Singing the Kodály way –
Developing the musical mind through song.

Chris Moore 2013 MENZA National PD Day

It is the duty of every music educator to teach music in such a way that good
music becomes a necessity of life for every child
(Kodály, as cited in Richards, 1966, p. 44).

If there is a single underlying philosophy of the Kodály approach to music instruction, it is that ‘music
belongs to everyone’ (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2010, p. 49).

Why do I choose to use a Kodály approach?
I was frustrated that I was not creating musically literate students. They would
generally leave primary school having had enjoyable and worthwhile musical
experiences but, unless they had private music lessons, they would not be musically
literate. Without a degree of musical literacy, my students would not have control
over their own musical learning. I now believe that music lessons should be more
than just the provision of positive musical experiences. Teachers have a
responsibility to develop the musical skills and language of the students. I have
come to agree with Kodály expert Dr James Cuskelly (Brisbane, Australia) that
Kodály’s method appears to be a very efficient (if not the most) method for
developing musical understanding, literacy and the musical mind.

“It is much more important who is the music teacher in Kisvárda than who is
the director of the opera house in Budapest... for a poor director fails once,
but a poor teacher keeps on failing for thirty years, killing the love of music in
thirty generations of children” (Kodály quoted by Choksy, 1999, p.1 as cited
in Fuller, 2005 p. 167).

Kodály’s basic philosophical principles:
1. Musical literacy – the reading, writing and thinking of music – is the right of
all human beings.
2. For music to be internalized, musical learning must begin with the voice.
3. The development of a musical ‘ear’ (audiation) can only be completely
successful if begun in early childhood.
4. Just as children speak in a mother-tongue, they also have a musical mother-
tongue and should be taught musical literacy through the natural folk music
of their culture.
5. Only the highest quality music should be used in music education.

What is the Kodály approach?
• The Kodály approach is an unaccompanied vocal method, the voice being the
most natural of instruments. Other instruments are used when the student
is vocally secure.
• The teacher models the learning
• The Kodály method begins with pentatonic music because it:
  o Is the basis of most folk music and therefore part of the child’s heritage
  o Is harmonically easy to work with
  o It encourages accurate pitching
• Lessons move from the simple to the complex, organizing learning into small, logical steps in sequential order and presenting one new thing at a time

Three basic tools (borrowed from other sources centuries old) aid the development of musical literacy.
  o tonic solfa
  o ‘Curwen’ hand signs for pitch
  o ‘French’ time names or rhythm syllables for rhythmic notation
Kodály described handsigns as “indispensable” (Richards, 1996, p.46) enabling the child to physicalise intervals and internalize melody.

The Method:
• Firstly, is the development of attentive listening through the learning of many songs (30-60 each year), games and rhythmic activities by rote - always combining singing and movement
• Rhythm symbols (stick notation) are introduced, together with French time names
• Pentatonic handsigns (Curwen) and pitch names (solfa) are introduced in a particular order (beginning with the falling minor 3rd soh-mi) and always through the songs the children have learnt
• Rhythm and melody are closely integrated
• Emphasis is placed on training the ear:
  • Accurate pitching through the use of two-part songs, canons, quodlibets etc;
  • The recognition of intervals;
• The development of inner hearing (internalising the music or audiation).
• Techniques employed: sight-singing, dictation, improvisation and independence of parts (e.g. rhythmic ostinato against a melodic line)
• An emphasis on preparing the child to be successful in learning is important
• Learning sequences are developmentally appropriate
• Teachers are also encouraged to adapt and bring their own areas of expertise to the process

Audiation:
A key aspect of the Kodály approach is audiation. ‘Notational audiation’ is the inner hearing, the “thinking in or with sound” (Serafine, 1980, p.1 as cited in Runfola and Swanwick, 1992, p.377).

Successful audiation is of paramount importance in unlocking the world of music – it is about meaning communicated through music: “Audiation is to music what thought is to language” (Gordon, 1999, p.42).
In my lessons I have observed that the children who can sing and internalize the melody are also the ones who can then play the melody quickly on tuned percussion or other instrument. I find that those who have not successfully internalized the music struggle to play even simple material on instruments. Put simply, if you can’t sing it you can’t play it.

**Benefits to the learner:**
The Kodály method provides the personal skills to allow for successful learning in any context, even where students determine their own learning pathway and environment and for a musical understanding that “flourishes with opportunities for self-initiated discovery and interaction with others” (Custodero, 2010, p.141). That is, musical literacy in the broadest sense of understanding music, opens doors for the student. The lessons should be intellectually, physically and musically engaging. The students are quickly empowered because their musical skills develop rapidly.

The Kodály method is developmentally appropriate. Music learning can be constructed to be learner-centred and grounded in problem-solving. For example, because children prefer to run, jump and skip, “moving rhythms are more child-related than sustained ones” (Choksy, 1988, p.12). Similarly, young children have a limited range; small skips are easy to sing in tune – semitones and leaps of over a 6th are difficult. Descending intervals are easier for children. “Melodically, the first recognizable tunes sung by most young children are made up primarily of minor thirds, major seconds, and perfect fourths; so, mi, and la in solfa terminology” (ibid.). It also builds on a ‘readiness to learn’ and develops prior knowledge through a ‘spiral curriculum’ (Bruner, 1960)

In the Kodály method, the mind determines the musical outcome of the task while *a cappella* vocal work promotes immediate feedback: “Singing requires the rapid internalization of sound and provides immediate participation in the musical experience” (Houlahan and Tacka, 2008, p.21).

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(Kodály, as cited in Houlahan and Tacka, 2008, p.21).

**Learning sequence:**
The Kodály sequence is always: ‘prepare, present, practice, reinforce’. Games and songs specifically prepare the student for the musical concept to be introduced, providing the “musical language” from which notation could be drawn, studied, and read” (McChesney as cited in Fuller, 2005, p.175). Lessons are segmented into small learning ‘bites’ of 3-5 minutes providing variety while covering 12-15 learning intentions in each lesson. Every lesson begins and ends with singing games –purely as fun for the learner. Break up the lesson with more games, rhymes and songs.
It would be better to drop one entire section from the lesson plan than to skip the games and try to cover all the skill material...[which can be]... postponed until the next lesson without damaging the continuity of the lesson or the learning (Choksy, 1988, p.157).

“Musical experience precedes symbolization. The teaching order is always sound to sight, concrete to abstract” (Choksy, 1981, p.7 as cited in Fuller, 2005 p.167). Teach a song, game or rhyme (prepare), then later, once it is known, present the musical concept from within the song making the learning ‘conscious’ for the student. Reinforce and practise the new musical idea through other known songs. The teaching should be specific: - outline what skill/understanding is to be ‘prepared’, to be ‘made conscious’, and to be ‘reinforced’.

For example, six to eight songs featuring the focus pitch ‘la’ may be taught before ‘making conscious’ that pitch through one song. The teacher then returns to previously taught songs to locate the new pitch thus reinforcing the learning (Choksy, 1988). No song or game is chosen without purpose.

An emphasis on two-part singing:
Kodály stated that ‘correct unison singing can, paradoxically, be learned only by singing in two parts; the voices adjust and balance each other’ and that ‘the advantages of singing in two parts can hardly be overestimated, but unfortunately it is often left until far too late’ (Kodály as cited in Bacon, 1977, p.3). I have experimented with simple two-part work (canons and partner songs) with my Year 4-6 classes and found their tuning certainly improves, they more accurately retain an auditory memory of the pitch in interval recognition games, and they develop an understanding of the interplay between two lines of music. I deliberately choose songs that can be used for two-part work. This includes, adding a rhythmic ostinato while singing, keeping the beat on one knee while clapping the rhythm on the other and singing, singing a song while using solfa handsigns in canon.

Transferring music to instruments follows complete internalization by the student. This is more than just memorisation. Once the students have mastered a melody - singing it in solfa, singing and clapping the rhythm in canon, singing and signing it in canon, notating it in solfa and on the treble clef, playing on ‘paper keyboards’ or silently fingering the recorder, transposing it to another key - only then would they transfer it to the piano or recorder. The student would decide when they had the song thoroughly ‘in their head’ before playing it on an instrument. That is to say, if they perceived their own audiation process to be successful, it would be demonstrated on the instrument. They are monitoring their own learning.

Choice of music and the use of folksong:
Kodály aimed to make music accessible, to demystify its language:
“Music must not be approached from its intellectual, rational side, nor should it be conveyed as a system of algebraic symbols, or as the secret writing of a language with which he has no connection. The way should be paved for direct intuition” (Kodály, 1974, as cited in Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2010)
Many consider pop songs more relevant to today’s learner but as Cuskelly notes, most are either melodically or rhythmically complex, overly simplistic or inappropriate for young children. Added to that is the often temporary nature of their popularity.

Kodály promoted the use of folk music from the child’s own culture and significant ‘art’ music - “living music, not fabricated or contrived for pedagogical purposes” (Choksy, 1998, p.17).

To write a folksong is as much beyond the bounds of possibility as to write a proverb. Just as proverbs condense centuries of popular wisdom and observation, so, in the traditional songs, the emotions of centuries are immortalized in a form polished to perfection (Kodály as cited in Houlahan and Tacka, 2008, p.23).

But folksong not only embodies a culture and heritage, it represents longevity in musical terms. Folksong also demands participation and response – making it an ideal pedagogical vehicle. For teaching purposes, short songs and games that meet particular criteria – a particular tone or rhythmic set – are chosen.

Each song is analysed for its tone set, melodic and rhythmic elements, form, scale, starting pitch, appropriate age level, and teaching purpose. This allows teachers to choose music that reflects their students’ own stage of musical development as well as reflecting each child’s musical heritage (the sound set determined by their cultural, linguistic and musical environments) and respecting the musical heritage of others.

Folk music is the treasure trove of children’s values, beliefs, cultures, knowledge, games and [stories]. The music of children’s own cultures must be given respect and status in the classroom ... Receptivity toward the music of other cultures can be developed from this point of reference, thereby fostering cultural awareness, tolerance and respect (Elliot, as cited in Houlahan and Tacka, 2008, p.37).

One good source is the American Folksong Collection of the Kodály Center for Music Education at Holy Names University, California.

However, an overemphasis on American folk music is not ideal. Dr James Cuskelly is critical of an over reliance on American folksong – a leftover of Mary Helen Richard’s Threshold to Music – the first introduction of the Kodály method to the English-speaking world via the USA in the 1960s. Cuskelly, teaching in Queensland Australia, uses a variety of English language folksongs from many different countries as well as contemporary Australian music that he feels captures the essence of being Australian. An example of this is the music of Faye White, who works with community groups to create songs that cross cultural and musical barriers. These are not ‘pop’ songs but contemporary world music/folk songs. Singer songwriters such as Hirini Melbourne, Moana Maniapoto and Anika Moa whose songs have an enduring quality and cross cultural divides may be New Zealand equivalents. These
songs together with traditional Maori and Pasifika songs have yet to be analysed for their specific usefulness for Kodály teaching but would certainly add to the relevance of the Kodály method in this country.

What about folksongs for NZ pakeha? All songs in the English language can be considered their heritage.

**Summary:**
In its essence the Kodály method seeks to create musically literate students who possess the skills to apply music to their lives in whatever way they wish. It offers authenticity of musical material through the heritage of folk music while also developing creativity. In specifically emphasising ‘audiation’, it offers a depth of cognition that is not always found in other approaches to music education. It is concerned with empowerment and creating opportunities for learning. The Kodály method exemplifies excellent teaching practice and reflects current educational thought in New Zealand. It fits within the framework of the New Zealand curriculum and clearly engages the learner in the ‘key competencies’: “thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self; relating to others; and participating and contributing” (Ministry of Education, 2007 p.12).
Singing the Kodály way – musical songs and games referred to in the MENZA workshop:

General Teaching Objectives
Year 1:
To establish a good foundation for ear training and internalization and establish the difference between singing and speaking voice, teach lots of games, songs and rhymes focusing on pitch, beat, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, improvisation, movement and fun!

Years 2-6:
Build on the students’ musical intuition, develop skills using the tools (solfa, rhythm syllables and handsigns), develop a wide singing, listening and performance repertoire and establish a passion for music through enjoyment.

The following songs, games and rhymes can be located in the various books mentioned in the Bibliography.

Examples of games to start and end a lesson:
The Earth is our Mother
Chicken on a fence post
Naughty Pussy Cat
Ickle Ockle Blue Bottle
Cut the Cake
Lucy Lockett
Go in and out the window
Mouse Mousie
Circle round your zero
Green Sally
Let us chase the squirrel
Draw a bucket of water
Engine #9 (rhyme for developing the concept of ‘speaking’ voice)

Examples of songs for part singing and some suggested uses:
I like the flowers
• Canon
• Clapping rhythm vs beat
• Rhythmic notation of tafe/timri (dotted quaver+semiquaver)

Ah Poor Bird
• Canon
• Self canon sing with rhythm in canon
• Minor versus major versions

Fire Down below
• Natural minor/Aeolian mode (m s l t d’ r’ m’)
• Beat on one knee, rhythm on the other
• Teaching tafe/timri
• 2 part song (includes si)
My Paddle (Canoe Song)
  • Canon
  • Ostinato
  • Syncopa (compare rhythm with Come Through ’n a Hurry)
Seagull, seagull Sit on the Shore/London Bridge
  • syncopa
  • ta-ate (dotted crotchet+quaver)
  • Quodlibet/partner songs
I’ve been to Harlem/Little Liza Jane
  • ta-tiri (quaver and 2 semiquavers)
  • Quodlibet/partner songs
  • ostinato: Jane Liza (d s, l,) (m m r) (s s l)
  • rhythmic ostinato – clapped
Weevily Wheat (p76)
  • syncopa
  • melodic ostinato (wheat, don’t want) (barley, don’t like) (Charlie, for)
  • canon
  • rhythmic ostinato -clapping
Birch Tree
  • minor (l t d r m s)
  • As used in Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4 Fourth Movement
Hot Cross Buns
  • Canon – rhythmic and melodic and with handsigns
  • Good for introducing reh
Fed My Horse in a Poplar trough
  • Rhythm: ta-tiri, tafe
I had a Good Home
  • Chant not song
  • Compound time
  • Canon etc
Once a Man Fell in a Well
  • Ascending and descending scale (d r m f s)
  • Good for notation work
  • Invert and sing upside down
  • Augment and sing in canon

Examples of internalizing the beat:
Sally go round the sun – sing while walking around holding hands in a circle; then
sing silently ‘in head’ saying only the ‘boo’ at the end
Who stole my chickens

Exercises to Develop Literacy:
Solfa echo – singing with handsigns
  • Teacher sings, students copy
Singing following handsigns
• Teacher handsigns, students sing

Humming and showing handsigns
• Teacher hums intervals, students with eyes closed, show appropriate handsigns

Clapping from rhythmic notation
• Rhythm cards
• Stick notation on whiteboard

Writing rhythmic notation from a focus song
• E.g. compare ‘My Paddle’ and ‘Come through ‘n a hurry’ or compare ‘No one in the house but Dinah’ with ‘Chicken on a Fence Post’

Sightsinging from solfa stick notation and/or treble clef notation
• E.g exercise 36 (s, m, d) BACON ‘185 unison pentatonic exercises – first steps in sight- singing using sol-fa and staff notation according to the Kodály concept’

Transferring solfa notation to treble clef
Transferring solfa and treble clef notation to tuned percussion
An example of teaching from a focus song ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy’ (s, m, d):

The following should be developed in short learning ‘bites’ over several lessons.

To internalize the music:
Sing song while keeping beat on knees
Sing only some words and internalize rest of words (e.g. only sing ‘was a bear’) – play around!

To develop 2-part work:
Add a rhythmic ostinato (e.g. blue jelly/ ta titi) while singing
Sing in canon entering on beat 3 of the first bar – one group could also augment (halve the time) the song while another group sang the original

To develop a sense of rhythm and beat:
Clap the rhythm while singing
Clap the rhythm without singing
Clap the rhythm to time names
Walk the beat (‘beat on your feet’) while singing
Walk the beat while clapping rhythm and singing
Walk the beat while clapping rhythm without singing
Keep the beat on one knee, rhythm on other knee while singing then swap
Keep the beat on one knee, rhythm on other knee without singing then swap
Have one child tap the beat on ‘hearts’ stuck to the whiteboard
Write rhythm as stick notation using time names on white board above the hearts/beat
All clap the rhythm using time names while teacher points to notation
Individuals clap the rhythm following the notation

To develop a sense of melody:
Point to melodic contour in the air
Sing to high middle low while showing the contour in the air
Sing words while showing the contour in the air
Sing in your head while showing the contour in the air
Stand, bend, crouch while singing high middle low and then words
Point contour while showing ‘doh’ with other hand
Sing song while showing handsigns: soh, mi, doh
Sing to soh mi doh while showing handsigns
Individuals sing with handsigns
Add solfa to rhythm (stick) notation

To develop a sense of notation:
Sing using solfa handsigns
Sing using solfa while pointing to the ‘musical steps’ chart
Sing while using a ‘hand staff’ - pointing to fingers (doh is little finger) and noticing the spaces between
After introducing the basic concept of treble clef notation, transfer solfa stick notation to treble clef notation (note heads first then rhythm) explaining the ‘copy cat’ rule: if soh is in a space, mi is in the space below and doh is in the space below that; if soh is through a line, mi is through the line below and doh is through the line below that.
(Add bar lines and time signature later)
In later lessons, identify the song from the treble clef or solfa stick notation

To apply to instruments:
Transfer to tuned percussion or other instrument with which the children are familiar: if doh is C where will mi and soh be?
Get the children to play silently the until they have it mastered e.g. finger the recorder but don’t blow; play on ‘paper keys’ before going to the piano; playing the xylophone with fingers before using beaters
Point out the students that those children who sing the song (out loud or internally) while playing it will be more successful than those who don’t
Once mastered in that key transpose to doh = F then doh = G

To encourage improvisation:
Half group could play the first phrase while second group improvise an answer on s, m, d (or you could add reh and la)
Students could compose an ostinato to accompany song using d, r, m, s, l

Always end by singing original song intact for fun.

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BACON, D. (1977) 50 easy two-part exercises – first steps in part singing according to the Kodály concept (3rd ed), USA: European American Music Corporation

BACON, D. (1978) 185 unison pentatonic exercises – first steps in sight- singing using sol-fa and staff notation according to the Kodály concept, USA: Kodály Centre of America


USEFUL WEBSITES:
The International Kodály Society www.iks.hu
American folksong collection at Holy Names University www.Kodaly.hnu.edu
Sound Thinking: www.soundthinkingaustralia.com
Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia (KMEIA) www.kmeia.org.au
Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia (KMEIA) Queensland branch www.kmeiaqueensland.com.au