

# THE KODÁLY METHOD

BY ADELE CUMMINGS

Adele Cummings teaches classroom Music in the Middle School.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout my education at University I had what I would like to think of as a good grounding in the Kodály philosophy and methodology. I, along with my fellow music education students, was an avid follower of this method of teaching. Now, as a recent graduate and beginning teacher, it came to my attention that some of my fellow newly-graduated colleagues were becoming disenchanted with the Kodály Method as a system for music education. I have always been positive about the merits of the Kodály method but it got me thinking about what makes the method successful and how beginning teachers can practise it effectively. Many of the well-known, successful Kodály programs have been set up in independent schools; however, I believe that the method can be successful in state schools, culturally diverse schools or rural schools. The strategy I would employ to make the method successful, regardless of the type of school, is to approach the method in a more open way. It is important for teachers to think about the end result Kodály envisaged and the outcome they want for their students. The aim of this paper is to examine what makes the Kodály method successful and how it can be implemented in a range of settings.

To begin to examine how teachers can practise the Kodály Method successfully, I wanted to determine what other teachers found challenging when implementing the method. As I have only been teaching part-time for one and a half years, I drew on the reflections of my newly-graduated colleagues and more experienced music teachers. The teachers from whom I gathered thoughts and experiences are working in a range of schools throughout Queensland, in Melbourne and in the United Kingdom. Some are teaching primary-aged students; others teach at high schools and P-12 schools.

Many of the teachers I interviewed have had a good grounding in the Kodály philosophy, having taken a number of specific music education subjects at university with a Kodály focus. These teachers are finding the planning side of a Kodály program much easier because they have had a lot of practice with this. The teachers who have had less experience with the Kodály method seem to feel as though they are less successful at implementing the method.

Concerns from teachers included:

- Choice of repertoire
- Time allocation
- Support from the school and other teachers
- Planning
- Classroom management

## THE BROADER VISION: EXAMINING KODÁLY'S PHILOSOPHY

I believe the key to practising the Kodály Method successfully in any context is to examine Kodály's 'greater vision' underpinning the intricacies of the pedagogy. In *Kodály Method 1*, Lois Choksy explores the method for use in American schools. She states that the Kodály philosophy stems from the belief that music education is integral in developing the person as a whole and that "its primary role is to develop a love of music supported by understanding and knowledge" (Choksy, 1974, p.17) I would think that this ideal is in keeping with what all music educators strive for.

According to Chosky, there are three parts to the method: learning should be culturally rich; learning should be sequential; and music should belong to everyone. Moveable solfa, hand signs and French time names, which are so often associated with the method, are tools but not part of the philosophy as such.

Music should be culturally rich. This was very important to Kodály and reflected the time and country in which he lived. I think it is important to provide students with music from their culture. However, this requires some thought as to what defines Australian culture and the 'culture' of our schools. We need to acknowledge that we are a very multicultural society and our school populations reflect this. So we need to be careful to include a range of song types. I believe this includes quality popular music styles as well, even if just as a starting point.

Learning should be sequential and meaningful. I think this is probably the most important aspect of the method. Learning should begin with what students know and have already experienced before moving to the unknown. The alternative to this method is to teach in what is known as a subject-logic approach (*Kodály Method 1*, Choksy). This means that students are to learn rhythms mathematically or conceptually rather than through experiencing them or drawing them from a real musical context. I believe

that this approach is much less meaningful than drawing on learning experiences from real musical experiences. Kodály believed that students should be actively involved in music making and that the learning of musical concepts should come from a real music context – for example, from a real piece of music. I would think anyone who has taught music in this way can see the level of engagement from their students when they are deeply involved in the music. In her article 'Hungary will never outgrow Kodály', Denise Bacon outlines the importance of this element of the philosophy. She writes that "*Hungary will never "outgrow" Kodály because his ideas were not merely pedagogical; they were broadly educational*" (Bacon, 1978, p.39). In this statement, Bacon brings to attention the fact that the foundations of the Kodály method are 'best practice' teaching. The method strives for the same goal that all educators strive for – that is, deep understanding, active involvement in learning experiences, and sequenced learning.

Music should be for everyone. Music education should not be limited to only those who can afford private lessons. Music education should be approached with the attitude that anyone can and should learn music. Teaching in this sequenced and logical way allows anyone to learn music.

This is an example of what a successful Kodály teacher from Brisbane believes is at the core of the philosophy:

*Two things are at the core of the Kodály philosophy: (1) music for everyone; and (2) teaching using tools of best practice. A true Kodály teacher is one who realises these things take different forms in different cultures and contexts. Flexibility is key and so is the need to identify correctly the needs of the students and implement an appropriate program. In my opinion, there is no strict method; tools of practice are always improving and Kodály intended for this to happen. I know what I do would be different to what others do, and what I do this year will be an improved on last year. The method is constantly evolving.*

In summary, the broad definition of the Kodály philosophy is 'best practice teaching' to foster a love and understanding of music in every child, regardless of her background or prior knowledge. Kodály had a set of tools that he found successful in bringing

this philosophy to fruition. However, this doesn't mean that teachers cannot achieve the same goal by adapting these tools to suit their context.

## WHAT MAKES THE METHOD SUCCESSFUL?

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From the information I gathered from teachers and from the literature, there are some core elements of the method that make it successful.

Many teachers indicated that the teaching of concepts in a structured and developmental sequence allowed for success. They found that the method worthwhile because it engages students actively in music making. They also found that their students completely understood a concept because of the careful teaching of that particular element. One teacher commented:

*I find that the students fully understand the concepts I teach with the Kodály method and enjoy their learning, whereas when I teach concepts in a non-Kodály way, they don't seem to enjoy learning as much or don't always understand or remember what they have learnt.*

Supporting this further is a statement made by Joseph Szarska, Head of the Pedagogical Institute in Budapest, in his article 'The Controversy Surrounding Kodály' (1968). He says that it was easier to implement the Kodály method in Hungary because of the national curriculum. However, he believes it could stand on its own internationally because it is clear, sequential and logical so it can be learned by anyone, and not just by musically talented children.

## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE METHOD AND HOW CAN IT BE PRACTISED EFFECTIVELY?

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To begin to examine how teachers can practise the Kodály method successfully, I wanted to find out what the challenges are when implementing a Kodály approach.

Lois Choksy wrote an article 'Kodály In and Out of Context' when the method was first introduced to American music education. At first, Choksy had some reservations about the success of the method.

She agreed with the developmental approach and the importance of musically literate students; however, she believed the method would not work in America. She thought that it succeeded in Hungary because there was more time devoted to music lessons, they have highly trained, specialist teachers and they have a national music curriculum. In America,

there was no national curriculum so students could commence a highly structured music class half way through the year, with no knowledge, and have to catch up. At first, Choksy also believed that the Kodály method did not allow for differences and individuality.

A number of the teachers I interviewed have similar misgivings particularly with regard to time allocations for music. It is true that it is difficult to set up a program that relies so heavily on a sequential format when teachers may only see children once per week or for one term in a year. I think there some possible solutions to this – for example, to promote a music program tirelessly and make it the best it can be, so that it is regarded as an integral part of a child's education.

Some teachers expressed the concern that when a child joins the class mid-year from another school, they find it very difficult to catch up. Denise Bacon, in her article 'The Controversy surrounding Kodály', explains that in her class students who have commenced mid-year do not find it hard to catch up; rather, they are inspired and work harder because they can see the success of the other children. Perhaps this is a culture that can be created, over time, within music programs.

The last point, that the method does not allow for individuality, is an important one. This idea that the method is a rigid, unimaginative process is a common criticism. Some of the teachers I interviewed have had difficulties implementing a Kodály method in such a way that it does not become a rigid process of skill development. I constantly have to remind myself that the purpose of my teaching is to help my students to enjoy making quality music. My other aim is to make lesson segments meaningful by always remembering to make it about the music rather than about participating in skills-based activities.

In Denise Bacon's article 'Hungary will never outgrow Kodály', she confronts the criticism that the Kodály method has become a 'rigid pedagogy'. She explains that this is not true for the teachers who were closely associated with Kodály and his teachings in Hungary. Any pedagogy can become inflexible. It is up to the teacher to make sure that this does not occur. This is not a fault of the Kodály method itself, but of its implementation. Teachers clearly need to be flexible in their approach to experience success with the method. Teachers should constantly evaluate whether their approach to music education is achieving the desired outcome.

Some of the teachers I spoke to felt as though they were achieving limited success and were overwhelmed by the whole experience. These feelings stemmed from issues relating to behaviour and classroom management, as well as the difficulty of trying to adhere to the learning

sequence. For many teachers who have just emerged from university, where they taught their peers in a controlled environment, it is a bit of a shock to enter a real classroom and learn to manage a class effectively, let alone having to think about the complex process that is the Kodály Method. This is more a by-product of inexperience than a fault of the method. It is also important to note that it is by teaching that teachers learn how to be good teachers. It is only by making mistakes and evaluating their teaching practices that teachers can become better teachers.

One of the reasons teachers who attempt to implement the Kodály method feel unsuccessful is because it involves complicated skills which require a lot of training and methodological understanding. It is a labor-intensive art, and teachers who want to introduce it have to understand and acknowledge this.

Probably the most overwhelming challenge facing new teachers implementing a Kodály program, particularly in rural areas or more difficult schools, is the use of the voice. I, along with many others, have had mixed success in getting my students to sing. My discussions with more experienced teachers have yielded a few solutions to this problem. Experienced teachers who have implemented Kodály programs in schools will agree that it is a long-term investment. It takes time to build a singing/music culture in a school and for students to get used to a particular type of teaching.

The other factor is repertoire choice. In the article, 'Hungary Will Never Outgrow Kodály', Denise Bacon states:

*It is true that Hungarian youth, now able to compare their own folk music with that of Western cultures through the influx of recordings to Hungary, are questioning why they must analyse and dissect folk songs in the classroom. Indeed, an overemphasis on the use of folk song to develop conscious knowledge of form and structure or basic skills of reading and writing music can easily result in spoiling the essence of the music. What is required instead is a balanced curriculum, a basis of indigenous folk song, interesting but short exercises for the development of skills, and both the performance and hearing of art music of all periods and styles. These must be juxtaposed, reinforced, and assimilated until they become the tools of creative expression and individual fulfillment (Bacon, 1978).*

I think this idea of 'balanced curriculum' is really important. It is important to choose music to which students can relate. Of course, I am not suggesting that we feed them an exclusive diet of pop music. However, using songs with which students are familiar, along with more conventional folksongs, can be a good way to engage students and build rapport with them. Another experienced teacher I spoke with



told me that building rapport with students is the most important thing. If teachers have a connection with their students, then they can teach them anything and lead them to a broader musical diet.

I also believe that teachers' enthusiasm for the repertoire they are teaching has a huge impact on the way students will receive it. Presenting repertoire in different ways can also engage students. Earlier in the year I attended a KMEIA workshop, and Andrew Pennay was teaching us a simple Afro-American spiritual. What made it so much more engaging was that he accompanied it on the banjo. I believe students would respond very positively to repertoire presented in a varied and authentic way.

Prior to my teaching at Somerville House, I taught a Year 6/7 class which was very resistant to singing. It became clear that a full-blown Kodály approach was not going to work with these students. I implemented a popular music unit to try to build a rapport with the students. My aim was still to introduce music in a meaningful way and to challenge the students intellectually by using popular repertoire. I found this difficult, as they really didn't have enough musical background and knowledge to be able to analyse the music deeply. Teaching lessons that felt meaningless frustrated me, and I could see the students becoming less interested too. The positive element to this unit was that it allowed me some time to build a rapport with the students so that I could start afresh with them in the next term. After the popular music unit, I introduced a semester-long Australian music unit. The students responded well to this. They were grateful for the more stimulating and challenging learning experiences and the repertoire was still engaging. I chose Australian folksongs, such as those by Peter Clarke and Jim Jones, which told stories of convicts and bushrangers. The slightly gruesome and tough narratives suited the audience to which I was catering. I also taught them traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander songs as this was the background of many children in the school. I think if I had continued there, I would have also used African American Spirituals. While they were still, at times, resistant to singing, they were definitely more engaged in music learning in general. I just insisted that this was the way it was going to be and continued to tell them the advantages of singing. I honestly believe that this was a long-term project and, had I spent more time at the school, I could have created a singing culture.

## REFLECTION ON MY EXPERIENCES – WHAT ALLOWED ME TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS?

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In my first year, I was employed to teach music at a small state primary school in Brisbane. The school was so small that I could teach all the classes in one day. It was a co-ed primary school in a low socio-economic area, with a very diverse student population. As the school had a small number of students, I had multi-age classes, P/1, 2/3, 3/4/5, 5/6 and 6/7.

The challenge was to build a sequential program on half an hour per week. I often felt as though I was repeating the same segment over and over, and I didn't get enough time to introduce lots of different repertoire so that students could experience the same musical element in different pieces. I think this was partly owing to the fact that I was a beginning teacher and that students were new to this approach. It would have taken a few more years to really build up a program.

One of the factors that led to success was building a rapport with the students. This meant that they trusted me enough to step out of their comfort zone and take risks such as singing and learning in a way that they were not used to.

Choice of repertoire for those particular students was probably the most important thing. When they were engaged with the repertoire, the teaching was easier and the learning was more meaningful.

Creating challenging and engaging learning experiences by letting students experience music (by clapping, moving singing and playing games) meant that I definitely saw them actively engaging in their learning. The Kodály method lends itself perfectly to teaching in this way. For this group of children, often the challenge was helping them overcome their preconceptions about what they could and could not do.

At Somerville House, we have a well-established aural/vocal music program. Now the challenges I face are different. At a school where the girls are used to being extended academically, I must find new ways to challenge them and keep them moving forward while still having fun. With this in mind, I have to be careful not to become too focused on teaching skills – for example, solfa and rhythmic drills - which have no real musical meaning. It can be a daunting prospect: to prepare and practise elements, while teaching improvisation, reading, writing, composing, accompaniment techniques, basic piano skills, use of other instruments, carefully and sequentially laying the foundations for harmony, and presenting these in

meaningful ways. I believe that being able to concentrate on all these different aspects comes with experience.

At Somerville House, I am a part of a music team and this allows me to be successful in my teaching. I am constantly engaged in reflective practice and can draw upon the experience and support of my colleagues.

## IN SUMMARY

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'The Ideas of Kodály in America', by Jean Sinor, is a particularly interesting article exploring the adaption of the Kodály method to American music education. I found the section on 'applying the philosophy' to be very relevant to this topic. Jean Sinor explains that to apply Kodály's principles a teacher must be sure that they also align with her own ideas of what music education should be. She suggests that the teacher should be involved in making music outside of school to continue to learn and be exposed to new music. This reflects Kodály's emphasis on ensuring that the teacher of music should herself be a strong musician. She encourages teachers to participate in Kodály courses and workshops which explain the philosophy and provide ideas for getting started. According to Sinor, Kodály emphasized the creativity of the individual teacher in developing his or her own teaching style. And finally, developing this kind of methodology takes time. I particularly like her concluding paragraphs:

*Some techniques will have immediate results, some will seem to have no effect, and by about February, the teacher will usually have reverted to some tried and true techniques of previous years. That's just fine and to be expected, but should not be taken as an indication that this approach isn't 'not for me'. After the first year's experiment, the teacher should be ready for some serious study and further courses, or a certificate program might be tried. After appropriate training and adequate experience, a teacher should feel confident in applying his or her own concepts of music education in the adaptation of Kodály's ideas to American society and musical culture. When that happens, then one will not have to speak of this method or that method, but, simply of music education" (Sinor, 1997, p.41).*

After researching this topic and hearing from experienced teachers, I strongly believe that this method of teaching can be successful in a range of settings such as state schools, culturally diverse schools and secondary schools.

The following comment from a beginning teacher concludes this paper perfectly:

*I think that all teachers, beginner or experienced, should definitely think of the Kodály Method as a strategy for good music education rather than a strict pedagogical sequence. Of course the pedagogical sequence is a great guideline, but should not be the 'be-all and end-all' of what we do. I think the most important thing is achieving best practice – for the students' sake in terms of their musical, emotional, personal and cognitive development, and for the sake of our culture and society – so that we have well-developed and well-informed learners and people leading the world. I don't think it matters where you get your techniques, guidelines, philosophies, strategies, sequences from, as long as they facilitate best practice. It just so happens that the Kodály Method provides a great pedagogical sequence, an approach for lesson design and some materials all in one – but it is not exhaustive. It is a great basis and foundation and framework in which to work, but if you need to modify and be flexible to achieve your aims in the classroom, then that's what you do because that is best practice.*

#### References

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