When the Cradle Falls: The Subversion, Secrets, and Sentimentality of Lullabies

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On January 29, 2002, in a State of the Union speech fueled by grief from the September 11 terrorist attacks, former President George W. Bush accused Iran, Iraq, and North Korea of helping terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. He called these countries the “axis of evil,” a term that he would go on to use much throughout the rest of his two-term presidency.¹ What the Bush Administration seemed to have meant by this term was that the governments of these countries were evil; unfortunately, what most people took from this term was that the people of these countries were evil. His use of the strong term “evil” allied many people in the United States against these “evil” countries, powering what would become the “War on Terror.” In response to Bush’s “axis of evil” label, the Norwegian composer Erik Hillestad exposed a soft side to these nations. Through a collection of lullabies originating from these “axis of evil” countries, Hillestad matched a loving face to the people of Iran, Iraq, Palestine, North Korea, Cuba, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan.² Seemingly afraid of exposing any innocence of these countries to the American people, the Bush Administration blacklisted the Valley Entertainment company who released the album Lullabies from the Axis of Evil in the U.S. Many may wonder why a country heading into war would even bother worrying about a CD of lullabies—harmless children’s songs! Lullabies may seem like “fuzzy baby songs,” but are more powerful than they appear; they

² Erik Hillestad, Lullabies from the Axis of Evil, © 2003 by Kirkelig Kulturverksted, © 2004 by Valley Entertainment.
reveal the universal innocence of humanity, while mirroring the cultures of which they are a part.

Mothers of all backgrounds can relate to the serenity felt while singing to their precious child. A mother who finds herself amongst the great turmoil of war in her country can share the same intimate experience of lullaby singing as a mother fortunate enough to live in a peaceful country. Even mothers who find themselves in the most terrible of situations may still find a short moment of peace and innocence through singing a lullaby; such an example are the lullabies that were written by mothers imprisoned in Holocaust concentration camps. Imagine these mothers singing to their babies, while at the same moment, the sons and daughters of Nazi soldiers were experiencing the same thing—maybe even with the same tune. As a bond between cultures, lullabies can interconnect and humanize the common people of the world, regardless of race or background.

The word “lullaby” in English can be broken into two parts: “lull” and “aby.” Etymologically speaking, the word “lulling,” meaning to hush to sleep, most likely gets its name from similar Swedish, German, Sanskrit, and Dutch words. The German and Sanskrit words “lullen” and “lolati” mean “to rock” and “to move to and fro,” while the Dutch and Swedish words “lollen” and “lulla” mean to “hum a lullaby” or “to mutter.” Lullabies often include humming, muttering, and rocking; therefore, the Swedish, German, Sanskrit, and Dutch word definitions combine appropriately to form the English word “lull.” The second half of “lullaby”—“aby”—may be taken from “good bye” or “bye bye,” by means of the mother saying “bye bye” to her children at night when they fall asleep. Similar to “lullaby,”

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the German term “Wiegenlied” takes its root from “wiegen,” meaning to rock, to sway, to cradle, or to nurse. The French equivalent of the term, “berceuse,” comes from “bercer,” meaning “to rock,” while the Spanish term “canción de cuna,” translates to “cradle song.” In Japanese, the word for lullaby is “komori-uta,” which consists of the following three characters: 子 (child) 守 (protection/nurse) 唄 (song). When broken down by character, a lullaby is a “child protection/nursing song.” The Italian word for lullaby, “ninne-nanne,” is similar to the Turkish “ninni” and Spanish lulling-word “nana,” all three words deriving from the Latin word “naniae,” meaning lullaby, dirge or lament. Across many languages, it is clear that the equivalent word for “lullaby” invokes more than gentle music—there are important actions that go with this type of song. Rocking, swaying, protection, and even lamenting are powerful aspects that hide in the etymological meaning of “lullaby.”

While lullabies, or cradlesongs, lull an infant or a child into sleep, they express one of the truest forms of love. This pacifying genre is typically backed by intentions of adoration, tenderness, and tranquility for the innocent child, while often portraying otherwise to the mature adult. Curiously, the lullaby’s driving force of love and sensitivity, combined with the practicality of settling down an exhausted baby is often masked by eerie, austere, or outright frightening themes. A lullaby is often a façade for a mother’s expression of goals, expectations, or even warnings for her child, which she is able to express in private, with only her unaware baby listening. To a child, a lullaby might be a simple cradlesong, but to a mother, a lullaby can be an emotional song of anger, stress, or terror. With many examples of unusually fearsome lyrics mixed with sweet melodies, there is a common clash of sensitivity

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and love with fear and sadness in lullabies. Lullabies are one of the most intimate allusions to a culture, hinting at the bittersweet world a child will soon grow to know. Through a gentle tune, a mother pacifies her child into slumber with a subtle warning of the future.

**BACKGROUND AND SOURCES**

Scholarship on lullabies would suggest that they are a universal phenomenon. The vast range of English-language sources on lullabies ranges from culture-specific lullaby readings to medical and psychological studies. Many articles addressing the folk music of various countries and cultures include sections on lullabies. For example, Scheherazade Hassan’s article “Female traditional singers of Iraq: A survey” reports many types of music traditionally sung by women, with a section addressing lullabies in relation to laments. Various folk song anthologies such as from France, Germany, and Canada include several well-known lullabies in their repertoire. In addition, many collections of recorded children’s folk songs include lullabies. Of course, there are even entire collections, recorded and/or notated, devoted to lullabies, such as Dorothy Commins’s book *Lullabies of the World*. Commins’s book proved to be a very important source for my project. In fact, many of the lullabies I discuss in this paper are in Commins’s anthology of world lullabies, which includes her own melodic transcriptions of lullabies she wrote while conducting fieldwork, along with side-by-side English translations of all the lyrics.

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A broad range of scholarship covers lullabies from cultures spanning the globe. For example, there is an article on Australian Aboriginal lullabies, written by Elizabeth Mackinlay, who also co-authored a psychological study on lullaby singing. Mackinlay describes her article as “an ethnographic introduction to restricted and unrestricted Yanyuwa lullabies through examination of performance practice, themes and textual content of both forms of Aboriginal singing.”\(^7\) Another source is Italian folklore scholar Luisa Del Giudice’s article on Italian lullabies, which addresses the subversion of Italian lullaby lyrics.\(^8\) Through many lyric analyses, Giudice highlights common themes such as a threatening wolf, death, and religion. Death and religion as themes also find their way into a tragic collection of lullabies from the Holocaust. Aaron Kramer reveals the darkest and saddest side of lullabies in *The Last Lullaby: Poetry from the Holocaust*, a collection of lullabies written by Jewish captives of the Holocaust.\(^9\) In his book, Kramer organizes his findings according to themes such as children wandering, hunted, or in despair; dead children or empty cradles; motherless children, and even Jewish children safe in their American beds.\(^10\) The following lullaby from Kramer’s book depicts the deep sorrow, woe, and fear that countless imprisoned mothers felt during the Holocaust:

No pillow for your weary head,  
no walls to keep you warm…  
sleep, my naked little one,  
upon your mother’s arm…

\(^7\) Restricted and unrestricted refers to who in the tribe is able to participate in the lullaby singing. Elizabeth Mackinlay, “Music for Dreaming: Aboriginal Lullabies in the Yanyuwa Community at Borroloola, Northern Territory,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 8 (1999), 97-111.


Don’t cry, my love, in no-man’s land!
Your tear chokes me alone…
The eye of man is blind, my babe,
his ear is deaf as stone!—

Your father, from behind barbed wire,
sends you a soft embrace.
Sleep, my unsheltered baby, with
no roof, no resting-place.

Shut your precious eyes and sleep
amid the winds and guns…
Mother’s tear, her bitterest,
down your forehead runs.\(^{11}\)

Given the private nature of lullabies, nobody knows when the first lullaby was sung, but the oldest record of a lullaby dates back to 2000 BC.\(^{12}\) Etched in cuneiform script on a small clay tablet, the Babylonian lullaby depicts a baby who is criticized for disturbing the household’s peace with his crying:

Little baby in the dark house,
You have seen the sun rise.
Why are you crying? Why are you screaming?
You have disturbed the house god.
“Who has disturbed me?” says the house god.
It is the baby who has disturbed you.
“Who scared me?” says the house god.

\(^{11}\) Kramer, *The Last Lullaby*, 41.
The baby has disturbed you. The baby has scared you, making noises like a drunkard who cannot sit still on his stool, he has disturbed your sleep.

“Call the baby now!” says the house god.¹³

As long as 4000 years ago, mothers expressed their distress through lullaby singing. The singer’s complaint about her crying child is likened to the sound of a drunkard, who may even be a reference to her husband. The subversion in this lullaby shows that even in ancient times, lullabies were powerful enough to represent more than they appeared.

Another translation of this same lullaby has charm-like qualities. In ancient Babylonia, it was believed that a benevolent protective spirit in the shape of a bison with a human head called “kusarikkum” guarded the house.¹⁴ In this translation, kusarikkum charms the baby to sleep, as a “punishment” for disturbing the peace.

Little one, who dwelt in the house of darkness—well, you are outside now, have seen the light of the sun.

Why are you crying, why are you yelling?

Why didn’t you cry in there?

You have roused the god of the house, the kusarikkum has woken up:

"Who roused me? Who startled me?"

The little one has roused you, the little one has startled you!

"As onto drinkers of wine, as onto tipplers, may sleep fall on him!"¹⁵

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¹³ Richard Dumbrill, translation of cuneiform script, in Nina Perry’s “The Universal Language of Lullabies.”


¹⁵ Walter Farber, “Magic at the Cradle…”
Lullabies and charms share many qualities; the “magic” of these songs will be discussed in further detail below under “Genre.” After all, putting a screaming, fussy baby to sleep may seem pretty magical to a tired mother.

One of the truest sources of lullaby research, of course, is parents. During my research, I spoke with several of my friends and acquaintances from different cultural backgrounds such as American, French-Canadian, Greek, Guatemalan, Indian, Iranian, Japanese, and Lebanese. Each person had memories of the lullabies they had sung to their children or a lullaby that they remembered had been sung to them when they were young children. Having international connections helped match a face with many of the lullabies I came across through my research. When I would ask someone about a certain lullaby from their culture, they would often reminisce and begin singing it. Hélène Shalhoub, a wonderfully helpful friend and colleague who is originally from Lebanon, remembered several lullabies she sang to her children. After recollecting these lullabies and expressively singing them, she even helped me transcribe the lyrics. Mami Saito, a friend from Japan, aided my research by translating several versions of Japanese lullabies I came across. Whether it was singing a remembered lullaby, translating lyrics, or even sending me YouTube links to various lullabies recordings, my international colleagues and friends were wonderfully helpful.
We normally think of lullabies as being backed by a mother’s love. A busy mother, father, nursemaid, or nanny offers affection to a child by taking the time to soothe them to sleep through singing. While lullabies are pleasing to the ears, they are also psychologically and medically beneficial to both the child and the mother. Many mothers experience recurring stresses, fears, and sorrows that can be reduced through lullaby singing. In times of great turmoil, lullaby singing can act as a coping and survival tool for both the mother and her child. Listening to music can reduce stress and aid mothers to relax during difficult situations. The texts of many lullabies reflect a mother’s fears, complaints, or sorrows, and singing these feelings in a non-threatening, intimate setting allows her to release and let go of her pent-up emotions. In a study on the effects of lullaby singing conducted by Elizabeth Mackinlay, ethnomusicologist, and Felicity Baker, music therapist, eighteen first-time mothers reported their experiences with singing their babies to sleep. One mother who had reported to be particularly stressed about the difficulties of motherhood responded to the study:

I don’t think I was depressed, but I was different within myself about the whole motherhood experience….I sort of felt that by singing to her I sort of, I never felt like I can evade any sort of feeling of, you know, about to burst into tears, and…it’s almost like I masked that feeling, and I sort of covered it up, and instead…it kind of made me feel more in love with her, I suppose you could say, gave me that extra bit that I needed to get me through the feelings

that I got in the earlier times when I just started to feel down, like why isn’t anything going to plan. It just sort of made me feel like I had a bit of control.  

In the study’s conclusion, “some mothers reported that they chose lullabies that they knew they would respond to in a positive way, that is, they knew would change their mood for the better, such as feeling more relaxed and happier.” On the other hand, a newborn baby may enjoy as much comfort as their mother through lullaby singing. During the second trimester of development in the womb, infants develop their sense of hearing. As infants continue to grow in the womb, they are comforted by the sounds of their mother’s body, such as the swooshing sound of the main artery of their mother’s heart. Infants also take comfort in hearing their mother’s voice from inside the womb, and therefore we can assume they feel secure from the sound of her voice after they are born. Since they are used to hearing her voice frequently during the second and third trimester, lullaby singing by the birth mother can be a reassuring reminder that “mommy’s here” when babies close their eyes to fall asleep.

The power of lullabies can extend to helping growth and development in pre-mature babies, and can even influence lung and heart functions. Recent studies have shown that synthesized womb sounds and live lullaby singing can aid several development issues in Newborn Intensive Care Unit babies, while at the same time maybe even reducing stress for the parents. As recently as April 15, 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics concluded from their study of 272 premature infants:

17 Mackinlay and Baker, “Nurturing Herself…,” 83.
20 Johnston, “Lulling your Newborn.”
The informed, intentional therapeutic use of live sound and parent-preferred lullabies applied by a certified music therapist can influence cardiac and respiratory function. Sound and lullaby may improve feeding behaviors and sucking patterns and may increase prolonged periods of quiet-alert states. Parent-preferred lullabies, sung live, can enhance bonding, thus decreasing the stress parents associate with premature infant care.21

In reference to “parent-preferred” lullabies, the power of choice may be one of the driving factors in decreasing parental stress. Being able to choose which lullaby is sung to their child may give the parents a sense of control and will often aid them to express what they need to “get off their chest.”

When babies are growing inside the womb, they become accustomed to the everyday routine of the mother. Periods of resting versus periods of movement and activity contribute to different experiences for the growing infant. For example, when a mother is walking, the baby will experience a swaying effect inside the womb. The swaying pattern the infant experiences inside of the womb may be a reason for the pleasure and comfort a baby experiences while being rocked in his mother’s arms.22 The rocking movement has a beneficial influence on the baby, such as a cooling or a warming effect, and can help improve intestinal function.23 Rocking, combined with singing to a child is medically advantageous.

Another benefit of lullaby singing is that it contributes to a child’s development of his communication and musical skills. Because the mother is singing, or even speaking softly to the child directly, it can encourage speech development and good listening skills. Through

22 Johnston, “Lulling your Newborn.”
23 Johnston, “Lulling your Newborn.”
this calm, intimate approach to singing, a lullaby can help a child to develop his communication skills such as the development of sounds and the ability to hear and notice rhyming words. For example, in Sweden, many mothers sing “Mors Lilla Olle” or “Mother’s Little Olle” to their babies, a lullaby that contains eight different vowel sounds, in four rhyming pairs. Along with contributing to communication skills, lullabies are a medium through which babies are first introduced to music. The lullabies not only aid the child to develop their musical ear; they act in the baby’s process of enculturation. For example, children who grow up listening to Euro-American tunes sung in modes made-up of half-steps and whole-steps will develop a musical ear different from children who have grown up in the Middle-East, for example, who have learned to hear not only half-steps and whole-steps, but quarter tones such as neutral seconds, also.

**WHAT IS A LULLABY?**

Many children and adults alike enjoy listening to a variety of soothing music while falling asleep. Depending on personal preference (or what works!), bedtime music can include almost anything. Some might enjoy listening to Ravel’s piano works while falling asleep, while others might like to listen to their favorite pop album. Many mothers enjoy singing a variety of children’s songs to their baby at night; some might even sing a few of their favorite pop tunes to hush their child to sleep. From the singer’s point-of-view, “anything goes,” as long as it soothes a baby. In this way, singing lullabies can be

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24 Mary Jeanette Howle, “Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star: it’s more than just a nursery song,” *Children Today* 18, no. 4, (July-August 1989), 18.
25 Nina Perry, “The Universal Language of Lullabies.”
entertaining for the singer; they get to sing one of their favorite songs while the baby enjoys
the sound of the singer’s voice. It is easy to sing in front of infants and young children—they
are happy to be sung to, and, as far as we know, do not judge us on our singing capabilities.
In turn, the lullaby singer is often more comfortable with improvisation and ornamentation.
If any song can function as a lullaby, however, then what separates “Rock A-by Baby” from
bedtime Bach? Lullabies share many traits that together achieve the task of putting children
to sleep.

**Who Sings a Lullaby?**

Women are the nurturing hosts for infants; not only do they bring them into this
world, but they often provide the primary care for them throughout their childhood. Fathers,
siblings, nannies, or even grandparents, however, can sing lullabies in many instances. In the
well-known francophone lullaby, “Fais Dodo,” also known as “Do, l’enfant do,” meaning
“Go to sleep” or “Sleep, child, Sleep,” an older sibling is singing to their little brother, Colas.
Of course, sweet treats are the desire for many young children, so it is no surprise that the
baby is being bribed with them in this lullaby.

Fais dodo, Colas, mon petit frère.
Fais dodo, t’auras du lolo.

Maman est en haut
qui fais du gateau.
Papa est en bas,
qui fait du chocolat.

Fais dodo, Colas, mon petit frère.
Fais dodo, t’auras du lolo.

**Translation:**

Go to sleep, Colas, my little brother.
Go to sleep, and you will have some milk.

Mommy is upstairs,
    making a cake!
Daddy is downstairs
    making chocolate!

Go to sleep, Colas, my little brother.
Go to sleep and you will have some milk.26

**Gender**

Many folk songs are considered gendered. In folk music, lyrics mentioning “long yellow hair” or “lily-white skin” can account for a tune that was written about a female, while elements of strength and bravery generally point towards a male. Lullabies are a special case in that mothers can sing lullabies as a preview of how their child’s gender will affect them in their future. Elements of strength, bravery, richness, war, handsomeness, and other features of manhood are often depicted in lullabies that were meant to be sung to little boys. Contrasting to these songs, lullabies geared towards little girls frequently mention beauty, gentleness, marriage, and motherhood—sometimes warning the little girl about how difficult it will be when she has a baby and a husband of her own to take care of.

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The following lullaby is a well-known Scottish lullaby that was made popular by the nineteenth-century author Sir Walter Scott in his book *Guy Mannering*. “Sleep on ‘Till Dawn,” also known as “Lullaby of an Infant Chief,” as called by Scott, is based off of the Scottish air “Cadul gu lo.” When Sir Walter Scott borrowed this tune, he added his own lyrics while keeping the same theme of manhood and the original air as the melody. The lyrics provided are from Sir Walter Scott’s version.

O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo,
O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo.

O, hush thee, my babie, thy sire was a knight,
Thy mother a lady both lovely and bright;
The woods and the glens, from the towers which we see,
They all are belonging, dear babie, to thee.

O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo,
O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo,

O, fear not the bugle, though loudly it blows,
It calls but the warders that guard thy repose;
Their bows would be bonded, their blades would be red,
Ere the step of a foreman draws near to thy bed.

O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo,
O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo,

O, hush thee, my babie, the time soon will come,
When thy sleep shall be broken by trumpet and drum;
Then hush thee, my darling, take rest while you may,

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27 Dorothy Commins, “Lullabies…,” pg. 89.
For strife comes with manhood and wakening with day.

O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo,

O ho ro, i ri ri, cudul gu lo.²⁸

Figure 1: “Sleep on Till Dawn”²⁹

²⁸ Commins, Lullabies of the World, 89.
²⁹ Commins, Lullabies of the World, 89.
As a parent sings his baby boy to sleep, he is also warning him about his likely violent future as a soldier. The lullaby transports the baby from his father’s arms to a war camp scene. “Rest while you may,” warns the father, as he knows his son’s innocence will soon be broken from the strife of manhood. The simple AABBAA form repeated over each verse, combined with a humble rhythm and melody line, helps the parent remember the lullaby and pass it down from generation to generation (see Figure 1). The simple-triple meter helps the singer rock his child to sleep, while the lyrics anticipate and warn the baby boy of the hardships of manhood.

Lullabies aimed towards little girls feature traditionally female traits often perceived as beauty, gentleness and kindness, along with the idea of being a good, caring wife. Images of rich bridegrooms often appear, in hope that the little girl will someday marry a wealthy, successful suitor. “Loli Dyanse Ladi,” or “Slumber, Little Bride,” is a lullaby from Sindh, a western province in Pakistan. The lyrics reflect the promised future for a Sindhi girl—a beautiful wedding. Sindhi brides traditionally adorned themselves with intricate jewelry, including nose rings studded with pearls and precious stones that were so heavy that they had to be supported by slender chains attached to jewelry on their forehead. “Slumber, Little Bride” suggests marriage in its title and follows the little bride on her wedding day through each verse. A rich bridegroom coming from a “little palace” is mentioned, along with the “fine raiment” the bride will wear for her wedding day. The Sindhi mother lulls her little daughter to sleep, in hopes of a pleasant marriage in her anticipated future.

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Slumber, little bride, who stays awake,
who stays awake.
This beautiful little girl will have a husband.

Beyond the fort is a little palace,
Whence the bridegroom will come.

The bride is now attired in
fine raiment,
For the bridegroom has arrived.

Lovingly someone exclaims,
“babe bablera”
This beautiful little girl will have a
husband.\(^\text{31}\)

\[^{31}\text{Commins, Lullabies of the World, 224.}\]
Each verse of “Slumber, Little Bride” is sung over a miniature ABB’ form (See Figure 2). The sections A (mm. 1-7) and B (mm. 8-11) are rhythmically simple, consisting of mostly eighth notes. The melody concludes with an improvisation on the word “dinero” in the B’ section (mm. 12-16). Although Commins notates a long ascending and descending line on the word “dinero” in measure thirteen, there is likelihood that this was an attempt to notate an ornament. Since ornamentations naturally change throughout a piece, it is probable that the B’ section is delivered slightly different each time. Repetition, simplicity, ornamentation and improvisation are all elements that provide the foundation of a lullaby.

Grove Music Online describes Sindhi musical settings as being “based on melodic patterns derived from both classical raga and traditional song,” but “unlike raga, they are characterized not only by a melodic progression but by a fixed sequence of specific motifs.”

Sindhi folk songs are musically simpler, but contain stylistic similarities to Sindhi art music. “Slumber, Little Bride” is a lullaby, so its humble motifs make sense. The first half of each verse spans just a fifth with minor third leaps and simple passing tones. The second half of the first verse is stated in a motif that also only spans a fifth, but is then repeated with a complex ascending and descending ornamentation. The simplicity of the motifs, combined with the complexity of the ornamentation personifies the modest elements, yet personal touch to a lullaby.

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32 Commins, Lullabies of the World, 224.
Musical Characteristics

The two basic elements that constitute a lullaby are music and text. Although lullaby lyrics can be quite complicated and subversive, musically, they are simple songs, modest enough for any amateur singer. The generally simple rhythms and melodies, combined with a flexible timbre and soft dynamic range make lullabies easy to sing, memorize, and pass down from generation to generation.

In terms of timbre and dynamics, the situation of a lullaby enforces a soft, quiet approach to both. If someone is trying to put an infant or young child to sleep, they are not going to sing or speak loudly; they are going to use their softest, most soothing voice possible, in order to create a peaceful setting. Because of this, lullabies are almost always sung in a hushed singing voice. A soft, familiar voice, combined with a repetitive melody and rhythm is calming to a restless child, making him ease gently into sleep. When singing a lullaby, a very small dynamic range is often used, with most, if not all, of the song sung at a piano or pianissimo dynamic level.

When analyzing the musical characteristics in terms of pitch, there are many similar characteristics among lullabies from all parts of the world. Lullabies, in general, have limited melodic ranges, rarely spanning over an octave. This accounts for the common, amateur singer’s vocal range. The smaller range also makes the melody easier to memorize. In terms of rhythm, they tend to be modest in nature, without tricky or complex phrases that might deter an average singer from remembering how to sing the lullaby. Lullabies are often a repetition of several verses of the same melody, what is described as strophic form in Euro-American music. This repetitive form reinforces the simple melodic lines, making it easier to
memorize. Many examples use a “rocking rhythm,” which is any rhythmic meter that aids the singer in rocking her child to sleep. Repetitive melodies combine with this rocking rhythm to create a hypnotic effect that will hopefully induce a cranky baby into a peaceful slumber.

One such lullaby that displays the common rhythmic properties of a lullaby is the well-known American lullaby, “Rock A-Bye, Baby” (see Figure 3). Although the true origins of its melody are debated, this lullaby was created when fifteen-year-old Effie Canning set the familiar words of the nursery rhyme “Rock A-Bye, Baby” to music in 1874.\(^\text{34}\) The provided version is in a simple triple meter, but many notated and oral versions are in a compound duple meter. Regardless of which meter choice the song takes, both meters work well for rocking a child to sleep. Both the melody and the rhythm are simple and easy to memorize, while the four-measure rhythmic ostinato carries through the entire verse over an ABAC song form.

![Figure 3: Rock A-Bye, Baby](http://www.traditional-songs.com/download_score.php?name=Rock-a-bye%20baby&country=Usa)

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**Art Music**

While countless examples of composed lullabies from art music traditions exist, many of the functional lullabies used at home are more of a folk genre than a fine art genre of music. However, in some cases, lullabies have evolved from art and popular music traditions into folk tunes. One such example is Johannes Brahms’s “Wiegenlied: Guten Abend, gute Nacht” widely known as “Brahms’s Lullaby.” “Wiegenlied: Guten Abend, gute Nacht” was originally composed as a classical lied in 1868, but its popularity has since turned it into a commonly sung lullaby throughout the Western world. In fact, most people would likely be able to hum “Brahms’s Lullaby” without even knowing it was originally a classical lied or that it was written by Johannes Brahms (if they even know who he is). Another such example of a lullaby that has transcended art music into the dreams of sleepy children is the well-known Lebanese lullaby “Nami, Nami,” or “Sleep, Sleep.” Twentieth-century Arab art music composer Marcel Khalife wrote “Nami, Nami,” but many Lebanese parents commonly sing it. Even while conducting research on this lullaby, two of my Lebanese colleagues easily recognized the melody and recollected singing it to their children.

Lullabies have been appropriated into art music and have been performed by a variety of mediums such as a classically trained vocalist, a large orchestra, and solo instruments. For example, Franz Schubert’s German song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* ends with the lied “Des Baches Wiegenlied,” or “The Brook’s Lullaby.” In this lied, the babbling brook lulls the character of the heartsick miller to death, as he silently drowns in the river after throwing himself in.  

Although Schubert titles his lied as a lullaby, in reality it is an art song that was composed to be performed in a professional venue by a classically trained vocalist and

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pianist. An average mother would not have the skill or familiarity with Schubert repertoire to sing this for her child; therefore, it is not a functional lullaby. Functional lullabies are usually sung by an ordinary person (usually a mother) attempting to lull an ordinary child in an ordinary setting.

**GENRE**

Scholarship suggests that lullabies are a universal phenomenon; however, there may not be a universal definition of a lullaby. Across the world, they are accepted as mostly vocal pieces meant to lull children to sleep. It is difficult, however, to fully define the genre for this type of music, since lullabies exist as folk songs and even art music. Also, due to their practical functionality, lullabies could also be considered work songs. Are lullabies a genre of themselves, or are they imbedded in several genres? Whether lullabies are work songs, charms, laments, or just simple, short, songs composed of a mother’s love, there are several relative genres to consider when defining lullabies.

*Laments*

Some cultures commonly associate lullabies with laments, due to their similar medium, usually sung by a woman, and by their common musical characteristics, such as descending melodic lines, elements of weeping, and direct, intimate delivery. The ancient Roman scholar, Marcus Varro even cites the Latin word “naenia,” meaning dirge or lament,

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as baby talk for “lullaby.” However, other translations of “naenia” include “magic song,” and “incantation”—words that are commonly associated with lullabies, due to their effectiveness of “magically” calming babies to sleep.

Many of the harsh topics addressed in lullabies may seem unsuitable for putting children to sleep. In the context of a lullaby, however, the idea of “ignorance is bliss” accounts for the inappropriate lyrics, since babies do not understand the lyrics and only respond to the calming sounds of the lullaby. When a baby listens to a lullaby, he responds to the sounds of the lyrics, rather than the meaning of them. A song with rhyming words might capture the baby’s aural attention; however, little does he know that these seemingly sweet words could actually be a woeful lament. A mother knows that her children do not understand the deeper meanings behind her lyrics, and for this reason, lullabies can mask instances of grief, complaint, or other mature concerns.

The association of lullabies with laments is perhaps due to the approach to song or chant shared between both genres. In Iraqi musical tradition, the poetic meter in which lullabies are commonly composed, called “wazn al na‘i,” or “meter of lamentation” is considered a lament poetic meter, which acts as the framework for lullabies and songs of mourning. While doing fieldwork in Italy, the folk music scholar Alan Lomax wrote that “the musical matrix of many southern Italian ninne-nanne (lullabies) is indistinguishable from the funeral lament proper and it is in fact a common belief that sleep is a temporary

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form of death and something in itself to be feared.”41 Laments are not only sung in times of grief or mourning; they are also sung at times of leave-taking. For example, a mother might sing a lament in reaction to her son going off to war, or her daughter parting the family through marriage.42

Since the performance of lullabies typically occurs in private, they sometimes readily act as a host for a lamenting mother. Lullabies might also act as laments for a grieving mother who has faced many hardships, such as war and violence, the loss of loved ones, or poverty. In Iraq, a country that has suffered through war in recent times, the text of their most famous lullaby, “Dilillol” is a lament within a lullaby. In Scheherazade Hassan’s article “Female Traditional Singers of Iraq,” she notes that lullabies are “the most vividly evoked and remembered genre in the Iraqi cultural memory” and that “they used to represent a widespread practice that expresses a traditionally female world view.”43 As if it were solely a lament, the text of “Dilillol” represents the female view of war, grief, and protection. As the baby drifts off to sleep from the soothing sounds of the lullaby, the mother laments in grief, as if she is speaking to her older son who she misses terribly. “Mama” is baby talk for a little baby, so in this case, it is referring to the little baby boy and not the singer’s mother.

Pampered is the baby, my son, pampered.
Your enemy is ill, and lives far away

O, mama, Oh
There is a mountain between you and me, mama.
My eyes cannot see your eyes anymore.

41 Luisa Del Giudice, “Ninna-nanne-nonsense?: Fears, Dreams, and Falling in the Italian Lullaby.”
42 Porter, “Lament.”
Your road and our road is by God, becoming far
I see and I hear the baby cry from far away
Oh, mama, oh, I predict the day we meet again will be a feast day

Pampered is the baby, my son, pampered.
Your enemy is ill, and lives far away.44

Since Iraq has struggled through many wars, many of their lullabies follow the theme of their enemies being far away, sick or injured, and unable to attack. The baby is reassured that the enemy is far away, and unable to hurt him, while deep down in the mother’s heart, she is calling to her far-away son, telling him that it is okay for him to return back home.

Lamenting through lulling, the mother puts her new son to sleep while crying for the old one.

Charms

As far back as 2000 B.C. (and probably before then), lullabies were associated with magic. The Babylonian lullaby discussed in “Background and Sources” mentions magic when the house god puts the baby to sleep. Sleep seems to have a magical effect on everyone. While resting and rejuvenating the body, sleep temporarily halts our many stresses, worries, or fears. Even more so, sleep enables us to enter a dream world with endless magical possibilities. Anthropologist James M. Wilce points out that “although similar to lullabies, laments are regarded not only as emotional outlets but, at least in some cultural contexts, as magically efficacious.”45 Lullabies, along with laments, should also be recognized as magically efficacious; babies are charmed to sleep through the soothing

44 Translation by Hélène Shalhoub.
incantations of their mothers. To place a “charm” on something involves chanting a verse that invokes some form of magic. Derived from the Latin word “carmen,” a song or prayer that is chanted, charms are often associated with sleep.\(^{46}\) Merriam Webster Dictionary Online defines “incantation” as “a use of spells or verbal charms spoken or sung as a part of a ritual of magic” and as “a written or recited formula of words designed to produce a particular effect.”\(^{47}\) Lullabies, too, could be partly defined as a “recited formula of words designed to produce a particular effect.” The effect, of course, is sleep.

In traditional Greek lullabies, mothers call upon Ύπνος (Hypnos), or Sleep, as a figure of magic, who is asked to take the baby in his arms and help him go to sleep.\(^{48}\) Sleep is associated with the Greek mythology gods Hypnos, the god of sleep, Thanatos, the god of peaceful death, and Morpheus, the god of dreams. In fact, in Greek, the word for sleep is Hypnos. Hypnos the god is often depicted carrying one of the following items: a horn of sleep-inducing opium, a poppy-stem, a branch soaked and dripping with water from the river Lethe (Forgetfulness), or an inverted torch.\(^{49}\) Hypnos’s mythological brothers and sisters, all born to Nyx, goddess of night, mostly consist of gods and goddesses that carry negative connotations. For example, Hypnos’s twin brother Thanatos is the god of peaceful death. Their brothers and sisters include: Moros (Doom), Ker (Violent Death), Oneiroi (Dreams), Momos (Blame), Oizys (Misery), Moirai (Fates), Keres (Death-Fates), Nemesis (Envy), Apathe (Deceit), Philotes (Friendship), Geras (Old Age), and Eris (Strife). Curiously, many of these ideas, such as fate, doom, death, and strife, commonly appear in lullabies.

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\(^{46}\) Carol Kimball, “Charm me Asleep,” Journal of Singing 69, no. 1 (September/October 2012), 79-83.
‘Ὑπνε, που παίρνεις τα μικρά,” or “Sleep, who takes little ones” is a common Greek lullaby in which mothers sing to their children while calling upon Hypnos, who takes the children with him and helps them grow up.

Sleep, who takes the young children  
Come over and take mine.  
Young—young I am giving to you.  
Bring him back much bigger.  

As big as a tall mountain,  
As tall as a cypress tree.  
Also make his/her branches spread  
from East to West.\(^{50}\)

By asking Hypnos to bring her young child back much bigger, the mother is anticipating the growth of her baby; of course, she hopes that he will be very successful when he is all grown

\(^{50}\) Translation by Ignatios Vakalis.
up. Hypnos is asked to play a role in the child’s future success, spreading his branches, or influence, from East to West, across the world.

The melody of “Sleep, who takes little ones” explores a mode that includes D, E-flat, F-sharp, G, A, B-flat, C, D (see Figure 4). Verse one, for example, explores scale degrees one through six, with an ascending melody in measures one through seven, followed by a cadential descent in measures twelve through twenty-five. The simple, flowing exploration of this mode, combined with a simple rhythm comprised of mostly quarter notes and half notes, makes it easy for the mother to recite from memory. Most importantly, this modest, yet beautiful melody contributes to the lullaby’s hypnotic, drowsy effect on the child.

**Work Songs**

Simply put, work songs are songs that are sung or played during actions of work to pass the time. *Grove Music Online* describes work songs as being performed during and in time to the actions of work.52 Work songs can range from vocal pieces sung by female slaves harvesting cotton to complex percussive pieces made from stamping actions in a mailroom.53 When considering the love that underlies many lullabies sung by caring mothers, it might be difficult to think of a lullaby as a work song—are mothers really just trying to pass the time and get through the exhausting work of motherhood? After all, raising a child or children is far from easy, and may come with qualms. Many children are sung to sleep by someone other than their mother, father, or someone who really loves them. For example, lullabies can

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51 Melody transcription by Lauren Castro.
be sung to babies by nannies or others who may or may not put much love into their singing. In this case, lullaby singing might part of a job, or a last resort to hush a crying baby.

A nanny’s work can be grueling, in some cases even more difficult than the mother’s work. Historically, many nannies were household servants who were also expected to serve the position of a nursemaid. In Japan, many lullabies were composed under the harsh circumstances of being a live-in nanny. The common custom called “komori-boko” forced teenage girls, usually of poor families, to serve a wealthy family as a live-in nanny and look after newborn babies. In exchange for ninety-five pounds of rice, these young girls worked as a nanny for at least a year, far away from their own family. No matter how discontented or homesick these nannies felt, they were never allowed to complain aloud about their feelings, as they were supposed to be submissive to their masters. One woman remembered her time as a nanny at age fourteen:

My father told me to serve as a live-in nanny for one year. Since I thought one year would pass by quick, I became a nanny….I put a baby on my back all day. Because he wetted his clothes constantly, I eventually had prickly heat on my back. When the baby cried, my master got really mad by yelling not to let him cry….I was supposed to work for one year, but my master told me to work for one more year and one more. I ended up with a three-year service.

These homesick girls, however, found a secret way to open up and complain about their troubles—through lullabies. In the small village of Itsuki, Japan, examples of lullabies written by “komori-boko” nannies addressing desire and discontent were collected by Teruo

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55 Masuyama, “Desire and Discontent in Japanese Lullabies.”
Themes such as homesickness, hatred for the babies, jealousy of the rich masters, and longing for their job to end are common in Itsuki lullabies. The following lullaby, “Itsuki Lullaby,” demonstrates the subversion found in lullabies written by “komori-boko” nannies. Because coming up with new tunes to quiet aggravating, crying newborns was simply a part of the demanding work of slave childcare, “Itsuki Lullaby” could easily be considered a lullaby and work song.

Because of its beautiful melody, “Itsuki Lullaby” has become a popular tune in Japan. Many modern renditions of this lullaby can be heard with or without the lyrics, such as on a Japanese shakuhachi (a bamboo flute) or the koto (a plucked zither), though, most commonly, an average parent sings it to a slumbering baby, just as the distressed nannies sung it.

I certainly hate
Taking care of the crying child.
They hate me for keeping the child to cry,
They hate me for keeping the child to cry.

The sleeping child's
Cuteness and Innocent look!
The crying child's ugly look,
The crying child's ugly look.

I will be here until Bon Festival,
After Bon Festival, I will not be here.
If Bon Festival comes earlier, I would return home earlier.

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If Bon Festival comes earlier, I would return home earlier.\(^{58}\)

The lyrics flow as if the singer is thinking aloud; she complains about her duties as a nanny and how she is treated poorly, and swings being admiring and hating the baby. Although the baby is probably innocent and cute enough for anyone to admire him, to the nanny, he is just a symbol of demanding, hard work. The lullaby’s text closes with a longing to return home as soon as the Bon Festival comes. Themes of homesickness and sadness permeate the lyrics of this lullaby, giving the adult listener a new perspective to the depth of this lullaby written by an unhappy nanny longing for her real family.

From a musical standpoint, this song exemplifies the typically repetitive structure of a lullaby. The melody is sung in a pentatonic mode on D, which in this transcription, consists of D, E, F, A, and B-flat (see Figure 5). The half steps between E and F, and A and B-flat, give this pentatonic mode a somber sound, which goes appropriately with the lyrics.\(^{59}\) The melody is simple; after listening to it only a few times, it is easy to remember. The repetition of the short, simple melody helps lull the drowsy child to sleep.

\[ \text{Figure 5: “Itsuki Lullaby”}^{60}\]

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\(^{58}\) Translation by Mami Saito.

\(^{59}\) My Japanese friend Mami Saito’s impression of the melody: unhappy, sad.

\(^{60}\) Melody transcribed by Lauren Castro.
Another well-known lullaby from Japan is “Edo Lullaby.” Originating in Edo, Japan (the former name of Tokyo), its text presents the opposite of “Itsuki Lullaby;” the character in the lyrics is one of the rich mothers and masters of a nanny. The mother complains that her nanny has left to see her own family but reminds herself of the advantage of her trip home: the nanny will bring the child some souvenirs. Many different options for what the souvenirs might be are interchangeable in the lyrics; that is to say not all versions of “Edo Lullaby” mention a toy drum and a flute like in this example. Similar to “Itsuki Lullaby,” “Edo Lullaby” has been performed and recorded as an art song for various combinations of Japanese instruments, but it is a traditional folk song—it is originally just a simple little song written by an average nanny who was just doing her job of putting a baby to sleep. The modest rhythm and simple melody make memorizing and reciting this lullaby an easy task for any lullaby singer. Figure 6, below, is from Dorothy Commin’s *Lullabies of the World*. Measures one through eight comprise the common melody of “Edo Lullaby,” while the rest of the transcription is Commins’s addition.

Hushabye, Hushabye!
My good Baby, Sleep!
Where did my boy's baby-sitter go?
Beyond that mountain, back to her home.

As a souvenir from her home, what did you get?
A toy drum and a reed flute.
Hushabye, Hushabye!
Hushabye, Hushabye!  

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SUBVERSION AND LOVE

Subversion

Are lullabies love songs? Or are they much more? A heartwarming sleep song? Or a therapeutic outlet for venting day-to-day troubles and grief? Because lullabies can be so deeply subversive, they can straddle the border of love and discontent. The intimate setting of lullabies allows the singer to the sing about whatever she wants to the naïve child. Many

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Note: Piano accompaniment was added by Commins because she felt “it was necessary to create a simple piano setting not only to help establish the mood of each melody, but also to convey something of the spirit and character of songs which come from the far corners of the globe,” XIII.

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cultures expect women to remain submissive to their husbands. As passive, obedient wives, many mothers hold on to their “inappropriate” thoughts and release them during lullaby singing. The cradlesong acts as a tool for the mother to vent her thoughts of desire, discontent, envy, or grief.

In her book on lullabies, Leslie Daiken labels this “projection of extraneous fears and forlornness” as “singing inward.”63 “Singing inward” can address a variety of taboo topics such as martial problems, homemaker exhaustion, or even the fear that her baby might die. In this Italian lullaby, a mother complains about her difficult life as a wife and a mother:

Sleep, my beauty, sleep,  
Sleep and rock-a-bye,  
because when you become a mother  
you won’t sleep like this.

Sleep, my beauty, sleep,  
because when you have a husband  
you won’t sleep like this.

Sleep, my beauty, sleep,  
in your bed of lilies  
because when you have children  
you won’t sleep like this.64

Through a sweet, lulling melody, a mother, or even a nanny, might warn the child of the harsh future to come. Topics such as adulthood, hunger, war, and even death can saturate a loving melody to create a song that is both calming for the child and healing for the singer.

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The Basque lullaby “Aur gaishua lo eta lo,” or “Hush, Poor Child, Hush Thee to Sleep” exemplifies the dual task of a mother’s lulling and venting. The first verse of the text is quite soothing; the mother sings about slumber, and even mentions her own much-awaited moment of sleep. The second verse, however, is an example of a mother’s “inward singing,” as she complains about her drunk, unfaithful husband.

Hush, poor child, hush thee to sleep;
See him lying in slumber deep!
Thou first, then following I,
We will hush and hush-a-by.
Lo lo lo lo lo lo.

Thy bad father is at the inn;
Sleep and rock-a-by,
Oh! the shame of it, and the sin!
Home at midnight he will fare
Drunk with strong wine of Navarre!
Lo lo lo lo lo lo. 65

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Through this song, the upset mother discretely complains to her child about her marital problems. It appears she has a drunk for a husband, who may even be unfaithful. Rather than spending time with her and their child, he prefers to be at the bar. Since the child is unaware of the meaning of words, the mother can openly complain to him about his drunk, unfaithful father. Just as the lullaby is dual functioning in meaning, the mode upon which the melody is based is dual functioning; that is to say that it combines both Ionian and Aeolian modes to create a sweet, yet brooding sound (see figure 7). Scale degrees one through five

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(E-F#-G#-A-B) combine with scale degrees six and seven (C-D) to create a melody that moves between feelings of happiness and angst. For example, the “2-3-1” scale-degree pattern heard in the pacifying “lo lo lo lo lo lo” lines give the melody an almost cheerful sound, while the C-natural gives the tune a slightly sorrowful feel. As expected, the melody and the rhythm are simple enough for a lullaby and could quickly and easily be learned and memorized through oral transmission.

The subversive lyrics of lullabies can show the utter impatience and annoyance felt by overworked mothers and nannies. At the end of the day, the one thing a mother needs most is sleep, herself. Fed up with her crying child, the mother might threaten him through a soft, deceiving lullaby—after all, the baby does not know he is jokingly being threatened. While the distraught nannies from Itsuki, Japan grieved about homesickness and hatred of their job in their lullabies, they also threatened their master’s babies. The following verse from an Itsuki, Japan lullaby makes one wonder if the nanny actually followed through with her threat on occasion: “If you don't go to sleep after I say, ‘Go to sleep,’ once, I'll hit your head and pinch your butt.” Similarly, in an Italian lullaby, negative, aggressive images are masked by the lullaby: “Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, what patience it takes. I’m going to knock you against the dresser! ohô! ohô! ohô!”

Fears and threats of being attacked or eaten by an aggressive animal are also a common theme in many lullabies. In Italy, children fear the wolf, in Japan the fox, and in Guatemala, the Coyote if they do not quickly fall asleep. The wolf’s threatening presence in many southern Italian lullabies signifies the upcoming harsh realities of life with lyrics often

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asking the child, “what will you do when you find yourself in the wolf’s mouth?”69 In a similar example from Japan, the “worried” mother tricks her child into sleeping sooner by frightening her with a fox: “Now be a good child, because to a little girl who did not want to sleep, appeared a fox. I am very much afraid that this will happen to you. So, be a good child and go to sleep.”70 The canción de cuna (lullaby) “A la rorro nene” is familiar among many families in Guatemala. The baby is threatened not by a wolf or a fox, but by a coyote that will eat him if he does not go to sleep:

A la rorro nene, a la rorro ro,
dormite mi niño, dormite mi dios.

Dormite mi niño, cabeza de ayote,
que si no dormis te come el coyote.

A la rorro nene, a la rorro ro,
dormite mi niño, dormite mi dios.

Translation:

Rock-a-by, rock-a-by,
sleep, my little one, sleep my god

Sleep, my child, pumpkin head
because if you don’t sleep, the coyote will eat you!

rock-a-by, rock-a-by,
sleep, my little one, sleep my god.71

Love

With the many somber, distressing, and even threatening lullabies mentioned throughout this paper, it is easy to forget about the lullabies that feature positive lyrics. From a first glance at a paper about lullabies, you may have thought you were getting yourself into a reading of loving, affectionate, “fuzzy” baby songs. Lullabies, however, often only appear to be this way on the surface. From laments or incantations to threats and complaints, lullabies often are much more powerful than they appear. The subversion of these “harmless” songs can be a glimpse into the distresses of the cultures from whence they came. The private, uncensored nature of lullabies has allowed singers to mask distress through singing. The sweet, innocent sounds of a lullaby can disguise the often-negative lyrics. In some cases, you were right all along to classify lullabies as “fuzzy baby songs”—some really are just that. Along with the cradlesongs that voice a mother’s concerns or complaints, many actually voice a mother’s love and contentment with her child and family. “Nami Nami,” a lullaby of the contemporary Lebanese composer Marcel Khalife, depicts nothing more than a mother’s love for her child and a positive family life. Although this lullaby was a composed art song, many Lebanese mothers have committed it to memory and regularly sing it to their sleepy children. In regions that explore similar modal systems, such as Iran, Egypt, and even Greece, “Nami Nami” has been adapted as a pop song with each surrounding culture’s personal touch. For example, in a YouTube video, “Nami Nami” is called an “Egyptian Lullaby,” sung by Aida Al Ayoubi. Although the lyrics slightly differ from the Khalife’s

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72 Two Lebanese colleagues of mine recognized “Nami Nami” and reported singing it to their children.
“Nami Nami,” the melody is the same in the Egyptian version. Greek singer Pemi Zouni has included it on her CD of world lullabies, in which she sings Khalife’s Arabic lyrics to an accompaniment of Greek instruments. In a CD of Middle-Eastern lullabies lovingly dedicated to her son Iman, Iranian singer Azam Ali sang her own interpretation of “Nami Nami” (see Figure 8).

   Go to sleep little one.
   Let us rest on this straw mat.
   Go to sleep while it is yet dark.
   Soon the clouds will disappear and reveal a great light to light up all the neighborhood.
   Tomorrow your father will return home with money from the lemons he sold.
   He will bring you clothes and a scarf to keep you warm in December.
   My beautiful one, with lovely handpicked black hair, whomever does not love you or kiss you knows not what they are missing.

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74 The YouTube video claims that “Nami Nami” is an Egyptian lullaby, but it appears on Marcel Khalife’s album *At the Border* as his own composition.


76 Although Lebanese singer Oumaima Khalil originally collaborated with Marcel Khalife to sing and record “Nami Nami” on Khalife’s 1980 album *At the Border*, I chose to transcribe the music from Azam Ali’s interpretation. With an opportunity to sing and perform “Nami Nami” with Cal Poly University’s Arab Music Ensemble, I decided Ali’s version would best suit the ensemble, because of her arrangement with added lazmas (instrumental interludes) and composed introduction to the song. Lyrics transcription by Hélène Shalhoub and Ken Habib.

77 Lyrics translation by Azam Ali.
Nami Nami

On Azam Ali's album *From Night to the Edge of Day*, originally on B, transposed to D

Figure 8: “Nami Nami”
Through images of happiness, admiration for her child, and comfort, a mother’s love saturates the lyrics of “Nami Nami.” As we would expect, easy-to-understand melodies and rhythms, combined with repetition of phrases, represent the music of “Nami Nami.”

Composed in the melodic mode of Bayyati, the lullaby involves the pitches D, E-half-flat, F, G, A, B-flat, C, and D (where the E-half-flat is a neutral second). As often in the case of Eastern Arab art music, the melody first explores the lower part of the mode, before going on to explore the upper part of the mode. Accordingly, in “Nami Nami,” sections A and B explore only the first five pitches in the mode (pitches D, E-half-flat, F, G, and A) and then predictably cadence to D at the end of each phrase. In the C section, the melody finally ascends to the anticipated upper end of the mode (see measures 29 and 33). The iqa’ rhythmic mode is based on a four-beat cycle. Azam Ali’s rendition of “Nami Nami” draws rhythmic idioms from Arabic, Persian, and popular styles, adding a complicated layer to its performance in an ensemble setting with percussion. However, if sung a cappella by a mother to her baby, the rhythm, consisting of mostly quarter notes and eighth notes, is simple quadruple. Of course, a free rhythm approach to singing “Nami Nami” can also be used, along with improvisation and ornamentation.

CONCLUSION

Lullabies open the door to the musical culture in which each is born. While hinting at the social context from whence they came, they humanize and soften the common people of the world. They can be laments, historical works songs, magical incantations, or as you may
have thought all along, “fuzzy baby songs.” Whether scary, threatening, gendered, or just plain affectionate, it is apparent that lullabies are a rather subversive and powerful category of children’s songs—why else would *Lullabies from the Aix of Evil* be blacklisted?
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