



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Kodaly-Inspired Instruction in Orchestra Rehearsals

by Joe Mish

The Kodaly Method of music education has been in place in American schools for more than 30 years. Its sequential activities train students to be musically literate: to sing in tune, perform with rhythmic accuracy, to read and analyze music, to improvise and compose original music, to listen and to hear music internally. All of these activities have occurred in elementary music classes before most students learn to play a string instrument. There are limitless possibilities to integrating students' Kodaly-based music learning into our orchestra programs.

The Toolbox

The Kodaly method provides a “toolbox” for music teachers. The best-known tools are the use of rhythm syllables (instead of traditional counting), singing with solfege syllables, Curwen hand signs, and stick notation. In my experiences and training over the past five years, I have found all of these tools to be valuable in the orchestra rehearsal.

The easiest tool to start with is the rhythm syllables used in the method. There are a number of variations, but generally a quarter note is pronounced “tah”, eighth notes as “tee-tee”, sixteenth notes as “tika-tika”, and in our school's version, half notes and longer are “too-oo” with the number of “oo” equal to the number of beats. Dotted-quarter eighth note and dotted-eighth sixteenth note patterns are pronounced “tah-m-ti” and “tim-ka.” There are provisions for eighth note triplets, “triple-ti,” and quarter note triplets, “triple-tah.” Even compound meters can be accounted for with rhythm syllables. This is a basic outline, but there are syllables for all rhythms encountered by most students through middle school. There are ways to “say” more rhythms than there are ways to count all the rhythms I have encountered as a musician. When rhythm syllables are employed it is far easier for students to decode visually and aurally what they are playing than when traditional counting is used.

Studies have shown that singing improves the intonation skills of ensem-

bles. The Kodaly method has been shown to be the best approach to develop in tune singing. So another tool that is obvious to use in orchestra rehearsals is singing with solfege syllables. Kodaly uses the movable do system. That means that “do” is the tonic note in major and “la” is the tonic note in minor (an opportunity to demonstrate the concept of relative keys). With students who have been Kodaly-trained, it is an easy extension to singing in orchestra rehearsals (and lessons). It also helps students to put the “notes” into a tonal perspective; i.e. F# is different in G major than in D major or A major. With singing in classes it is easy and helpful (and if the teacher knows them) to use the Curwen hand signs to communicate visually. It also provides a physical movement or reinforcer for our tactile learners (we have more than a few of those students in orchestra). There is also an extended set of hand signs and syllables for chromatic alterations that are encountered in more advanced music.

Another excellent tool is stick notation. This is rhythmic notation on a straight line (similar to percussion parts) with pitches written beneath each note. Usually note heads are not used, except for the “white” notes. In Kodaly the pitches are notated in small case letters for solfege (do = d, re = r, etc.) and absolute pitches are notated with capitals. With my orchestra students, I have found it helpful to use both solfege and absolutes. I use solfege if it is something we are generally going to sing and absolutes if it is something we are going to concentrate on playing. More advanced students benefit from mixing it up more (and transferring from one to the other), but I don't start out with students this way. The advantage of this type of notation is clear — it can be read by all members of the orchestra regardless of clef. If your example extends more than an octave, a comma can be used to indicate whether it is higher (D[^]) or lower (D_^) than the tonic note. I have found this to be an easy way to practice a section of music all together. It keeps all students engaged while a certain section practices a passage. A hard

passage for the first or second violins, violas, cellos or double basses only, becomes a challenge for the entire orchestra.

These are the basic tools of the Kodaly method. They will work most easily with students who have Kodaly training in the elementary school, but some or all of these tools can be taught and adopted in orchestra rehearsals. If they are used regularly, students will accept them as part of the process of learning music.

Sequential Learning

Another important aspect of Kodaly training is that it is based on sequential learning. Concepts are arranged in a developmental sequence of skills (like in a good string method book). Sequential learning is most important to the success of any teaching. In Kodaly, students learn a concept aurally first (rote learning). This is called the preparation phase. Next is the presentation phase, when a concept is labeled or shown to students visually (reading). Then comes the practice phase, when the concept is practiced a variety of ways until it is mastered. It is similar to the Suzuki philosophy. In traditional orchestra rehearsals we often skip the preparation and go right to the presentation. In a Kodaly-inspired orchestra rehearsal we prepare a concept or a piece of music days or even weeks before students will encounter or sightread it.

This preparation phase in an orchestra rehearsal is based on teaching for success before a piece is presented for sightreading. It does involve planning and some score study. Dr. Angela Broeker, a nationally recognized choral conductor from the University of St. Thomas, has broken down the score study process for Kodaly-inspired teaching. She starts with traditional score study to determine how the piece is put together. After that she does a thorough pedagogical study of the score to discern the skills needed by students to perform the work. The questions she seeks to answer are:

- What aspects of this piece...

...can students perform independently?
...can students perform with minimal help from the teacher?
...are well beyond the students' current conceptual and skill development?

- How do teacher goals for skill/conceptual development of this piece fit into overall curriculum goals?
- Where are the difficult passages and how might the teacher facilitate them?
- Which processes get at the core of the work?
- Are there processes that would better highlight the most salient characteristics of the work?
- Is it possible during a presentation to subconsciously teach another section of the piece while focusing on the section at hand?
- How can the students be engaged?
- What process will keep them coming back for more?

Answering these questions makes it easier to apply our "Kodaly toolbox." This process also aids in selecting music that is at an appropriate level of ability for your orchestra. When getting started with this method, keep it simple. At first, I always attempted to use each tool at least once when preparing each piece I did. Now I endeavor to have several ideas using each of the tools before I present a new piece to my orchestras.

The score study spent in preparation for sightreading benefits the orchestra in many ways. Most importantly there is more of a focus on developing students' skills, not just learning pieces. Our classes become more varied, interesting, and challenging for all students (not just the first violins). Class time is used much more efficiently because the instruction is more targeted than in a traditional rehearsal. And when we teach a piece subconsciously and consciously to the orchestra before the day comes to sightread all (or part of it), the students become more successful the first time they play it. That first time achievement translates into all the students (not just the strong musicians)

becoming more engaged with a work.

After sightreading a piece, there is the traditional rehearsing, but I also continue to use the "toolbox." This is especially true of daily warm-ups that can be derived from the literature being performed. Singing and rhythm syllables can be worked into a rehearsal at anytime. Anything used in preparation activities can be used for rehearsal, too. What follows is a list I use to get myself started when planning my classes. It is not an exhaustive, but a fluid catalog of ideas. New pieces may inspire unique ideas to apply to your teaching. Use this list to stimulate your creativity:

- Spend quality time "warming-up" v. rehearsing
- Work with scales, arpeggios, chords (that is the sequence)
- Do rote work with difficult rhythmic or melodic passages
- Do part-work with echo, ostinato, canon
- Use previously known or complementary literature
- Use excerpts for unison playing/singing (everyone learns the melody)
- Read stick notation off board or overhead projector
- Convert from absolutes to solfege (and vice-versa)
- Do listening activities
- Do singing activities
- Do inner-hearing activities
- Do movement activities
- Do memory work
- Create your own etudes
- Improvise or compose using the style or concepts from the literature
- Teach symbols, terms, and style considerations
- Use flash cards
- Use games

Kodaly-inspired orchestra rehearsals take planning. Music needs to be selected and studied well before it is given to the students. Daily plans are also essential for

productive rehearsals. This critical aspect can be aided by finding great literature that has a lot to teach, engages the entire orchestra, and that has depth. By depth I mean that the composition is substantial enough to engage the conductor/teacher each time it is taught. I have found that I am a much better teacher of a piece the second or third time around. This is normal in the orchestra world. Professional conductors and orchestras have favorite repertoire on which they build their careers. It is a logical extension for school orchestra conductors to do the same.

When Zoltan Kodaly supervised the development of the method that bore his name, his intent was to develop children's music literacy so they could participate in making and therefore understanding great music. This method uses folk songs as an introduction to the "classical" music that is the reason our orchestras exist today. It can and should be successfully applied in orchestras. This quote summarizes what Kodaly-inspired orchestra rehearsals are all about:

"It is only a few who can reach the highest peaks of art, just as the Himalayas cannot be climbed by the average tourist. According to Schumann, a genius can be completely understood only by another genius. But what does this understanding mean? Is it not enough for the average man to be seized by the feeling of reverence and worship when casting a far away glance at the Himalayas? But to be able to direct people's view to the highest mountains, first we have to show them some accessible hills."
Zoltan Kodaly, from *Music Should Belong to Everyone*

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