

'This little finger on my right': Helen Wallace teaches a group of two-year-olds the actions for '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, once I caught a fish alive'

ALL PHOTOS BY NICHOLAS DAY

Starting young

The Kodály approach to musicianship provides a sound basis for teaching even the youngest children, says Helen Wallace

Nobody can play well if he does not feel and know where the essence of the melody is, and if he cannot bring it to life with his voice... To teach... an instrument without first... developing singing... is to build upon sand.

Zoltán Kodály¹

WE ARE down on the floor walking our hands through the 'forest' in time to the song. 'Let's take a walk, take a walk, take a walk, and see what we can see.' Ten faces look up expectantly: 'I can see a song bird,' sings the teacher, 'Who can see the song bird?' One two-year-old spots the toy hiding by the window. His face lights up and out comes the response, clear as a bell: 'I can see the song bird!' To an outsider, this is just a game; each child is finding an animal to be used in the next game. To a Kodály-trained teacher it's so much more: each game-song is spring-loaded to impart musicianship skills, appropriate to the child's own ability. This is a lesson in keeping a pulse, matching a specific rhythm, pitch-matching a tune (here the interval of a minor

third, soh-mi, the first interval all children naturally use when calling). The pitch will have been carefully selected to fit exactly within their range, and the teacher will adhere to it precisely. The speed will have been considered so that the children can walk their hands easily in time. This is an exercise in listening to others, in understanding the structure of the song and their contribution in it, in turn-taking and in being rewarded.

When I say to parents that I use a Kodály-based approach to early years music teaching I'm met with either blank incomprehension or scepticism that such a philosophy can have any relevance to the under threes. Musicians, too, are suspicious of the 'K' word, assuming I'm drilling babies in 'doh-re-mi' via obscure Hungarian folk songs. That Kodály teaching equals *solfège* is one of many myths and misunderstandings about the approach (relative sol-fa, hand-signs and rhythm names are just three of the *tools* Kodály used).

Judith Brindle, an inspirational early years, SEN and primary practitioner in West Yorkshire, is used to the flak: 'People assume

it's too restrictive and prescriptive or that the songs are "too simple", failing to see the learning potential in them – but we are giving them the best musical food, and the tools to be creative, the *real* musical skills. It's up to the teacher to make it tantalising and fun.' Nikhil Dally, who developed his Stepping Notes curriculum for two- to eight-year-olds in Surrey from a Kodály basis, admits that Kodály can be approached in too narrow a way: 'Yes, if handled badly it can be turned into something austere, but it's up to the teacher to breathe life into it. That's all about your interaction with the children – a good teacher adds flow, fantasy, context and purpose.' David Vinden, Director of the Kodály Centre of London and a distinguished musicianship teacher for the youngest children right up to conservatoire level and beyond, is unequivocal: 'In 35 years of teaching I've never found anything as good as Kodály. There's a lot of misinformation about it: it's utterly child-friendly, they make progress because it's aimed at what they *can* do, it's organised in a logical, progressive way and is *never* boring!'

WHAT IS THE KODÁLY CONCEPT?

So what do these leading teachers actually mean by 'Kodály' when teaching pre-school-age children? Kodály himself never wanted his principles enshrined in a single 'method' or 'tutor' to be religiously followed, but there's a strong consensus on Kodály principles. Judith Brindle: 'When I use the word *I* mean a singing-based curriculum, progressing from the simplest to the most advanced musicianship, building up a carefully-selected repertoire of songs, through which you teach pulse, rhythm, pitch, expressive elements, musical structure and, ultimately, harmony.' For David Vinden the key point is that the singing training 'moves from the simple to the complex, the unconscious to the conscious in known, logical steps.' Cyrilla Rowsell, Secretary of the British Kodály Academy and a highly respected teacher-trainer, co-ordinates the String Training Programme (STP) at the Guildhall for four- to 11-year-olds. She knows from personal experience what children miss when they do no structured early years music: 'Children are hearing and using language for at least four years before they learn to read and write. But we expect them to pick up an instrument one day and learn "music". Eleven years of piano lessons taught me something about playing the piano but almost *nothing* about music: I was skating on the surface. If a child is shown a written crotchet they have no physical understanding what's behind that. Kodály musicianship puts petrol in the tank, in that it gives children a profound experience of music-making, through the voice, building up a repertoire of songs and giving them the unconscious knowledge of pitch-matching, walking the pulse, rhythm, phrasing and improvising.' Rowsell points out that a good Kodály teacher should be rigorously analytical, and always able to explain *why* they are working on a particular game-song; they should be expecting pre-school-age children to sing age-appropriate, rhythmically simple material, with a limited pitch-range (she suggests d above middle c to b), with a focus on individual singing and inner hearing. 'When they are engaged in the song they are at play, but they should know what they are aiming for and know how they've improved. I love to see their burgeoning confidence and independence.'

BACK TO THE ROOTS

So where do the Hungarian folk songs fit in to all this? David Vinden goes back to the roots: 'We must understand that Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) was engaged in resurrecting Hungarian folk-culture: he

amassed a repertoire of Hungarian, Slovakian and Romanian folk-songs, gathered a group of fantastic educators around him – including Katalin Forrai whose expertise was in teaching very young children – and sorted the songs pedagogically. He had two goals: to impart sound musical skills to everyone, regardless of ability; and to make use of his folk-song heritage. He wasn't interested in producing prodigies, but for music to be part of life.' Vinden feels that the UK has missed out on the thorough-going pedagogical work in building a song repertoire, though he himself has done a huge amount of work to redress this, and is currently engaged in making an edition of Cecil Sharpe's collected children's songs with Ruth Herbert. He and Cyrilla Rowsell have also developed a Jolly Music curriculum (published by the Jolly Phonics team, see review on page 55). The Beginner's book is ideal for use in reception and Key Stage 1, for specialist and non-specialist teachers alike. In Scotland, Lucinda Geoghegan has also made fantastic collections of simple song games under the imprint of the National Youth Choir of Scotland (NYCoS). Colloquial songs from all over the British Isles, Europe, the Americas and Africa are in use by Kodály teachers today, provided they have a limited range of pitches and intervals.

Nikhil Dally takes up Kodály's own story. 'The point about Kodály was that he was a creative, international musician: he admired the French way of naming rhythms and took that; in England

he was struck by Curwen's effective use of *sol-fa* in training choirs to read music. He was a pragmatist: when he saw something that worked, he used it. We in 21st-century Britain don't have the historical baggage of Hungarian nationalism: we have to adapt his principles to our own multicultural situation: there's no blueprint, we have to work hard to create a coherent programme.'

Dally came to Kodály having spent years teaching Javanese gamelan through singing: 'It's a measure of the slight dysfunction of Western society that we have become so obsessed with teaching instrumental playing from notation. 90% of other cultures learn music through singing: it's fundamental.'

OPEN TO COMBINATION

Many see Kodály's openness to being combined with other philosophies that also seek to access the music at the centre of the human being as one of its great strengths. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) was another a highly creative music teacher who believed that experiencing the elements of music with the whole body led to a deeper understanding of music. In Eurhythmics (music through movement) all elements of music are taught through movement: children begin to learn pulse; pitch; duration and tempo; accent; silence; dynamics; phrasing; articulation; sustained legato and the relationships between time, space and energy.

Dalcroze teachers use Kodály principles as the basis of their singing practice, while Kodály teachers often employ Dalcroze principles when working with young children; the balance will depend on the personality and priorities of the teacher and the setting. Dally sees movement as another 'fundamental' element of music-making. 'The body gives expression to the voice, the voice gives control and direction to the body. The two are fundamentally linked. You see that in all young children: toddlers instinctively bounce to the rhythm of a song; they don't think twice about it.'

Other Kodály teachers are clear about the potential of complementing these two philosophies. 'They work fantastically well together; they are two sides of the same coin,' says Vinden. The Guildhall STP youngsters do 40 minutes of both Dalcroze Rhythmics and Kodály musicianship every week, while Dally combines the two organically. Judith Brindle has respect for both disciplines: 'Action is motivating. I often put the actions first, swing from leg to leg to set the pulse, chant the song, then sing the song' Kodály musicianship training has also been





'Splish, splash, splosh': Only one child at a time plays percussion, in this case cymbals, to the pulse of a song

successfully combined with Suzuki by Yuko Vinden, in north London, and is the basis of the Colourstrings approach to stringed instrument teaching developed by Géza Szilvay. In several Scottish regions, NYCoS has successfully rolled out Kodály-based choral training, and in the London Borough of Lambeth, it informs the Musictrax programme in primary schools, where children move from basic song-learning to instrumental playing.

THE EARLIEST YEARS

Of course, when working with very young children, understanding their developmental stage is crucial. With a class of babies, one is really teaching the adults to be good singing role models, but it is vital that the children are experiencing music as intensely as possible. This means singing quiet, unaccompanied songs, some for listening, some more limited for joining in, moving the child in the adult's arms, and communicating quite strong rhythmic movements (marching, jogging, trotting) by carrying them.

As babies grow into toddlers, they start to sing and enact simple songs (eg 'Jelly on the Plate', 'Mary Ann', 'Cobbler Cobbler', 'See Saw').

Singing along to a tape is not helpful, since the recorded music not only tends to overwhelm their singing but can never be varied. Another temptation, says Dally, is to introduce a cacophony of hard-to-handle percussion. 'The common practice of giving a group of pre-schoolers lots of noisy instruments to play while singing can be a disaster. It makes it harder to hear the tune, therefore harder to sing it accurately. And the task of playing the instruments can be so absorbing that they forget to sing at all: a spectacular own-goal.' That does not mean the pulse cannot be played out using a drum or woodblock or that all shakers and ankle bells are banned, but it does mean that when the focus is on listening and

singing, nothing should detract from that.

Pressure often comes from parents and other teachers to make the music class 'more fun', more like the 'party world' pre-schoolers are assumed to inhabit. But, as Dally points out, children don't need adults to teach them to have fun. The Kodály music session is about more. 'Music in itself is *more* than fun, it's transcendent.' The rapt attention given to a short action song by children as young as 18 months never ceases to amaze me: their sheer concentration is to be cherished in a world full of aural and visual hyper-stimulation. The key is to make the focused activities short, the whole session not more than 20-25 minutes, and never to turn it into a 'show' for the parents. Dally's lessons flow seamlessly from one action song into the next, children moving between different coloured centres, each with their own identifiable musical phrase: 'It's not a spectator sport, but an act of communal play. Rehearsing a song merely to perform it is wasting valuable learning time.'

Judith Brindle consciously develops the skills of staff members: 'A most important part of my work is to improve the practitioners' musical skills and understanding of what is good musical practice to enable them to maintain the quality of the music sessions when I have to move on. It seems generally accepted in nurseries and children's centres that the leader of the music session should sing with enthusiasm, loudly but, sadly, not pleasing to the ear and all-too often out of tune.' Having modelled the song herself, says Brindle, 'to maintain children's attentive listening, I ask staff in turn to take the lead, which includes singing solo.' After each performance stars are awarded and a wish made if an improvement can be made. She has found reluctant staff have genuinely improved and felt proud of their achievement.

MOVING ON

As children grow into toddlers, they gradually join in more of the lesson, taking responsibility for setting the pulse of a song, singing in call-and-response songs and eventually singing alongside others. They may spend a year or more listening and absorbing before the singing emerges. Certainly by two-and-a-half many are confident enough to sing individually. A sense of higher and lower will be introduced, but sol-fa hand signs may not come until KS1. From responding to musical signals with actions (jumping, bunny hops, ducktails up) children begin to be able to step to quaver, crotchet and minim beats or to three or four time, to roll balls through the length of a phrase, or to bounce balls or pass bean bags to a beat. Body percussion is favoured over clapping as hands are

peripheral, whereas feeling pulse in feet and on legs sends a stronger message to the brain.

When children begin to learn instruments or sing more complex songs, Kodály training becomes even more important, and indeed, can be developed over a life-time. As Judith Brindle explains, 'I came to Kodály long after my music degree, and I still have so much more to learn. A good Kodály teacher should be constantly working on their own musicianship.' Dally, who teaches musicianship through the piano for older children, encapsulates Kodály's real underlying message: 'When children are learning instruments, it doesn't necessarily matter what system a teacher is using; what matters is: Are they teaching musicianship which comes from the centre, which is not a veneer? Are the children still singing inside as they play, are their hearts dancing with the music?'

TRAINING

▷ There are several training courses available to musically-trained and non-specialist teachers in Early Years Kodály organised by the British Kodaly Academy: Springboard; Sound Beginnings and Sound Progressions, accredited by Roehampton University www.britishkodalyacademy.org

▷ David and Yuko Vinden run musicianship courses for musicians and teachers at the Kodály Centre of London www.kodalycentre.co.uk

▷ The Dalcroze Society, www.dalcroze.org.uk, offers an Early Music qualification accredited by the University of Canterbury, Stepping into Music www.steppingintomusic.org.uk

▷ Nikhil Dally (Stepping Notes Music School, Egham, Surrey) offers day courses for teachers www.dally.org.uk/steppingnotes. Next course: 15th February, 2010.

▷ Colourstrings www.colourstrings.co.uk

▷ First steps in music with Helen Wallace in south-east London www.soundssense-music.co.uk

▷ Jolly Music curriculum www.jollylearning.co.uk

▷ Lucinda Geoghegan has developed a range of song collections for babies to advanced www.nycos.co.uk

¹ *The Selected Writings of Zoltan Kodály* (Boosey & Hawkes, London), p. 193, 196



'Along came a shark, as quiet as could be': Teaching a song that utilises speech, song and whispering