

## The Kodály experience



### Cyrilla Rowsell

*Cyrilla Rowsell was a class teacher in first and primary schools for 11 years. During this time she became increasingly interested in the Kodály approach and attended courses in the UK and Hungary obtaining the British Kodály Academy's (BKA) Advanced Musicianship Diploma with distinction. Cyrilla now teaches for the BKA, primary schools and on the String Training Programme at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama as well as running courses for a variety of music organisations around the country. Cyrilla also runs a 150-strong junior choir.*

"How many of you know anything about Kodály?" The group of around 35 students on the CT ABRSM course look blank, except for one brave soul who lifts his hand and volunteers, "It's all that hand sign stuff?" This is representative of the general response from any group of instrumental teachers faced with the same question. However, an hour and a half later, I see many happy, inspired faces and I leave with the sound of other questions ringing in my ears. "Why have I never heard of this before? Why isn't this taught in all schools?"

So how did this approach come about?

### "How many of you know anything about Kodály?"

Zoltan Kodály (1882-1967) was a deep-thinking man who became increasingly concerned about music education in Hungary. He found that his harmony students at the Liszt Academy, whilst technically proficient, could not hear the music in their heads.

He felt that a musician should have a well-trained ear, intelligence and heart as well as well-trained fingers and that the student would eventually have problems if the latter raced ahead of the others – which, in my experience, is often the case!

Kodály believed that 'Music should belong to everyone... music is a spiritual food for which there is no substitute...there is no complete spiritual life without music... there are regions of the human soul which can be illuminated only through music.' He was impressed by the Galin-Paris-Cheve movement and by the work of John Curwen; he realised that rhythm names and *solfa* were powerful tools with which to develop musical literacy and incorporated these into his overall concept. During the 1940s many of his colleagues and students began to put his ideas into practice and developed a methodology which can be used from birth or before (Kodály said, 'Music education begins nine months before the birth of the mother'!) to high levels of professional training – conservatoire and beyond.

Kodály identified three stages of learning: unconscious experience, making conscious and reinforcement. In other words:

- Preparation
- Presentation
- Practice

Young children do not learn through intellectual and theoretical abstractions. We would not teach a child to read who has not yet learned to speak – and yet we often try to teach music in this way. I remember my very first piano lesson, at the age of six. I was shown a symbol and told, "This is a crotchet. It lasts for one beat." If a child has no experience of beat or pulse this is useless information!

In Kodály lessons children learn many songs and rhymes, initially by imitation. Gradually what they have assimilated unconsciously is made conscious and children learn both the appropriate vocabulary to describe their experience and the symbol which represents it. In this way, musical literacy is taught in a practical and logical sequence. Kodály teaching is structured so that students progress from the simple to the complex in a series of logical steps. The steps are very small – 'Children learn best that which they already know' – so that success is guaranteed. Success breeds confidence and the desire to learn more.

The music used should always be of the best quality, initially using one's mother tongue. Kodály felt that 'Folksong is the school of good taste... those who develop a taste for what is good at an early age will become resistant later to what is bad.' Most of the repertoire consists of children's singing games. Many of these originated in the street and playground – a repertoire which, sadly, many children do not know today. Children of all ages love these games; it is very gratifying to see mature, streetwise 11-year olds revelling in them and, through them, being allowed to be children again. At a later stage, composed songs and art music are also used but always, the musical knowledge comes from the song material.

The voice is the primary instrument used in Kodály training. Singing has a profound effect upon the child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development and is the most direct way of making a musical response. Not only is this instrument free and portable, but because it is part of our bodies anything learned through singing is learned more deeply and thoroughly. Learning through an instrument is an external skill, as the pupil makes something else make the sound; singing, an internal skill, is deeply personal as you make the sound. Singing is also vital for developing that essential part of a musician, the inner hearing. It is not possible to sing anything which has not first been imagined in the inner ear; therefore singing proves that the music has been assimilated and understood.

## “A child who plays before he sings may remain unmusical for a lifetime”

Kodály felt very strongly about this: ‘A child who plays before he sings may remain unmusical for a lifetime. That is why we encounter so many skilful pianists who have no idea of the essence of music.’

Songs used in the early stages have a small range and simple rhythms. Many of the games and activities encourage solo singing, which is helpful for the teacher’s assessment as well as breeding confidence in the child. Growlers gradually learn to pitch accurately by singing on their own and imitating the teacher’s voice. Incidentally, I have never found anyone (child or adult) who is unable to pitch a falling minor third – which is the first interval to be made conscious through *solfa* (*soh-me*) – although I was challenged once by a four-year old whose natural pitch for this interval was the E to C# below middle C! (He is now 10, in my choir and sings like an angel.)

Pentatonic music is used initially as it is easier to sing with good intonation, without semitones. I find children who have a good pentatonic grounding learn the diatonic notes quickly and easily and their intonation remains good. Two-part work is an important part of the training; voice tunes with voice and the natural tuning enhances the pupil’s perception of relative pitch and tonal functions.

Children first experience pulse, then rhythm; they are taught to differentiate between the two before they are introduced to rhythm symbols and rhythm names. An awareness of pitch (moving higher, moving lower, staying on the same pitch) is developed before the children begin *solfa* training. New pitches are gradually introduced and the children learn songs in various tone sets. *Solfa* is learned with accompanying hand signs, which provide a physical link with the sound heard and produced. *Solfa* not only expresses relative pitch but also the tonal function of each note. Hand signs are powerful tools in that they can also be used for the child to read from, thus quickly and easily reading new music or recognising known material. Music is always dealt with in phrases or motifs, never in single sounds or notes; this develops rhythmic continuity and a sense of the shape of the phrase.

Children learn to read and write music initially with stick notation (the rhythm with *solfa* symbols underneath) and then on the staff. Staff reading is firstly done without a clef so that the children learn spatially the positions of the intervals without having to worry about sharps or flats. Gradually pitch names are introduced and eventually pupils learn to read in all seven *doh* positions.

Kodály’s aim was to teach musical literacy to all. He saw literacy as the ability to ‘hear what you see and see what you hear...performance reveals whether the instrumentalist understands what he is playing.’

Aural training is an aspect of instrumental teaching which I know worries many teachers. Fitting it within a half-hour lesson already crammed full is difficult, and several teachers I know feel ill-equipped to teach it as their own pianistic skills are lacking. However, I perceive that maybe the major

problem is that many teachers do not know how to teach aural awareness. It would appear that aural is not taught, only tested.

I cannot have been the only child who dreaded having to stand by the piano and sing. I found aural petrifying and difficult; I could not sight-sing accurately and O level chord analysis and dictation were impenetrable, terrifying mysteries. As a result, I grew up with the unshakeable belief that I was not musical. When I discovered the Kodály way of teaching in my mid-20s (having no musical qualifications other than Grade 7 piano and a very poor O level) it was a true road-to-Damascus experience. It was a total revelation to me that here was a way I could learn to sight-sing, write dictation, train my musical memory, and hear and understand intervals and chords.

## “Hear what you see and see what you hear”

What would a teacher do for a child who is having trouble learning to read? He/she would allocate more time to the child, trying different strategies in order to make a breakthrough – not say, “Never mind you can’t read, dear; let’s make sure your maths is extra good instead.” But this is precisely what happened to me – make sure your pieces and scales are good to compensate for the poor mark you’re going to get for your aural!

Kodály felt that ‘before we rear instrumentalists... we must first rear musicians.’ How many more musicians we would rear if all children who are going to learn an instrument had a minimum of one year’s Kodály training before they started, and continued this training alongside their instrumental studies!

Children who are taught Kodály thoroughly and systematically become joyful, rounded, confident musicians – not just instrumentalists.

Kodály tapped into the essence of music and of pedagogy:

‘If, through the reading of music, a child has reached the stage where he is able to sing a small masterpiece in two parts with another child he has acquired a hundred times as much music than if he had thrashed the piano from sunrise to sunset. Many people are looking for the door to the treasury of music in the wrong places. They obstinately keep hammering on the locked gates and pass right by the open doors that are accessible to everybody.’

How many of us – how many of our pupils – are still hammering on locked gates?



For further information:  
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