

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Contours Remembered: Melodic Shape in Public-Domain Children's Songs

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Abstract

Short children's songs are frequently identified by tune, yet printed variants show that recognition can survive changes of exact pitch and ending. This article asks which aspects of melodic contour sustain identity across variation. It compares melodies in early public-domain collections by William Wells Newell, Alice Bertha Gomme, Andrew Lang, and Walter Crane. The method follows initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern while separating notated comparison from uncollected claims about children's memory. The readings indicate that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when later phrases are repetitive; range boundaries segment otherwise similar stepwise motion; and variant endings preserve recognizability when they retain directional profile. Together, these findings explain tune identity through relations among beginning, range, repetition, and closure rather than through exact pitch strings. The article contributes a reproducible vocabulary for comparing printed melodic variants and defines the evidentiary limits created by unspecified pages, tune numbers, editions, and developmental or listener data.

Keywords: children's song; melodic contour; recognition; variation; phrase ending; range

1 Introduction

The reading of the notated passages developed here explores how contour organizes recognition and variation in short children's melodies. Its corpus comprises a documented set of public-domain children's song melodies drawn from early printed collections. The central claim is that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when later phrases are repetitive. That proposition matters because melodic identity can be explained through relational shape without reducing songs to exact pitch strings. Attention therefore falls on initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern.

The project's scope is more limited than a general history of contour memory. Within this repertoire, melodic contour is assessed through initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

The argument develops through three findings. First, distinctive beginnings carry more identity when ensuing phrases are repetitive. Second, range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion. Third, variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional

profile. Collectively, the findings establish that contour memory is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the repertoire.

The research problem in *Contours Remembered* has two parts. The descriptive part asks where initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern enter the selected works and how their placement changes. The interpretive part asks why those changes require the vocabulary of melodic contour rather than a simpler account based on convention, chronology, or genre. Keeping the two parts separate prevents the conclusion from being built into the description. It also clarifies the article's novelty: the new contribution must lie in the explanatory connection, not in the mere presence of the chosen material.

In this article, melodic contour does not name a mood, topic, or value detached from form. It names the interaction among preparation, allocation, and revision. Preparation concerns the expectation built around initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern; allocation concerns who or what can act on that expectation; revision concerns the following event that changes its sta-

tus. The definition is intentionally operational. It tells the reader what evidence would support the term, what evidence would weaken it, and why the three findings belong to one argument rather than three parallel themes.

Accordingly, the guiding question is: Which contour relations preserve melodic identity when printed children's-song variants alter pitch detail or phrase ending? The objective is to answer it by comparing initial contour, pitch extrema, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern across melodies in early public-domain collections by Newell, Gomme, Lang, and Crane. The article argues that recognition depends on relational contour: distinctive beginnings, range boundaries, and directional closure preserve identity without requiring exact pitch duplication. The contribution is a transparent vocabulary for printed-variant comparison that does not substitute notation for evidence about memory. The sections that follow establish the critical context, define the corpus and method, test the topic-specific propositions, discuss their combined implications, state the evidentiary limits and future research needs, and conclude by answering the question.

Research on music cognition clarifies why melodic contour can remain recog-

nizable despite changes of key, rhythm, or ornament. Dowling and Harwood distinguish contour information from exact interval content in melodic perception [1]. Huron's account of expectation connects learned stylistic probabilities with the perception of continuation and closure [2].

2 Melodic Contour in Four Printed Collections

The selected sources include *Games and Songs of American Children* by William Wells Newell [3], *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* by Alice Bertha Gomme [4], *The Nursery Rhyme Book* by Andrew Lang [5], and *The Baby's Bouquet* by Walter Crane [6]. The analytical framework combines theories of musical expectation, phrase organization, expressive meaning, and interpretive practice. Meyer's account of musical expectation provides a basis for distinguishing anticipated events from formal surprises [7], while Lerdahl and Jackendoff's account of tonal grouping guides the description of phrase-level organization [8]. Hatten's account of markedness and musical meaning informs the interpretation of relationships between formal contrast and expressive significance [11]. Kerman's defense of interpretive criticism supports the movement from formal description to proportionate argument [9], while Cook's account of analytical practice enables comparison without treating any single method as exhaustive [10].

The selected repertoire comprises a documented set of public-domain children's song melodies drawn from early printed collections. Cases were chosen for conceptual contrast, not statistical representation. Each item offers a distinct configuration of contour memory and permits comparison through the common unit of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern.

The chosen method combines comparative melodic analysis using transparent symbolic descriptions rather than claims about uncollected listener behavior.

Rather than counting motifs, *Contours Remembered* follows initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern through their immediate contexts. The process records position, recurrence, interruption, and result before assigning interpretive weight. That order becomes consequential for the score comparison: a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redi-

rect the whole sequence. The critical vocabulary is drawn only from scholarship that bears on the named formal problem. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld unless the cited sources supply that evidence.

Source control is integral to the claim about melodic contour. Differences among editions, transcriptions, reproductions, restorations, recordings, or performance documents can alter the very feature being compared. The article therefore treats the version named in each reference as part of the evidence. Where the supplied bibliography does not yet identify that version precisely, the interpretation is provisional at that point; it cannot support a locator-dependent assertion until the author checks the consulted source.

The repertoire is first approached through William Wells Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children*. The reading tests the proposition that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when ensuing phrases are repetitive by restricting attention to initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In William Wells Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children*, the proposition that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when subsequent phrases are repetitive is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern, which agent or compositional layer controls it, and what effect follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of William Wells Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern, the expectation active at that moment, and the outcome that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports *Contours Remembered* only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general similarity to the other cases is not enough; the segment must show why the proposition about melodic contour is necessary to explain its organization.

The second case, Alice Bertha

Gomme's *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion. This is not handled as a defect in reliability.

The case drawn from Alice Bertha Gomme's *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* changes the scale of comparison. Here melodic contour is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among scores. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion.

For Alice Bertha Gomme's *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on melodic contour. The article answers only at the level of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a subsequent effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition weakens. If it does, the case clarifies how structural hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The third comparison centers on Andrew Lang's *The Nursery Rhyme Book* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile.

The value of Andrew Lang's *The Nursery Rhyme Book* is retrospective. Ensuing passages are reread against the first account of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the ensuing event merely restates the preceding one, the proposition that variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case reveals how melodic contour acquires compositional memory.

Verification in Andrew Lang's *The Nursery Rhyme Book* depends on two locators: one for the initial treatment of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range,

and text-setting pattern and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, projected, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the later reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about melodic contour a visible temporal basis.

The last case, Walter Crane's *The Baby's Bouquet*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Walter Crane's *The Baby's Bouquet* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern tests how far the claim that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when ensuing phrases are repetitive can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance demands qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition persists, which part contracts, and which further source would be needed to choose between rival hypotheses.

The resistant role of Walter Crane's *The Baby's Bouquet* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when subsequent phrases are repetitive. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which melodic contour ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or structural account should take over.

3 Distinctive beginnings carry more identity when later phrases are repetitive

The first pattern can be stated as follows: distinctive beginnings carry more identity when subsequent phrases are repetitive. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why contour memory can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

The first proposition is strongest where initial contour, highest and lowest pitch,

repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern do more than recur. To count as support for the claim that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when later phrases are repetitive, an occurrence must be prepared by a preceding expectation and must alter the consequence of what follows. *Contours Remembered* therefore reads recurrence with placement: identical words, sonorities, shapes, gestures, or interface elements may carry different force when their structural position changes. This criterion keeps melodic contour tied to sequence instead of treating visibility alone as proof.

4 Range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion

The next result proposes that range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The repertoire repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

The second proposition asks who or what receives the force identified in the first. If range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion, then position is inseparable from access: a voice, instrument, figure, object, space, or interface option carries weight partly because it can initiate, interrupt, answer, or withhold. *Contours Remembered* traces this allocation through initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern. The resulting hierarchy is not assumed in advance; it is inferred from the capacity to redirect subsequent action or interpretation, including cases where peripheral placement proves more consequential than formal centrality.

5 Variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile

A third pattern suggests that variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed consequence are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores a difference and activates it later.

In combination, these results form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second reveals that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how following events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that contour memory is historically variable and formally organized.

The third proposition is tested retrospectively. For the claim that variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile, later evidence must change the status of something already encountered; simple repetition is insufficient. *Contours Remembered* therefore rereads prior initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern after each return, correction, re-entry, or altered frame. This backward movement reveals whether the score instance stores a difference and activates it later. Where the prior event remains unaffected, the proposed revision has not occurred and the claim about melodic contour loses explanatory force.

6 Discussion

The three propositions alter one another. If distinctive beginnings carry more identity when subsequent phrases are repetitive, then range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion cannot be treated as a separate theme; it describes who or what controls the first process. The claim that variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile adds a temporal test, asking whether subsequent events confirm, narrow, or overturn an earlier inference. *Contours Remembered* therefore explains melodic contour through ordered dependence rather than a list of recurring devices.

The cases further indicate that melodic identity can be explained through relational shape without reducing songs to exact pitch strings. This consequence does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

Counter-reading is used here as an analytical control. For the proposition that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when following phrases are repetitive, the strongest alternative is one that explains the same sequence without assigning it the same function. The proposition that range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion must then show why distribution, rather than mere recurrence, accounts for the contrast. Finally, variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile is tested by asking what later event would have to be absent for the interpretation to fail. These tests make disagreement about *Contours Remembered* local and answerable.

The intervention of *Contours Remembered* is not the discovery of an unnoticed motif. Its contribution is to specify how melodic contour operates

when the same feature changes function through sequence. Existing vocabulary can name the relevant elements, yet naming does not explain why one occurrence prepares an inference and another revises it. By keeping initial contour, highest and lowest pitch, repetition, phrase ending, range, and text-setting pattern connected to position and effect, the article turns a broad thematic observation into a claim that can be evaluated segment by segment and case by case.

This distinction also changes the status of absence. A missing response, withheld transition, unoccupied space, unrealized cadence, or unnamed agent is not automatically meaningful. It enters the argument only when the surrounding organization creates an expectation that the absence modifies. For *Contours Remembered*, such negative evidence is judged by the same standard as a visible feature: it must be locatable, connected to sequence, and capable of changing the account of melodic contour.

The most important limitation concerns the fact that the article analyzes notated variants and does not test children's memory or developmental response. It does not establish reception, intention, prevalence, or causal effect. The absence of those methods is acknowledged rather than disguised.

The value of *Contours Remembered* lies in its account of attention. Melodic contour determines which details become available early, which remain peripheral, and which acquire force only in retrospect. This is a formal claim with historical con-

sequences, but it is not a substitute for audience evidence. Its reach is confined to the named scores and to the editorial or documentary versions listed in the references.

7 Conclusion

The reading of the notated passages was organized around the question of how contour organizes recognition and variation in short children's melodies. Through comparative melodic analysis using transparent symbolic descriptions rather than claims about uncollected listener behavior, it argued that distinctive beginnings carry more identity when subsequent phrases are repetitive; that range boundaries help segment otherwise similar stepwise motion; and that variant endings preserve recognizability by retaining directional profile. These claims converge on a relational account of contour memory.

More generally, the reading of the notated passages shows that melodic identity can be explained through relational shape without reducing songs to exact pitch strings.

The comparison shows that contour sustains identity through relations among beginning, range, repetition, and closure. Distinctive openings carry weight in repetitive tunes, range boundaries aid segmentation, and directional endings permit variation without loss of profile. This answers the question and provides a source-conscious comparison method. Missing tune locators and listener evidence limit the result; archival verifica-

tion and carefully designed reception research should follow.

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