

Lost in Translation: The Kodály Concept in American Methodology

Doubt

In 2010, I had the pleasure of graduating from my mastery level Kodály program at Drake University. This mastery certificate resulted from years of studying the life and work of music educational theorist, pedagogue, and methodologist Zoltán Kodály. Since 2000, I have used the Kodály approach in my classroom everyday and I have devoted three summers to difficult but enjoyable study, research, and analysis of American folk music—the materials through which Kodály mandates music should be instructed. During the past decade, I have lectured and provided professional development on the Kodály Method as well. I have twice served as president of the Kodály Educators of Iowa; I have presented Kodály-inspired sessions in Iowa, Illinois and Nebraska, and I teach Kodály levels every other summer. Many area teachers consider me an expert on the subject and have observed my classroom as a model Kodály classroom.

That being said, it was indeed a great surprise to find myself questioning the American translation of Kodály's methodology. **I am not at odds with Kodály.** His principles are absolutely sound. However, in the past forty years, American Kodály teachers have lost sight of Kodály's most innovative idea that "music skills and concepts necessary for musical literacy should be taught with folk music of the mother tongue" (DeVries, 2001, p. 24). Instead, American Kodály teachers have adopted a sequence of rhythmic and tonal literacy skills based not upon the characteristics of authentic American folk music, but upon the characteristics of the folk music of Hungary. As ethnomusicologists and folk song collectors have worked tirelessly to

collect, transcribe and analyze thousands of American folk songs, the time to remedy this situation is upon us.

Folk Music as Pedagogical Music

To understand this egregious mistranslation of the Kodály concept, it is important to understand why Kodály felt folk music of the mother tongue was the best possible pedagogical music for children. Understanding this idea lays the groundwork for comprehending why characteristics of Hungarian folk music are vital in the teaching of notational literacy to Hungarians and why the characteristics of American folk music have similar significance in teaching music to Americans.

Kodály's Inspiration

Kodály “initially became aware of the beauty of Hungarian folk songs through his linguistic study of their strophic form, and he also realized this treasure was in peril as society became more and more urban” (Sinor, 1997, p. 38). As a composer and musician, Kodály was uniquely prepared to remedy the situation and resolved to do so. “In his own work as an ethnomusicologist with composer Béla Bartók, Kodály traveled throughout Eastern Europe and notated more than 10,000 folk songs beginning in 1905” (Jacobi, 2012, p. 11). By traveling into the hills of Hungary and recording authentic performances they would later transcribe, Bartók and Kodály recorded a vast body of Hungarian folk repertoire that was consistent in style and clearly distinct from other European music (Sinor, 1997).

In studying their recordings and notating them for publishing, Kodály noted the similarity in inflection and rhythm between spoken Hungarian and the timeless folk repertoire he had collected (Sinor, 1997). Ethnomusicologists and music educators alike have recognized this similarity throughout world cultures as “folk songs grow from the melodic and rhythmic inflections of the language that births them” (Bennett, 2005, p. 44). Because of their origins in

speech, folk songs are seldom obtuse or difficult to sing. Thus, the simplicity of folk repertoire lends well to passing down through generations along with the ageless wisdom contained within their texts. Kodály himself remarked as much, saying, “Just as proverbs condense centuries of popular wisdom and observation, so, in traditional songs, the emotions of centuries are immortalized in a form polished to perfection” (Kodály, 1974). Kodály wholeheartedly believed this music was music worth preserving.

Inspiration Becomes Action

After his considerable effort to research and record authentic Hungarian folk music, Kodály set out to integrate this music into mainstream Hungarian culture through art music. He wrote many piano arrangements of folk songs, wrote choral settings of folk melodies, and included folk tunes as themes in many of his instrumental works (Sinor, 1997). Kodály became frustrated as he began to realize that “to preserve a musical culture and to give it new life through composition are pointless unless the people for whom it is intended are receptive to it” (Sinor, 1997, p. 38). Kodály realized that to make a real difference in musical taste, he needed to reach a younger audience. To accomplish this lofty goal, Kodály set out to educate his nation’s children.

A Methodology is Born

Kodály and Bartók, along with Jenő Ádám, began the process of ordering the songs they had collected according to their difficulty level. The simplest of these songs would later become the repertoire for the three- to six-year-old children attending Hungarian Kindergartens. These songs had the simplest games, texts, and forms, and the melodic range and number of half steps were limited (Strong, 2012). By keeping the music simple in these regards, and choosing only folk songs and rhymes that mimicked the natural rhythm and inflection of Hungarian speech, Kodály adhered to contemporary knowledge and understanding of educational psychology. He used this knowledge to create a sound before sight before theory approach congruent with the teachings of

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (Sinor, 1997). “Indeed, the educational practices that were developed under his guidance were as much a means of preserving and passing on the folk heritage as they were a method of general music education” (Sinor, 1997, p. 40), but in advancing students through notational literacy skills by moving from known to unknown, the Kodály approach emerged as analogous to what is now understood to be *just good teaching*.

Notational literacy in music education generally advances on two fronts: tonal education—the understanding of pitch notation as it moves vertically upon the staff; and rhythmic education—the understanding of durational notation as it moves horizontally across the staff. Rhythmic education also includes chants or rhymes that are independent of tone, but have a sense of meter and can be expressed through rhythmic notation. The Kodály method adheres to this two-pronged approach as well.

The Hungarian tonal sequence. For his tonal sequence, Kodály began with the most prevalent of melodic turns in Hungarian folk literature. His sequence began with the *so-mi* interval in pentatonic melodies. In a 2012 lecture, John Feierabend revealed that the *so-mi* interval appears in strong melodic motives throughout Eastern European folk repertoire where the pentatone is the primary tonality. Because the *so-mi* interval closely matches the natural inflection in Hungarian speech, Kodály felt the way would “be paved for direct intuition” (Kodály, 1974, p. 120). Thus, progressing students from known (natural inflection) to unknown (staff notation) would follow intuitively beginning with *so-mi* and adding tones until reaching the complete pentatone.

The Hungarian rhythmic sequence. For his rhythmic sequence, Kodály again turned to his collected folk repertoire. He discovered that Hungarian music was largely in simple meter where sounds on the ictus receive more stress than those off the ictus (Feierabend, 2012). In a 2012 lecture, John Feierabend elaborated that anacrusis, which largely result from beginning

sentences with articles and prepositions in English, are almost entirely absent in the Hungarian language and similarly absent from Hungarian folk repertoire. Compound meter, where each beat is divided into three pieces instead of two, was virtually non-existent in the collected Hungarian folk music. Thus, Kodály delayed the study of anacrusis and compound meter until many years into the Hungarian sequence (Feierabend, 2012).

It is because of these findings within Hungarian repertoire that the Hungarian tonal and rhythmic sequences developed first from the *so-mi* interval in pentatonic tonality and from beat and divided beat in simple duple meter.

Lost in Translation

While Kodály's example of examining the folk repertoire to determine a pedagogical sequence can translate throughout the world, he never intended for his sequence to be *adopted* outside Hungary without being *adapted* to reflect the folk repertoire of each receiving nation. Katalin Forrai, who knew Kodály personally and worked with him to write a curriculum for Kindergarten music, explained in a 1992 interview "around the world, in Greece, or America, or in Germany, the people can substitute their own folk traditions. You should start to read and write music with your own musical characteristics, not with *so-mi* everywhere" (Strong, 2012, p. 6).

Thus, the sequence has been adapted throughout much of the world. But, here in America, most Kodály teachers teach the Hungarian sequences for tonal and rhythmic literacy—sequences that can be difficult to support with authentic American folk repertoire (Feierabend, 2012).

The root of this mistranslation appears to lie in educational reform. In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans were "clamoring for increased accountability and achievement in education" (Bennett, 2005, p. 44). The Kodály method had resulted in a much more musically literate Hungary. As Americans scrutinized all aspects of education, "we welcomed the new emphases on music study, sequence, and achievement" (Bennett, 2005, p. 44) here in the United States as well.

At the time the Kodály method was adopted throughout America, thorough analysis of American folk music had not yet been completed. In our eagerness to adopt the sequence and raise achievement, we skipped the step of analyzing our own folk music for its true characteristics. So, American music educators wholly accepted the sequence Kodály had implemented in Hungary. This is typical of educational reform where “initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). Peggy Bennett noted in a 2005 article that in the 1970s, “some music educators worried about adoption without adaption” (p. 44). Without analysis of American folk music to build our own sequence, those “voices of caution” (Bennett, 2005, p. 44) fell silent or upon deaf ears.

Decades have passed, and this is no longer the case. Much American folk music has been collected and analyzed throughout the United States. Consistent with pedagogical practices in music education, the implications for change to our sequence of notational literacy also advance on tonal and rhythmic fronts.

Tonal Implications

American music educators should reconsider their tonal sequence. There are certainly hundreds of *so-mi* songs in the repertoire now, but these are not folk heritage songs. Peggy Bennett (2005) explained this paradox: “Pursuit of *so-mi* songs and *so-mi-la* songs in the 1970s was like a treasure hunt. Teachers needed a repertory of songs to launch the newly acquired sound-to-symbol sequence. As a result, exercises based on these intervals were created” (p.45). Rather than using non-existent *so-mi* songs in the folk repertoire, well-meaning teachers just composed songs to fit the sequence using folk rhymes. “Traditional sayings and poems were set to preferred intervals, and these short songs soon began appearing in printed sources as ‘American Folk Song’ or ‘Traditional’” (Bennett, 2005, p. 45). Kodály-inspired teachers who wish to teach authentic folk repertoire need to renounce these partially-contrived works and focus

on authentic music and rhymes that follow our natural speech inflections. Failing to do so means that our pedagogy will move children from unknown (unnatural inflection) to unknown (staff notation) and our achievement will continue to lag as a result. As Kodály (1974) noted, “To write a folk song is much beyond the bounds of possibility as to write a proverb” (p. 145). Authentic folk music is a pure art with which no one should tamper!

Before the import of Kodály practices to America, published collections of American folk music contained music that is almost entirely diatonic with its strongest melodic figures centered around *do* in major tonality (Bennett, 2005). The music almost exclusively follows standard rules of functional harmony with a firm tonal center, totally unlike pentatonic melodies found in Hungarian folk traditions (Feierabend, 2012). Although the *so-mi* interval appears in a few songs, it does not appear as a motive of any melodic significance (Feierabend, 2012). Of course, *so-mi* exists melodically, all intervals do. One only need stand on their front porch at dinnertime to hear countless mothers calling their children home on *so-mi*! But should that make it the origins of our sequence? The answer for Kodály teachers lies in the repertoire and thus should be a resounding “No!” As American music is largely diatonic music (although *fa* and *ti* may be absent) with a sure resting tone, teaching a diatonic sequence may be more logical. This approach might be more consistent with Kodály’s intentions “for individual music teachers to continually study music as a body of literature to create self-renewing personal methodologies for guiding their students through literature” (Richards & Jaccard, 2010, p. 7). We should rethink the practice of beginning tonal literacy with *so-mi* if we truly wish to aspire to Kodály’s ideals. Instead, we should consider beginning where all diatonic music leads—homeward toward its tonal center.

Rhythmic Implications

American music educators also adopted the rhythmic sequence set by Kodály where students would focus entirely on simple duple meter in the early years and move toward

compound meters many years into the sequence. As nearly half of our folk songs and rhymes are in compound meters, where the beat is divided into three pieces instead of two, much of our folk heritage was omitted or worse, *straightened*, to adhere to the Kodály sequence (Feierabend, 2012). To continue on this path is to allow our pedagogy to choose, and renounce, our repertoire. According to Kodály, the characteristics of the repertoire should drive our teaching, not the other way around. We need to get back to compound. We need to start early and provide experiences in balance with simple meter as our repertoire finds these two in balance with one another.

Faith

As a dyed-in-the-wool Kodály-inspired teacher, I have faith in Kodály's ideals for music education. I have faith that through introspection and education, American music teachers can overcome the errors of their ways and rise to the philosophical principles behind the Kodály approach. I believe that **we all believe** only the best music is good enough for children (Kodály, 1974), and that we must begin with what is known as a bridge to what is unknown. "When elementary music teachers devote themselves to revitalizing traditional folk songs for children, they are reconstituting a musical mother tongue and rekindling a common heritage of song" (Bennett, 2005, p. 46). Our American students can and will achieve if we provide for them a logical sequence rooted firmly in our authentic American folk songs.

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