

## MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE EARLY YEARS The Kodály Approach

This article by Celia Waterhouse was first published in February 2002 in EYE Magazine (Early Years Educator)

All quality pre-school institutions profess that music is an integral part of their programme. The recent pre-school expansion in Britain has seen a corresponding expansion in demand for a properly structured approach to music education. Where can teachers find a high quality, educationally proven and affordable early years music scheme?

Zoltán Kodály (1882 - 1967) transformed music education in Hungary. The ideas he developed gave rise to a systematic and holistic approach to musical training, from pre-school stage to diploma level, which has become world-renowned. Kodály believed that music is "part of human nature" and that, given the right input, everyone could become musically literate and articulate.

So what is "the right input"? The main characteristic of Kodály work is **the use of singing**. Kodály believed singing was the best medium for teaching the language of music. Singing actively engages the whole person and develops that essential musicianly attribute, the inner hearing. Kodály teachers train themselves to the highest standards and, acting as a good role model, pass on the ability to sing well, rhythmically and in tune to the children they work with. Nowhere is this more important than at the early years stage.

Kodály believed in starting musical training **as early as possible**, not only nine months before the birth of a child, but even, as he once said, nine months before the birth of the parent! Early childhood education has always been a top priority for Kodály educators.

It is generally assumed in this country that learning a musical instrument is the best route to musical training. But instrumental study is not widely available until Keystage 1 or 2. The conventional path to learning an instrument in the UK can leave many essential skills underdeveloped. Kodály teachers are first and foremost preoccupied with training the **whole musician**: playing an instrument musically is the "proof of the pudding". The pre-school stage, when children are at their most receptive with rapidly developing memory, is the best time to start the ongoing process of musicianship training. A Kodály programme gives all children an **equal opportunity** to develop foundation skills, using nature's own built-in musical instrument, the singing voice.

Kodály work focuses on engaging children in enjoyable, practical, carefully structured **musical activity** relevant to their physical, intellectual and emotional stage of development. This builds up a bank of memorable repertoire, which roots children's understanding in real experience, and becomes a seedbed for future musical growth. Some early years music programmes focus instead on the written language of music. Colourful and attractive materials have been designed to teach children to recognise and name notes on the staff. Undoubtedly children can learn very complex written symbols, but what does this mean if unrelated to musical experience? To Kodály teachers this seems like "putting the cart before the horse".

## The importance of a good role model

A child learns his mother tongue by listening to and copying the speech sounds surrounding him from before birth. Gradually, through playful interaction with his primary carers, the baby's interest is first aroused, the attention focused, and the seeds are sown for rapid development of the memory. Through frequent repetition, sounds become associated with meanings, and particular sounds become the means of coherent communication. Adults are an integral part of the process, functioning as an ongoing role model and actively engaging the child in regular exchanges. Adults provide appropriate material for the child to mimic and copy, and convey meaning to the complex sounds being repeated.

The same organic process is true for music, and nature has supplied the means. Every parent knows that some of the earliest vocalised sounds made by young babies are more like singing than speaking. Babies have a special sensitivity to the frequency of the mother's singing voice, and respond to a spontaneous gentle lullaby and the soothing rocking motion of the mother's body. These are quite simply the basic musical ingredients of pitch and pulse. Mothers who sing to their children provide a role model for musical development, and material that becomes the child's musical vocabulary. This process can so naturally be continued through the early years by both parent and early years professional alike.

Sadly, for a good number of adults in modern Britain, spontaneous unaccompanied singing is not a natural and joyous means of self-expression. Some adults are inhibited about singing with their own children beyond the baby phase. Others are insecure in pitch, have never acquired a sense of pulse, and are diffident about the lack of confidence they feel about singing specifically and active music making in general. As we know, children are wonderful mimics, and all this is unwittingly passed on to them, acquired just like the local accent wherever they happen to be born. One of the best investments in music a nursery can make is to ensure that **all** staff are unselfconscious and enthusiastic about singing, and that they can sing well. In following a Kodály training programme inhibitions about singing are soon lost, and students (be they three or fifty-three) learn to sing confidently in tune, rhythmically and musically, and best of all, with a real sense of enjoyment, the key to all learning.

## Recipe for success with young children

Kodály teachers start from the premise that **everyone can learn to sing**. Most young children have a limited singing range of about a musical sixth (from about Middle D to the B above). Best results are achieved by beginning with **songs of limited range**, starting from the simple "coo-ee" or "cuckoo" singing pitches (the solfa pitches *so* and *mi*) that children - and adults - spontaneously use in calling to each other. The universally known playground chants and nursery songs, *Rain, rain, go away*, *Ring-a-roses*, *It's raining, it's pouring* and *Mary had a little lamb*, are examples of songs which young children can successfully cope with as a first diet. There is no shortage of good repertoire. The teacher also chooses a **comfortable starting pitch**, ensuring that the song fits within the children's range.

Songs are taught by rote from the teacher's **unaccompanied singing voice**. Children hear only the sounds they need to imitate, uncluttered by the different timbre of a piano or other distracting accompanying instrument, or the insistent drum rhythms of modern backing music. Songs are repetitive, rhythmically simple, and easily memorised. **Many**

**repetitions**, both on first exposure and on subsequent hearing, ensure accurate internalising of pitches, rhythms and words. **Daily singing** is the best approach, even if only for 10 minutes. Once memorised, songs provide core material with which other music skills are developed.

Variety is achieved by adding **accompanying actions** performed on the pulse or on cue words, appropriate to the song content. Actions focus and engage the whole attention, and fix the song and its essential mood and components more firmly in the memory by anchoring the experience in different parts of the body. **Pulse actions** programme in from the word "go" that essential component of music, its steady beat. **Cue word actions** are one of the first stages in rhythmic awareness. Numbers, names and animal noises are the most obvious starting point in early years repertoire. Towards age 5, as the child grows in musical experience, he or she learns to clap the rhythm (word pattern) of whole lines of well-known songs and rhymes.

Body actions develop co-ordination: this is where children and teachers can have a lot of fun! It also lays important foundations for a skill which musicians need in abundance, the ability to deal with several things simultaneously. Once a body action is established with any new song, it can be transferred to a percussion instrument. Children take turns to accompany the song with instruments such as claves, finger cymbals or jingle bells.

A well-developed memory is the key to any successful learning, and listening and concentration are essential to this. Kodály teachers make creative use of external stimuli to harness the imagination. The passing seasons, festivals and visits are an obvious source of inspiration for repertoire. Puppets, pictures and favourite storybooks or nursery rhyme books can be woven into music lessons to attract, focus and extend children's attention.

### What is good repertoire?

In considering repertoire appropriate for teaching, Kodály said, "only the best is good enough". Young children actively experiencing good quality music unconsciously absorb good musical vocabulary. This influences their musical development and choices for the rest of their lives. Kodály believed teachers should look to the indigenous folk repertoire of their native country and traditions, and draw inspiration and material from there. These songs and rhymes have stood the test of time. Their essential elements are building blocks for all musical experience and understanding.

This does not mean that all our most popular Nursery Rhymes are suitable for a structured programme of early years music training through singing: far from it! Many of the best-known British tunes are in fact settings of traditional **rhymes** with melodies composed for the Victorian nursery. Sing the following aloud, and appreciate the inherent difficulties:

- **Humpty Dumpty** high at the end
- **Jack and Jill** impossibly low at the end
- **Ride-a-cock horse** wide range, big melodic leaps, no melodic repetitions
- **Hey Diddle Diddle** no melodic repetitions, hard melody in last line
- **Hickory Dickory Dock** 1-syllable words on 2 rising notes in 2<sup>nd</sup> line
- **I had a little nut-tree** complicated melody in last line

Surprisingly, even contemporary early years song repertoire, including that specially compiled or composed, frequently contains similar difficulties, or is set in keys too high to

suit the singing range of a typical 3 or 4-year-old. Although some young children have amazingly high, agile singing voices, and big vocal ranges, this is not the norm. Most need a diet of carefully selected material, starting from limited range, gradually extending the boundaries as singing skills develop. Kodály teachers look analytically at songs, and are concerned with planning programmes where material is introduced systematically, allowing learning to occur cumulatively. The success following this approach is self-evident.

Kodály programmes at the early years stage make particular use of singing games. These are part of folk tradition, and children learn them as easily and naturally as they learn to speak their mother tongue. Singing games, usually in circle formation, give opportunities for social interactions such as turn taking, choosing partners, or role-play. Games help to develop essential skills such as listening, concentration, memory and co-ordination, in an enjoyable and emotionally satisfying way. Children perform musical actions as a group, according to the rules of the game, walking skipping or clapping to the steady beat, taking turns as the leader or soloist. They learn unconsciously and spontaneously through being actively involved in a structured play situation.

And those tricky Nursery Rhymes? Kodály teachers often use them in their original form as **rhymes**. Awareness of words is one of the earliest stages of rhythmic training. With their straightforward metre and rhythm, rhymes provide valuable material for rhythm work, and later improvisation and composition. The teacher chants with exaggerated intonation and mouth movements, focusing attention on the individual syllables, the rhythm pattern, and the balance of each line. Children unconsciously absorb the natural metre and word pattern, as well as the form and structure of music inherent in the rhyme. This kind of activity undoubtedly aids speech and language development.

### **Training and resources**

The British Kodály Academy runs an annual programme of courses for teachers and interested adults. Early Childhood Methodology is always available at the BKA Summer School and on one or two weekends through the year, and in addition musicianship training is offered at various levels. These courses, delivered by top experts in the field, are a valuable source of inspiration and teaching repertoire. Students do not have to be musically trained at the outset, and learn by active participation, just as children do.

The beauty of the Kodály approach is that it can be begun immediately: no expensive technology or equipment is required. Teachers can introduce it in a small way within their current situation, and gradually phase it in as they become confident with the aims and develop their own skills, understanding, and teaching repertoire. This is in fact how most Kodály specialists in the UK started out.

And the learning never actually stops! The Kodály process is organic and interactive, so there is always something new to learn at whatever level one is operating. That is what makes it an exciting and creative way of teaching music, as all Kodály enthusiasts will tell you.

## **Books and Resources for Early Years work**

Apple Pie and Custard / Knives and Forks and Spoons (Vera Gray)  
Songs and rhymes for all the year round, for playgroup, nursery, home  
Lindsay Music, 01767 316521 [www.lindsaymusic.co.uk](http://www.lindsaymusic.co.uk)

Children's Songs\* / Fishy, Fishy in the Brook\* (Helga Dietrich)  
Songs / Rhymes for young children

Five and Twenty Rhythmic Games (Dorothy Pilling)  
(Piano music for the development of free movement, for use in Nursery and Junior  
School) Forsyth 1936

Moon Penny (Bill Meek)  
Rhymes, songs and play-verse (Ossian Publications, Cork, Ireland 1985)

Music in Pre-School\* (Katalin Forrai)

Singing Games and Rhymes For Early Years\* / Singing Games and Rhymes for Tiny  
Tots\* (Lucinda Geoghegan)

This Little Puffin (Elizabeth Matterson) Finger plays and nursery games (Puffin Books  
1969)

\*Compiled and written by Kodály specialists, and available from the BKA. Orders to  
Kevin Bolton tel 01924 219794 email [kevinbolton@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:kevinbolton@blueyonder.co.uk)

## **Sound Beginnings**

The BKA now offers an advanced-level Certificate of Professional Practice in Early  
Childhood Music Education, in association with the University of Surrey (Roehampton).  
For information on Sound Beginnings, or other Early Years training courses, visit the  
website [www.britishkodalyacademy.org](http://www.britishkodalyacademy.org)