

Tanka Tanka Skunk

By Steve Webb
Orchard Books, 2004



Reviewed by
Veronika Schultz

T*anka Tanka Skunk* is a gem of a book. And, like crystalline gems, its structure comes from repeated units that fit together brilliantly. Tanka is the elephant. Skunk is, well, the skunk. In this delightful picture book, the two protagonists play with the rhythm and rhyme of their names and have a most glorious time. A refrain played on their drums quickly emerges: "Skunk, Tanka, Skunk, Tanka, Tanka, Tanka Skunk."

The book is brief, ideal for reading aloud to early childhood and primary music classes. Children immediately laugh at the nonsense words and become a rapt audience for the parade of critters that occur as episodes within this Elephant-Skunk *rondo* theme. This story lends itself to mini-lessons throughout the school year. A class can pat or clap the beat to the refrain and transfer it to hand drums, claves, or small maracas. Assign two levels of body percussion for the refrain and have each of two groups play one level. Another day, add different dynamics and choose the one the class likes the best.

There are myriad possibilities for developing rhythmic ostinati from a whole page or parts of a page: "tiger-cheetah, tiger-cheetah; lemur-llama-llama-lemur; dingo-donkey-duck." There is even layering of ostinati in the pictures of anteater and big blue whale. Or, pair creatures across or down a page to create combinations (e.g. alligator-ox, armadillo-fox). All this can be done with clear diction and expressive tone color.

Invite children to improvise "scat" solos by mixing up the Tanka and Skunk building blocks. Juxtapose rhyming words for a unique creation:

"chunka chunka skunk, tanka, plunk," or "tinka tanka tunk, bink, bank, bunk." Let the children play with these sounds and come up with their own mixes. Any of these rhythmic building blocks can be used for reading rhythm notation when the children are ready.

The book introduces metrical groupings: Skunk introduces his friend, Kangaroo, and points out the three sounds in his name; Tanka has a caterpillar crawl up his nose and then he plays the four sounds of his visitor on the drums. Many creatures in the text have names with two sounds.

How easy and what fun!

After the animals lie down for the

night, there is a cacophonous conclusion of voices and, of course, the Skunk-Tanka refrain one more time. One reading is hardly enough for youngsters. They will be eager to revisit these animal friends again and again. I encourage you to explore the many facets of this beautiful gem.

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