

Making (which?) Music Together

Presented by *LOIS CHOKSY*

July 11, 2003.

Early Years

When I think of my childhood, certain things come back to me with crystal clarity. I remember my grandmother's huge black iron stove with its warming shelf that always held left over bacon and cornmeal pancakes for me, mid-morning. Nothing before or since ever tasted so good. I remember summer days, walking barefoot on hot sand, jumping from one shady spot to another.

I remember hating school. Being tall for my age, I was always seated at the back of the classroom. An undiagnosed very near sighted, I couldn't see anything written on the blackboard. The teachers simply assumed that I was slow. And the one thing I really wanted to do - sing in the choir - I was never allowed to.

Recalling those days and those teachers, I am put in mind of a cartoon I once saw:

A teacher is sitting behind her desk talking to a parent, saying "I'm afraid your son can never have a career in music. He doesn't seem to hear very well, Mrs. Beethoven!"

I do not mean to equate myself and my meagre talents with those of Beethoven; however I think there is a lesson for all of us in this. It is our job as teachers not to prejudge our students, but rather to open the world of music to them all whatever we may think of their talents. We could be wrong, you know.

Kodály's principal dictum was "Music for all". This should be for us and for the children we teach our overriding goal.

The happiest days of my childhood were Saturdays. From the time I was 12 years old I spent all day Saturday at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland. I took lessons - voice and piano, I sang in a choir, I learned to sing in solfa, took musical dictation, studied harmony and music literature and made friends. For the first time I realized that I wasn't really weird - or that if I was, I had a lot of company. I lived for Saturdays.

Somehow I grew up, and somehow I managed, in spite of teachers, to acquire an education of sorts.

Beginning Teaching

And then, 55 years ago, I walked into my first classroom as a teacher. It was shortly after World War II, and I, as someone with only three years of university and no teaching experience, was given something called a "War Emergency Teaching Certificate" and turned loose to teach all subjects to a class of 47 third and fourth grade children. I had only the fuzziest idea of how to teach reading, and my own math and science skills were limited, to say the least. But I had studied music for 14 years, and whenever I wasn't sure what to do next, I taught the children a song or told them about one or another of my favourite pieces of music and played it for them on the school's one and only, rather dilapidated, portable record player.

The school principal was so impressed that I managed to keep 47 children more or less occupied and quiet that he came to the (mistaken) conclusion that I was a “good” teacher. Other teachers in the school were not so easily fooled. But they did see and hear that my children sang every day and that they sang well. I began to get invitations:

“I’ll teach your math (spelling, science, geography) on Tuesday and Thursday if you’ll teach my music.”

Before I knew what was happening, about 50% of my teaching time was spent in music. I was a much happier teacher and I dare say my children learned a great deal more math, science and geography than they would have with me. This went on for 5 years, with me gradually assuming responsibility for all the music in the school, including a choir and Christmas and spring programs.

At this point the district decided to institute school music programs in all of its 33 elementary schools, and I was the first “music teacher” hired. After that I happily taught music to my 500 children on a twice-weekly schedule.

I used movable-do solfa in my teaching because it was how I had learned music (Peabody Conservatory being one of the few music schools in the U.S. progressive enough to use movable rather than fixed do). Still, I had an uncomfortable feeling that I wasn’t doing justice to my charges. My “curriculum” if such it could be called, was a hodge-podge of singing and listening in no particular order. I was considered to be a “good” teacher (whatever that is) and other teachers were brought to observe my classes - but, in truth, I had no idea where I was going with my teaching or why I was doing the things I did. I was simply teaching as I had been taught, and I really hadn’t been taught very well.

Discovering Kodály

It was an enlightened supervisor who pointed me in the direction of Kodály, and a three-week summer course at Esztergom in Hungary in 1968 changed my life. There, I met Erzsebet Szonyi, the Liszt Academy professor and composer of whom musicologist Alexander Ringer said, “she wears the mantle of Kodály,” and she invited me to return to Hungary for a year to study with her and to observe in the schools. I think it was already in her mind at that time that I should write a book in English about teaching the Kodály way, but I’m not sure - she is ever the master of gentle persuasion.

I spent the academic year of 1970-71 in Hungary, at The Franz Liszt Academy of Music, and in the schools of Budapest, Kecskemét, Székesfehérvár, Miskolc, Pécs, and outlying villages. At first exposure to the Hungarian schools, one is bowled over by the apparent ease with which children sing, read, write, improvise and analyse music. It simply does not seem within the realm of possibility.

That initial glimpse of extraordinary technical facility is both impressive and misleading. One does not necessarily see the carefully constructed foundation underlying all that flash and dash. Indeed, while I was there, there were a number of what I still think of as “one week wonders” - people who came to Hungary from far and wide to observe in the schools, spent one or two weeks and went home to write music books based on what they saw - books usually full of Hungarian songs and cute pictures. They observed sequence without perceiving its philosophic and pedagogic basis; they saw the technical facility

without understanding its roots in musical understanding. They mistook the vehicle for the destination.

“Why is it always the incompetent who force their way to the scene of action, spoiling things to such an extent that twice as much work is needed to put things right again...” (Kodály, 1947/1974a, p. 160).

Good Teaching

Good teaching is probably 49% science, 49% art, and 2% black magic. We can plan carefully, fully aware of child development, fully cognizant of correct sequencing for learning, knowledgeable in music, and still have no idea what people, either children or adults, are taking away from our teaching. When we are young we assume that once we have said something to a class, once we have imparted some bit of knowledge, naturally, those upon whom we bestowed it then “know” it. As we acquire age and experience we learn that, sadly, this is by no means the case. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

It is a simple fact that what the learner brings to the learning is at least as important as what the teacher brings. And there is no test or evaluation device on earth that can give us an accurate picture of what children carry away from a music lesson. I am appalled at the so-called “tests of musical aptitude” that seem to flourish (particularly in the United States). I’m not sure what they test (other than an ability to take tests) but it *isn’t* musical aptitude.

I have a home on a small island in the Caribbean. For many years, whenever I was there, I volunteer-taught music to the children in the school. In a first grade class, there was a child, Raymond, who never sang. I used to sit with the children clustered around me for their singing lessons. Raymond always placed himself close beside me, one thumb firmly in his mouth and the other hand clutching my skirt. He never uttered a sound. If I directly addressed him he looked at the floor and squirmed.

Then one Saturday I was in the car outside a village shop, waiting for my husband, when Raymond approached, leaned in the car window, smiled, and started singing in a clear, accurate voice. In a period of 30 minutes, he sang every song I had taught the class in the preceding three months. You can well imagine my astonishment! The following Tuesday he was back in my class, clutching my skirt, thumb firmly ensconced in mouth once more. But I no longer worried that he wasn’t learning anything. The mind is a wonderful thing. We should never underestimate the capabilities of those we teach.

I have taught long enough now to have known the children, even the grandchildren, of children I taught. Many times former students have approached me to recount some moment they particularly recalled. And do you know what? Not one of them has ever said “That was a wonderful lesson on fa that day in 4th grade” or “I’ve never forgotten ta-ta-ti-ti-ta!” They have, variously, recalled specific songs we sang, pieces of music we listened to, concerts we gave, concerts we attended.

Understanding the Destination

I’m not suggesting that *ta* and *ti-ti* are not important, but rather that they are only the *vehicle*. Music, real music, must be the *destination*. If I seem to be downplaying the importance of musical literacy or of carefully sequencing material for instruction, such is not my intention. Indeed, my Australian colleague and good friend Frank York once

referred to me as the “queen of sequence” (If I’m given a grocery list, I tend to sequence it.)

Yes. Sequencing learning so that it proceeds seamlessly from simple to complex within each musical element is important. We cannot possibly teach effectively unless we first organize learning in this way.

Yes. Musical literacy is a worthy goal, and solfa and rhythm syllables are useful in achieving that goal. We would be foolish not to use such efficient tools. But they are means, not ends. They are *vehicle*, not *destination*. Of what use is it to teach linguistic literacy if our students aspire to nothing better than comic books? Of what use is it to teach musical literacy if our students aspire to nothing better than the latest pop music? Music Kodály referred to as “the refuse of street music” (Kodály, 1929/1974, p. 119).

There is a world of great literature to be lost if our children are not made hungry for it. There is a world of great music to be lost if we do not bring it to our children and our children to it!

Kodály stated the principal goal of music education as “To make the masterpieces of world [music] literature public property, to convey them to people of every kind and rank” (Kodály, 1949/1974a, p. 160). And later, in a lecture presented at the University of Toronto on the occasion of his being granted an honorary doctorate, he said “The final purpose of all this must be to introduce the students to an understanding and love of great classical music - of the past, present and future” (Kodály, 1966).

This then must be our promise and our commitment - to bring the best music to our children - to create in them a hunger that can be satisfied only with music of unquestionable quality.

How can we do this? We must make up our minds first never to use the cheap and tawdry, never to use edutainment music, never to use the expedient, commercially contrived and marketed slosh that permeates our society. Perhaps the only time and place in which our young charges will encounter good music is when they are with us for one or two hours a week. We cannot afford to waste a moment of that precious time on transitory music.

“Whatever lessons are contained in music that is worthless from an artistic point of view, these works are harmful from the pedagogical aspect, too” (Kodály, 1941,1957/1974c).

“Let us stop the teachers’ superstition that only some diluted art-substitute is suitable for teaching purposes. A child is the most susceptible and enthusiastic audience for pure art...only music of intrinsic value is suitable for children. Everything else is harmful.” (Kodály, 1929/1974d, p.122).

The Materials

Once we have made the commitment to good music, the rest is easy. What are the enduring songs of early childhood? Each culture has its own, passed from generation to generation of children, often without the intervention or even knowledge of adults. The nursery songs and acting out games, the chase games, games of mock courtship and even songs and games depicting death, through which children attempt to decipher the incomprehensible world of the adults around them.

These are a microcosm of life. They have survived in some cases for hundreds of years, and they exist in every culture. They have intrinsic value.

And after the nursery songs and games, what? The world of each people's own folk music heritage, of course. How better to understand oneself than through the music of one's own culture, country and peoples. How better to understand other people than through *their* music. Speech is mirrored in music; the stress patterns, the natural flow and rise and fall of a language is reflected in the folk music and composed music of each language. It is right for people in Hungary to use Hungarian children's songs and folk songs in teaching their young. Those same songs translated into English or Greek or Chinese are not only inappropriate, they are unmusical.

But folk music is not the *destination*. Our goal is "to make the masterpieces (of music) public property." And to do this we must spend significant time finding and organizing masterworks into age appropriate sequences for children. This is the step I see missing most often in Kodály programs. It's as if teachers take the long journey with their children, reach their destination, and then don't bother to open the door and go in. Of what use is it to teach children to sing, read, and write if we are not at the same time teaching them to value their heritage of music - and by this I mean far more than folk music. I've taught children in a conservatory setting, advanced performers on their instruments, who when they came to me could not name a single important composer, let alone sing a fragment by memory of any important composition.

I am not the first to observe this strange phenomenon of the gifted performer who is culturally illiterate. Kodály, in 1946, wrote: "Are there illiterates in the Music Academy? They are not only in it - they have been receiving diplomas from it for decades" (Kodály, 1949/1974e, p.163).

Follow the Music

I believe that everything one needs to know about music may be found in music - *real* music. That "exercises" not directly drawn from the music being studied and performed are both pointless and counter productive. Worse, they tend to be deadening. Ten minutes of a lesson, *two* minutes of a lesson are too much time to spend on exercises not drawn from worthy music. If children experience difficulty with a particular melodic turn or rhythmic figure, we should take it out of the musical context long enough to practice and perfect it - then return it to the original context. We should always begin and end with students performing the music. It is all there, everything we want to teach - all we have to do is *follow the music!*

The two most important aspects of our teaching are, first, the *value* we convey when we use only the highest quality music in our teaching at every level, whether that music is folk or composed, whether it is pentatonic, diatonic, tonal or atonal; and, second, the

musicality with which we present that music - the *modelling* we do in the process of teaching. Every time we sing a new song to a class, we should think of it as a musical performance. That is, we should sing expressively, with attention to dynamics and phrasing, breathing correctly, making the text clear and understandable. And when we present masterworks to children, we should choose compositions we love, for our feelings about that music are communicated as well. Children learn by what they see and hear us *do* to a much greater extent than they learn by what they hear us *say*.

The Kodály Method

I am a music teacher. I am a music teacher who deeply believes in the Kodály philosophy and carefully observes Kodály's teaching principles. I practice what is commonly called "the Kodály Method"? But what *is* The Kodály Method? It is certainly more than a set of pedagogical tricks.

László Dobszay, in an early lecture at the Kodály Institute in Wellesley, Massachusetts, stated: He who hopes that Kodály has worked out a system of education, a manufacturing process, which causes ideal musical education to be brought about infallibly, does not understand Kodály's world of thought and will be greatly disappointed. What is called the Kodály Method does have some elements which can, with more or less certainty, make the child learn – but learn what? ... Means without purpose... Behind the so-called Kodály Method there is a series of basic educational thought, an educational idea. If we fail to grasp it we proceed on a paved way - in the wrong direction!" (Dobszay, c1970).

So, what is the Kodály Method? It is a philosophy, a body of beliefs, a set of values, supported by (but not consisting of) a collection of pedagogical practices. These practices have existed in many places and for many years, and although it was the early followers of Kodály who put them all together with such great effect, there was nothing new or evolutionary in them. It was the *purpose* of these practices that was and is different. The pedagogy was only the *vehicle*. The *destination* was music. To be able to achieve a purpose, we must be in constant contact with the purpose, we must understand it well, we must own it. We must have the necessary insight, intuition, to enable us to use the means correctly" (Dobszay, c1970).

What are the purposes, the beliefs, the foundations of the Kodály Method? They are really very simple and straightforward. Yet if we subscribe to them they have the capacity to change our teaching practices (and our lives) forever. They certainly did mine. For me they became they became the credo of my professional life. I believe that music education begins (for better or worse) at birth - with the music children hear in their homes.

I believe that the nursery songs and games of the child's language should be his or her earliest singing experiences and that folk music should be the next. And that the best of the world's art music should be core-teaching material for older students. That it is our responsibility to "...instil a thirst for finer music in children, a thirst that will last a lifetime"(Kodály, 1929/1974d, p. 120)

I believe that the human voice - the instrument everyone is born with - is the best instrument through which to teach music.

"You have an instrument in your throat with a more beautiful than any violin...with this instrument you will come invigoratingly close to the great geniuses of music - if only there is someone to lead you on." (Kodály, 1929/1974d, p. 123)

“A deeper culture of music always developed only where it was based on singing” (Singing Youth, 1941). The root of music is singing (on the reform of our musical education, 1954)

And I believe that music should occupy a central place in school curriculum – that music should be taught daily - that it should be the *obligation* of the schools to musically educate all children - and that that education should include musical reading and writing. Not with the idea of producing professional musicians, but as Kodály said, “just to complete them as people.”

This is the “Kodály Method.” It is not composed of specific Hungarian teaching materials. Each country, indeed, each teacher, must choose musical materials and sequence for teaching, based on his or her own music and children. Kodály reiterated this many times in many places.

If the system is to be adopted in foreign countries, each country must use its own motivic and musical material” (from an interview with Zoltán Kodály by Erno Daniel, Santa Barbara, California, 1966)

The Need for Good Music Teachers

Of course, I’ve written a number of books (which some of you may know) telling teachers of English speaking children what to teach, when and how to teach it and even what music to use. I only hope that teachers *using* these books bring understanding, intelligence and musicality to the task. And I hope they realize that there is no one “right” order or process. And that only they can know what is “right” for their children.

Finally, there is no substitute for the well-trained musician-teacher. It is not possible for anyone less to teach music effectively. In my country, it is still thought in some places that any classroom teacher of 5 or 6 year olds is competent to teach music, even if he or she is not a musician - or even musically literate. It is thought that band programs begun in the secondary schools are enough music for the schools to offer. Would these same schools think it rational to wait until 8th grade to begin teaching Math or Reading?

Would they consider someone who couldn’t count capable of teaching math or who couldn’t read or write capable of teaching language? I think not. We should have the *best* musicians teaching the youngest children. Only they can lay the foundation for life-long musical learning.

Where did the idea that *anyone* can teach music spring from? I’m afraid only the minds of culturally deprived individuals who control budgets and who, having been given no musical values in the course of their own education see no need for them in the education of others. It is a notion we must militantly reject.

We are told that it is a matter of not enough money. In 1929, Kodály wrote,

“the economic crisis is the cause of everything? Everything will be set right as soon as the economy is in order? I do not think so. Penury may hamper development but wealth does not always promote ideas ... the greatest trouble is not the emptiness of the purse, but the emptiness of the soul” (Kodály, 1929/1974d, p. 126).

Concluding thoughts

I have fought all my life against the idea that music is some kind of frill - that it is peripheral to education. I will continue to fight it verbally and in print with every opportunity afforded me as long as I have breath.

When I retired from university teaching 5 years ago at the age of 70, a number of my former students chose to speak at the ceremony. One not so young man said that my teaching was like a pebble dropped into a pond. The initial splash is small, but the rings from it spread out and out until they reach the far shores. I hope that this is so.

If it is, then it means that I in Canada, Kacper in Poland, Mihalis in Greece, Connie in Taiwan, Judy Johnson in Australia, Mihaly in Hungary, and all the others who really care can make a difference. Once when I was particularly discouraged, my Hungarian mentor and friend, Erzsebet Szonyi told me that I had to think not in days or months or even years, but in generations.

I believe that we *have* made a difference. I believe that our students, if we have taught them well, can make more of a difference, and that someday there *will* be a musically educated public - a public that values music as we do. And that *their* children will not have to fight to be musically educated.

References

- Dobszay, L.** c1970 “*The Kodály method and its musical foundations.*” Unpublished, undated paper probably presented at the Kodály Institute in Wellesley, Mass, circa 1970.
- Kodály, Z.** 1966 *MacMillan Lecture #3.* Lecture presented at the University of Toronto, July 14.
- Kodály, Z.** 1974a “A Hundred Year Plan” in F. Bónis (Ed.). *The selected works of Zoltán Kodály* (L. Halápy & F. Macnicol, Trans.). (pp. 160-162). London: Boosey & Hawkes. (Original work published 1947).
- Kodály, Z.** 1974b “Children’s Choirs” in F. Bónis (Ed.). *The selected works of Zoltán Kodály* (L. Halápy & F. Macnicol, Trans.). (pp. 119-126). London: Boosey & Hawkes. (Original work published 1929).
- Kodály, Z.** 1974c “Music in the Kindergarten” in F. Bónis (Ed.). *The selected Works of Zoltán Kodály* (L. Halápy & F. Macnicol, Trans.). (pp. 127-151). London: Boosey & Hawkes. (Original work published 1941, 1957).
- Kodály, Z.** 1974d “Children’s choirs” in F. Bónis (Ed.). *The selected works of Zoltán Kodály* (L. Halápy & F. Macnicol, Trans.). (pp. 119-126). London: Boosey & Hawkes. (Original work published 1929).
- Kodály, Z.** 1974e After the first solfège competition. In F. Bónis (Ed.). *The Selected Works of Zoltán Kodály* (L. Halápy & F. Macnicol, Trans.). (pp. 163-164). London: Boosey & Hawkes. (Original work published 1949).