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Song before speech: infant vocal expressions, attachment, and the ritornello

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a closer look at the musical dimensions of early infant vocal expressions (crying, cooing, and babbling) and their role in shaping secure attachment through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the ritornello. Building on Bowlby's attachment theory, which highlights the infant's innate signalling behaviours and the caregiver's responsive attunement, the discussion brings into focus how repeated vocal exchanges create a sonic 'territory' that cultivates a sense of emotional safety. Drawing on studies of mother–infant interactions, the paper examines how rhythmic and melodic qualities of cries and babbles elicit complementary parental responses, forming proto-conversations integral to a child's emerging self-regulation. The theory of communicative musicality is brought into the discussion to show how these interactive 'songs' precede formal language yet convey complex affective states. Deleuze and Guattari's refrains framework accentuates the creative, structuring power of repeated sound patterns in steadying early relational life. The paper also sketches implications for psychoanalytic work with children, illustrating how vocal refrains can help stabilise unprocessed experience in child psychotherapy. Bringing together insights from Kristeva, Trevarthen, and Stern, the paper asserts that the preverbal 'song before speech' establishes a foundation for later linguistic and psychosocial development.

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Infant vocality as rhythmic territory

Early infancy is a time when there is the formation of relational bonds. Equipped with various innate reflexes, newborns quickly develop ways to engage their caregivers nonverbally and through vocal expressions. Crying is often considered a reflexive response, but many have emphasised its melodic complexity. It takes mothers no more than a few weeks to learn to differentiate hunger, discomfort, and distress from the pitch, timing, and intensity of their infant's cries.

By about three months, infants display new vocal qualities sometimes called 'pleasure cries', which may have a rising–falling melody set at a slightly higher pitch than the more urgent cry from hunger or pain. Afterwards, cooing emerges, offering a soft, sustained tone sometimes associated with states of calm alertness or enjoyment in social contact. This progression leads into babbling, where novel

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consonant-like articulations blend with earlier vowel sounds, yielding patterns such as 'ba', 'ga', or 'da' that frequently invite reciprocal 'babble talk' from an attentive caregiver.

Attachment as melodic dialogue

Bowlby's work on attachment clarifies how repeated cycles of infant signalling and caregiver responsiveness shape the infant's sense of safety. From Bowlby's perspective (1969/1982), crying is an attachment behaviour that summons a protective figure to alleviate distress or fulfil basic needs. Similarly, Winnicott (1965) drew attention to the caregiver's role in providing a 'holding environment', an emotionally safe and reliably responsive setting that supports the infant's sense of continuity of being. This concept intersects with Bowlby's secure base in pointing out the transformative power of attentive care for the child's emerging self. Repeated interactions in which the caregiver meets the infant's vocal cues with comforting proximity help nurture this secure base.

The philosopher-psychoanalyst Kristeva (1980) argued that language acquisition involves both creative possibility and a certain loss, as the child's original affect-laden sounds become subsumed by formal linguistic structure. Before the child has command of words to denote sadness, hunger, or delight, that child directly expresses such states through vocal contours. Infants essentially 'sing' their experience of the world. This idea resonates with a body of research on communicative musicality, a term extensively explored by Malloch and Trevarthen (2009), who describe how infants and caregivers co-create rhythmic and melodic patterns in their early interactions.

Trevarthen (1979) observed that even before language, mothers and infants fall into temporal synchronies that correspond to a core capacity for what he calls 'primary intersubjectivity'. Infants coo or babble, the mother responds, and the ensuing interplay exhibits a call-and-response dynamic reminiscent of musical phrases. Mothers everywhere appear to adjust their speech automatically in pitch, pace, and melodic contour when addressing an infant, a phenomenon historically referred to as *motherese* (Newport, 1977), though more recent developmental literature often uses the term *infant-directed speech*. Across a wide range of languages, Fernald (1989) showed that caregivers' heightened swings in pitch and rhythm seize an infant's attention; at the same time, those vocal curves carry unmistakable emotional warmth. Through repeated enactments of this vocal dance, the infant receives not only essential caregiving but also an affective imprint of a caring presence that 'sings back' in harmony.

Beatrice Beebe's (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002) micro-analytic filming of mother–infant face-to-face interaction corroborates this point: while mothers often match the infant's vocal qualities, they also introduce slight variations. That alternation of closeness and difference signals 'me with you', rather than a mere echo chamber, and aligns with Winnicott's notion of a holding environment (Winnicott, 1965). In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, each refrain both territorialises (matching) and deterritorialises (novelty), thereby sustaining a creative interplay that further stabilises attachment.[1]

Winnicott (1965) deepens this view by proposing that every satisfying maternal response forms part of a wider 'holding' ambience within which the infant's unintegrated sensations consolidate into a first sense of continuity of being. When

a caregiver mirrors an infant cry with a softened contour or echoes a playful babble, the sound functions like a *provisional transitional object*; it belongs simultaneously to self and other, occupying what Winnicott later called 'potential space' (Winnicott, 1971). In that acoustic interval, the infant experiments with boundaries of agency rather than collapsing into merger or rupture. In practical terms, these early refrains are miniature acts of play that stabilise attachment while rehearsing the capacity to be alone in the presence of another.

Klein (1946) would frame the same interaction in terms of *projective identification*. The distressed infant expels raw persecutory anxiety into the caregiver; the caregiver receives, transforms, and returns the material as a modulated vocal phrase that the infant can re-introject. Each cry–soothe loop therefore rehearses movement from the paranoid–schizoid configuration towards the depressive position, where good and bad aspects of the object may coexist without fragmentation. The acoustic refrain is not only regulatory; it is reparative – a sonic prototype of the later capacity to experience ambivalence and guilt and to seek reparation.

Seen through a Kleinian lens, the repeated musical motif carries unconscious meaning: it signals to the infant that destructiveness can be survived and repaired. In Winnicottian language, it makes the impingements personal, converting undifferentiated distress into shareable experience. Thus, the upcoming ritornello formulation does not replace psychoanalytic insight; it re-describes those insights in the sonic register.

The ritornello: refrains of attachment

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the ritornello is not merely repetition in the narrow sense. It is a recurring sonic or rhythmic motif that gathers a provisional centre, marks out a territory, and can later open that territory outward again. Their well-known example is the frightened child who sings in the dark. The little song does not abolish chaos, but sketches a fragile orientation within it.

In an effort to conceptualise the creative, rhythmic aspect of early infant-caregiver communication, Wainwright (2022) draws upon the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of the ritornello, or refrain. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the term to show how repeated sonic or rhythmic patterns can carve out a provisional territory in the midst of chaos. In infancy, the repeated call and return of cry, coo, babble, and answer gradually acquires this territorial function. What first appears spontaneous becomes patterned through repetition; the dyad is not simply exchanging signals, but composing a shared acoustic ground. The infant's sounds begin to mark a relational space that can be recognised, re-entered, and trusted.

Bowlby (1969/1982) shows that attachment emerges from predictable cry-and-response loops, each return to the pattern steadying the infant's emotional balance much as a musical ritornello steadies a composition. When read through Deleuze and Guattari (1987), these loops seem less like routine exchanges and more like moments of invention in which sound, rather than words, sketches the child's first rough map of belonging. In this way, caregiving moves beyond practical assistance; it becomes a silent co-composition in which every whimper elicits an answer tuned to the same key. The interplay of cries, coos, and babbles with answering lullabies and hums weaves a pocket

of resonance sturdy enough to shelter the earliest stirrings of self. Where Bowlby stresses the adaptive function of these interactions in ensuring protection, a ritornello perspective also calls attention to the aesthetic and rhythmic pleasure inherent in them.

Stern (1985) advanced the idea of affect attunement in infant–caregiver exchanges, describing how mothers often reflect the infant's affective state by mirroring not the exact pitch or sound but the underlying dynamic form of that sound. If the infant's coo has a sudden rise and fall, the mother might respond with a similarly shaped vocal 'phrase'. This form of matching, Stern argued, helps the infant sense that the caregiver is truly in sync with or attuned to the infant's subjective experience. The concept of the refrain extends this focus by showing how the repeated matching over time accumulates into an implicit 'audio territory' that the infant experiences whenever vocal interplay recurs. The territory contributes to the infant's ability to regulate themselves and to expand the range of play.

Crying is perhaps the most common site of refrains in infancy, since it is typically repeated with urgency. However, cooing and babbling also serve as refrains that signal the infant's desire to engage. The mother responds with similarly playful or melodic tones, reaffirming the infant's sense that the environment is welcoming and participatory. Researchers like Papoušek and Papoušek (1991) have carefully observed the microstructure of these early 'proto-conversations', showing how turn-taking and melodic interplay develop spontaneously within the mother–infant dyad. Mothers instinctively vary their pitch, sometimes producing elongated singsong syllables. Infants learn that their vocal output can prompt an immediate echo, creating a loop of reciprocal sound. Over repeated interactions, these loops crystallise into a core relational pattern, the infant's first real sense of 'dialogue'. Wainwright (2022) connects these micro-level observations to the broader philosophical account of Deleuze and Guattari, stressing that the repeated cyclical motif, comprising the baby's cue and the mother's echo, acts as a stable refrain that territorialises the shared space and fosters a baseline of security for the infant's emergent selfhood.

A published case from Alvarez (1992) highlights this dynamic. Alvarez worked with a dysregulated toddler whose piercing night-time screams did not respond to soothing. By beginning each session with a gentle, three-note hum that mirrored, yet softened, the child's cry, Alvarez gradually enabled the toddler to replace the scream with the hum. Within weeks, the toddler deployed this newly contained motif for self-soothing, evidence that the analyst's attuned refrain functioned as a proto-rhythmic holding environment.

While early vocal expressions primarily anchor mother–infant attachment, they also pave the way for the child's later linguistic abilities. Pinker (1994) notes that infant babbling is the brain's way of auditioning phonemes; the surrounding language culture then reinforces only those sounds that belong to its own system. Until speech consolidates, however, the child's vocal field stays remarkably open, unconstrained by the rules of symbolic meaning. In other words, it sings.

When vocabulary arrives, Kristeva (1980) observes, the child leans less on raw vocalisation, and the grain of crying or cooing slips beneath the more architectural pressures of grammar and lexicon. This handover stitches a delicate seam between feeling and signification, yet it never erases the earlier cadences. Instead, those sonic traces lodge in the psyche, a low-frequency archive of bodily affect. Deleuze and

Guattari (1987) call this persisting pattern a refrain, a term that helps explain why these infantile motifs can quicken again in adulthood, breaking the surface when emotions peak or when a therapeutic encounter coaxes them back into the present.

Porges's (2011) polyvagal theory provides further insight into how vocal modulation helps regulate physiological states. In Porges's view, certain acoustic signals, including melodic prosody, can cue the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting calm and social engagement. Infants rely on their caregivers' soothing voices to achieve a down-regulation of stress. The repeated patterns of lullabies, humming, or comforting speech become powerful regulators of an infant's arousal level. Wainwright (2022) contends that this physiological fact intersects with the ritornello concept, since repeated vocal refrains not only demarcate an emotional territory but also help the child to biologically shift from a state of distress to one of calm. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) famously mention the child who, frightened in the dark, begins to hum a tune under their breath. The hum, repeated and steadied, becomes a focus of safety and self-organisation. Repeated refrains, in other words, create a sense of familiar grounding or 'home'. With repeated exposure, the infant internalises this capacity to be soothed by rhythmic and melodic input, eventually learning to self-soothe or to find similar rhythms in the broader environment.

Therapeutic echoes

When the early holding environment fractures, or when the caregiver cannot detoxify projective attacks, the child is left with insecure attachment patterns and a compromised capacity for play. Clinical theorists like Schore (2003) and Stern (1985) note that therapeutic interventions often need to revisit these preverbal layers of experience to address the root of early emotional dysregulation. In this section, I extend the paper's central claim by arguing that preverbal vocal refrains (songs) do not simply precede language development but reappear clinically as regulatory motifs; revisiting them in therapy can reorganise dysregulated affect and reopen play.

Austin (2010), in her work on vocal psychotherapy, describes how adults in treatment can use nonverbal vocalisation such as moans, hums, or improvised melodic lines to contact primary affect states that remain only partially available to narrative recall. When the therapist echoes, supports, or lightly harmonises with the client's spontaneous vocal contours, the response can function as a corrective relational experience reminiscent of early caregiver attunement, where distress is met not only with meaning but with rhythm, pacing, and tonal warmth.

A parallel operation is visible in psychoanalytic child and adolescent psychotherapy, where the clinical task often involves meeting affect that is organised less by language than by repetition, sensation, and threshold phenomena (sound included). In this setting, a child's recurring hum, click, squeal, fragment of song, or prosodic 'call' can be heard as a ritornello: a small refrain that is neither mere symptom nor mere play, but a self-made device for stabilising the field when separation, uncertainty, or unmentalised intensity threatens to overwhelm thought. Rather than attempting to eliminate the repetition, the therapist can treat it as a potential site of holding and symbolisation-in-the-making; the refrain becomes a micro-territory within the transference, testing whether the room can bear feeling without retaliation, collapse, or premature explanation.

Alvarez's (1992) clinical writing is useful here because it renders audible how such refrains may be taken up psychoanalytically: she describes work with very young children whose dysregulation is not readily reached by interpretive speech alone and shows how a steady, simplified vocal response (a consistent, gentle motif, offered with restraint) can operate as a containing 'return' that the child may begin to internalise and re-deploy.

Read through Winnicott, the therapist's moderated refrain can be understood as part of a facilitating environment, a transitional phenomenon in sound that the child can use without being invaded by it; read through Klein and later containment-based traditions, the same gesture may be understood as receiving projected, unprocessed states and returning them in a form that is less persecutory, more thinkable, and therefore more liveable. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, the analytic room is briefly re-territorialised by the refrain, and it is precisely this modest structuring of sonic time that can reopen play, curiosity, and the capacity to relate.

From Winnicott's psychoanalytic standpoint, the therapist supplies a new *transitional object in sound*. From Klein's psychoanalytic standpoint, the therapist receives the client's split-off dread and returns it in a melodic form that can be mourned and reintegrated. The effectiveness of adult voicework therefore hinges on a calibrated oscillation between *somatic immersion and reflective distance*, the very oscillation that Klein and Winnicott both consider foundational for psychic growth.

The therapeutic relevance of the refrain lies precisely here: raw affect does not need to be mastered all at once in order to become workable. Through repeated vocal exchange, unformed intensity can begin to assume contour. In the therapeutic reenactment of early cry-response loops, the melodic gestures co-created by therapist and client allow previously unformulated feeling to take on shape in the relational field. What was once overwhelming may become repeatable, and what is repeatable may become bearable, thinkable, and eventually playable.

Newham (1996) points out that many people have never fully investigated their capacity to vocalise raw, preverbal emotion due to cultural norms that emphasise composure and linguistic precision. In voice-based therapy, the adult might experiment with an unstructured wail or whimper, while the therapist responds in a gentle, complementary tone. Through repetition of that loop, an 'audio territory' manifests that can soothe and contain feelings of fear, abandonment, or sadness. Wainwright (2022) proposes that the Deleuzo-Guattarian lens clarifies how that repeated motif functions: it is a creative, present-moment act of territorialisation in which chaotic affect is given shape and safety through newly established melodic boundaries. Clients have reported experiencing a sense of 'coming home' to a part of themselves that was preverbal or lost in infancy, echoing Bowlby's concept of secure attachment, but now reconstituted in an adult therapeutic setting.

Merleau-Ponty (1970) once commented that during the preverbal stage of life, all sounds are simply different ways of singing to the world. This description resonates with the vantage point that sees infancy as a time of deep musicality, where the child's cries, coos, and babbles serve more than an immediate communicative or adaptive purpose; they also express a direct bodily being-in-the-world. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) emphasise how each refrain is an event in which territory is staked out anew, meaning that every cry or coo is not just

a leftover biological reflex but a moment of creative expression. The caregiver's sensitive response amplifies that creativity and organises it into a predictable framework. When repeated across many days and months, these micro-acts of shared vocalisation accumulate into an implicit sense of identity, security, and relational possibility.

Tong (1989) notes that some psychoanalytic feminists argue that symbolic language ultimately separates the infant from the maternal voice, implying a rupture between bodily affect and symbolic representation. This perspective suggests that some individuals spend adult life longing for the unity once found in the prelinguistic maternal 'chorus'. Where classical psychoanalysis viewed this as an unavoidable separation, creative arts therapies offer a method for reintegrating early bodily–vocal experiences into one's conscious relational world. By harnessing nonverbal singing or vocal improvisation in the therapy room, clients can reacquaint themselves with the earliest layers of subjective life. The repeated, rhythmic patterns that define the infant–caregiver relationship can be re-enacted, forging a new emotional territory. In this sense, adult voicework can be understood as a reworking of early attachment experience, one that may help clients establish a more stable sonic ground for affect regulation (Austin, 2010; Newham, 1996; Schore, 2003).

These considerations hint at the universal significance of musical maternal–infant engagement. The phenomenon of 'universal lullabies' is relevant: despite cultural differences in scale or lyrical content, lullabies everywhere are deliberately repetitive, slow, and soothing. Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) show that these lullabies operate not only to induce sleep, but to create a shared zone of rhythmic calm where emotional bonding can flourish. The mother's or father's repeated lullaby stanzas constitute a refrain that invests the child's immediate surroundings with predictability and care. Although Deleuze and Guattari did not write directly about lullabies, their theory of the ritornello foregrounds how such repeated musical motifs continually reassert a comforting territory that helps dispel anxiety. Securely attached children, according to Bowlby (1969/1982), internalise such repeated experiences as an inner working model of themselves as worthy of care and of caregivers as trustworthy. The musical dimension is thus no mere ornament, but a vehicle by which these internal models are formed.

For future research, the synergy of attachment theory with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain points towards multiple avenues of enquiry. Studies using microanalytic methods of coding infant–caregiver interactions could test how certain rhythmic or melodic repeats correlate with attachment security, building on the observational work by Papoušek and Papoušek (1991). Neurophysiological measures, such as EEG or heart-rate variability, could track how repeated lullabies or vocal play episodes reduce infant arousal levels, thus linking them to the formation of a secure territory in a biological sense (Porges, 2011). Researchers could also investigate cross-cultural differences in the melodic shapes of infant-directed speech and their bearing on attachment outcomes. These projects would broaden Bowlby's original emphasis on function by exploring the creative, aesthetic, and rhythmic aspects of caregiver-infant bonding.

Clinical implications extend to clinical practice. Schore (2003) offers a neurobiological explanation of how early right-brain to right-brain communication, often mediated by vocal prosody and facial expression, shapes emotional development. When that communication is inconsistent or frightening, the child's capacity to regulate emotion or trust others may be compromised, resulting in insecure attachments.

A therapist who uses a ritornello-informed approach might incorporate repeated vocal motifs into sessions with clients who display these attachment disruptions.

Austin (2010) describes how consistent, warmly pitched vocal phrases can become a 'container' for the client's distress, echoing the maternal lullaby. Eventually, clients internalise that container, creating new neural links and emotional narratives. By doing so, they are reclaiming the preverbal territory that was never adequately established or was disrupted in early life, thus rewriting Bowlby's notion of attachment from a vantage point that recognises the power of repeated melodic refrains.

Spoken language may seize the spotlight, yet the low-frequency duet that once passed between caregiver and infant does not simply dissolve; it settles into the nervous system, a felt vibration waiting to rise whenever articulation proves too brittle. When unease settles over us, we begin to hum, to rock, to loop a half-remembered lullaby; it is as if the body, needle poised above a dusty phonograph, were hunting for the very first groove. Merleau-Ponty (1970) would describe the impulse as an echo of our primordial being-in-the-world, a resonance that precedes the carving up of sensation into verbal signposts. Perhaps this is why a church hymn or a spontaneous chorus in the car tugs at us with near-prelinguistic force; shared breath and pitch weave a fleeting fabric of belonging. Wainwright (2022) adds that infancy's tonal routines and repeated gestures that once traced safe boundaries for the developing self continue to resonate in adult life. In therapy or through creative practice, these early soundscapes can be rediscovered, revisited, and even reshaped. In much the same way, infant vocalisations transform pure affect into rhythmic shapes, establishing a sense of order and possibility that persists long after infancy.

Conclusion

The vocal expressions of infants, such as crying, cooing, and babbling, are more than just reflexes or preludes to speech. They embody a musical, rhythmic dimension that cultivates emotional bonding and structures the child's earliest sense of belonging.

Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory clarifies how repeated sensitivity to infant signals promotes security, while Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the ritornello illuminates how these repeated cry–response cycles function as refrains that continuously shape a protective and creative 'territory'. Over time, these cyclical vocal motifs help the infant gain trust in the caregiver, internalise a stable working model of relationships, and lay the groundwork for linguistic and social development.

This paper has argued that the song before speech is not merely a fleeting infantile curiosity. Repeated vocal motifs help organise early attachment, and they continue to matter later in life when emotion exceeds ordinary speech and rhythmic repetition becomes a means of regulation, repair, and return.

Note

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are the collaborative thinkers whose work on rhythm, territory, and becoming informs the conceptual frame of this paper. I draw most directly on their discussion of the ritornello in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), while also using their broader vocabulary of territorialisation, deterritorialisation, and refrain more generally across the paper.

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