play does play an important role in the construction of their identity different from their peers. An examination of piano play within a Mormon religious folklore context allows us to pull back additional layers of functionality.

Mormon folklorist Bert Wilson wrote of the importance of reflexive studies in religious folklore. He recognized great value in looking, "not just at a body of abstracted beliefs but at actual behaviors, at the process of believing, at *how* religious people, Latter-day Saints and others, enact their convictions in daily life" (2006). In this paper, Wilson explored the practice of giving service among Mormons, suggesting that such experiences hold greater significance in Mormon religious living than do other more popular supernatural legends like the "Three Nephites." I add to this list the central importance of music among Mormons. From their earliest existence, Mormons have been a musical people. Only days after the first official conference of the Church in June 1830, Joseph Smith, the Church's founder, recorded a revelation that directed his wife, Emma, "to make a selection of sacred hymns, as it shall be given thee, which is pleasing unto me, to be had in my church" (Doctrine & Covenants 25:11). Years later, Brigham Young continued this musical traditional by directed the church to dance. Such fondness for music and dance led some to call the Mormons, "The Dancing Puritans." Since their origins in 1852, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has become an American institution. Mormon music historian Michael Hicks writes, MoTab has been "the object of presidential commendations, the focus of a *Reader's Digest* record anthology—endorsed by Billy Graham—the topic of a widely distributed commemorative volume, and the even the subject of a U.S. postal stamp" (Hicks, 166). More recently, the popular success of Mormon singers like Donnie and Marie Osmond, David Archuleta, Gladys Knight, the Neon Trees, and Brandon Flowers, frontman for The Killers, has cemented this musical stereotype into American popular consciousness. Even in an episode of *South Park*, Mormons as a musical people is featured prominently. This stereotype is stressed in the television show South Park. In the episode, "All About the Mormons," a Mormon family moves into town and introduces themselves to the neighbors. The father immediately encourages his five children to play a song. Each child, including an infant, picks up an instrument and begins singing and playing. The crawling infant selected the piano.

Without a paid lay ministry, Mormons from the congregation are asked to voluntarily give of their time and talents in order for the Church to function. Among these "callings" are many that focus on the musical abilities of the member. These calling include a choir director, chorister, organist, and the pianist for one of the many auxiliary groups. With a worldwide membership of over 12 million and nearly 29,000 congregations, the need for musical talent is high. For this reason, many Mormon parents require their children to study a musical instrument—piano

being the most common. As a child, my mother expected me and each of my three siblings to learn to play the piano, specifically hymns. She explained that by learning the piano, I could provide a great service to people around the world as a missionary. This is the case for many Mormon men and women who serve missions to remote countries around the world, countries where members do not have the same opportunity for learning musical instruments.

Mormons are also frequently taught the importance of discovering and developing talents. These lessons begin at a young age. For example, as a Primary teacher, the Church provided me a manual from which I could develop my lessons for the five-years-old. Chapter 26 of this lesson manual is called, "The Parable of the Talents," and uses teachings from the New Testament to encourage these five-year-olds to find and use their talents. The manual suggests that I, as the teacher, ask, "What do you think Jesus was trying to teach us by telling the parable of the talents?" I am then to, "Help the children understand that the Lord has given us talents, abilities, and opportunities (such as belonging to his church). He expects us to use all these things to make our lives better and to serve others" (Primary 7: New Testament, 1997). By developing their talents, Mormon children are taught that they can serve God.

## Conclusion

Widely disseminated through oral tradition among children, this paper examines the performative functions of "piano play" and three specific children piano pieces, "Chopsticks," "Heart and Soul," and "The Knuckle Song" and argues that, during a liminal period, "piano play" provides children with a play-frame and space to negotiate age-anxiety. My analysis describes and expounds on the many ways I have documented that this negotiation occurs.

Childhood is a challenging period of life and many children do not have access to the tools that are needed to help them deal with these challenges. Left to their own devices, many unconsciously turn to the world of verbal and non-verbal folklore for help in coping with challenges and anxieties. As the boundaries of childhood become more constricted and contested, as evidenced by the popularity of socially constructed age-groups like "teenagers" and "tweeners," we will continue to see children seek shelter in the safety of shared folklore.

## NOTES

1. Although the children I interviewed are all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I do not feel that the experiences I document within this paper are unique to children of this subgroup. To the contrary, I believe continued ethnographic study will show these performances are generally common for most children.

2. The names of the children have been changed to protect their privacy and identity.

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