
OUTLOOK

The following article outlines the ideas of multiple correspondence between Gilbert de Greeve, former president of the International Kodály Society, and Teréz Tóth, an educational journalist. Thus, its genre is not a closed-structure, cohesive essay, but rather seeks to bring to the fore the openness and inspiration of thoughts resulting from the dialogicity of the text. The undisguised aim of the publication is to address the reader, encourage members of the Hungarian and international Kodály community, teachers, students, researchers and musicians to raise issues of debate, co-think, and express their views on issues concerning the work of the Hungarian and international workshops of Kodály-based Hungarian music pedagogy. A selection of the incoming writings will be published in *Parlando* with the consent of the authors.

The correspondence was initiated by a critical opinion on Teréz Tóth's online presentation at this year's International Kodály Symposium.

Overhearing a peasant song in the 1800's



Kodály tells a story from the beginning of 19th-century Hungary in his paper, *The Hungarian folk music*, 1960¹. He quotes Benedek Virág, the Hungarian poet and professor who once sitting at his window and smoking his pipe overheard a peasant singing a peasant song. He only caught one line from the song. But he liked it so much that he asked his famous friend, Ferenc Kazinczy, the writer and linguist to inquire among his expansive network of other intellectuals whether there is anyone who knows or recognizes the song so he can learn it. We don't know the end of the story but Kodály points out something really astonishing. Instead of walking out of his gate to the singer and asking about the song, the respectable scholar, Virág chose to send a letter with a messenger to his friend, someone from his own circle. Note that the

¹ Kodály, Zoltán: *A magyar népzene*, Zeneműkiadó 1976., p11

journey took at that that time 7 days. Kodály highlights that the social distance between a peasant and an educated scholar used to be so huge that it prevented the professor from simply crossing the street and asking them more of that beautiful folk song. Kodály says:

”As if he had viewed a different world from bird’s eye perspective. As if a metal wall had separated the two of them.”



I very much like your example of Kodály quoting Benedek Virág. It shows how much Kodály was aware of history and how much he valued that knowledge, something that is not so common anymore. Let me be very clear that I am not saying that we have ‘to live’ in the past, but we should certainly know ‘what was’, either to learn from it and use it nowadays, or to ‘see the mistakes’ and do not step into them again...

The past - what to do with it?



I find the mainstream interpretation of the Kodály music education, at least in Hungary, very traditional and extremely historical. I firmly believe that we know far more about the glorious past history of the Hungarian music education than about its current state. Please do not get me wrong, I do think that we need to return to the original Kodály concept and philosophy and re-read it, re-understand its timeless and timely implications. Yet, instead of merely keep mining into the past, I tend to focus on the present, 21st -century relevance of the Kodály philosophy at the same time advocating its huge benefits for the 21st-century education.

That is certainly true and indeed quite a problem. I do not know whether you have seen the article that was published in a book by KOTA and the Hungarian Kodály Society. It also addresses some of the points that you are making. A very right observation and I fully understand what you mean.

„Many years ago I read a very intriguing statement: “tradition is something we have to know well, to avoid stepping into it...”

Does that mean that tradition is worthless? Of course not. But tradition is much more something that we have ‘to learn’ from than something that we should be nostalgic about or firmly hold on to, to preserve... Because the danger is very big that tradition becomes folklore... And although, as such, there is absolutely nothing wrong with folklore, I do not think that it is what Kodály meant when he outlined his vision on music education for everyone. In fact, dear colleagues, it is very simple: when we would get stuck in tradition there would be no evolution anymore. And evolution is the only way to cope with all the challenges of the present and future time.

In a lecture in 1925 with the title Hungarian Folk Music Zoltán Kodály said: (quote) .../...”Rural Hungary has preserved the continuity of traditions. It is our job to take over from it and to cultivate them further”.../... (unquote)

Let me repeat the last words of his statement: “to cultivate them further.” And as we all know, that means evolution; an evolution that finds the right and healthy balance between the core of the intention, which is good music education, and the necessary adaptation to cultural, social and global challenges, linked to specific geographic and demographic circumstances.

The essence of Kodály’s vision and its challenge



What I mean, is that in the adaptation of a method or vision or a philosophy, to local and time circumstances, there are always two sides: the ‘essence’ of the method, vision or philosophy and the ‘application’ of it.



Let me explain it a little bit more.

- 1) The ‘essence’ of Kodály’s vision (as I see it) is the fact that the good music education has to be based on the own folk culture of a country.
- 2) The materials have to be valuable examples of that folk culture (which implies a serious musicological research)
- 3) The teachers have to be adequately trained to the level that they are good ‘musicians’ (not only good ‘pedagogues’).
- 4) Lessons should be as frequent as possible.

If that part of the whole concept is ‘not’ in place, it is difficult to speak about a ‘Kodály’ concept... In that perspective I am sometimes not so happy with certain new approaches...



I fully and wholeheartedly agree with your points about the essence of Kodály’s vision. However, according to my findings certain elements of it can be quite challenging in certain settings. One example is the folk music tradition. Its role in music education is a point to consider in a multicultural society (e.g. Australia) or in a country with linguistical and folk musical diversity (e.g. India) or a country with hidden, sacred even spiritual nature of indigenous music (Australia, Malaysia), where access to indigenous music can be bound to permission from the tribe leader or simply can be denied. In these cultures, raising the issue of the music pedagogy of a given country based on folk music triggers several questions. For example, which of the many folk music traditions should be the basis for music education? What if a particular ethnic group with a living tradition doesn’t want to make their music available to a larger community, the country?

Nevertheless, I believe that the fact that certain elements of Kodály's philosophy cannot be adopted in certain cultural and educational settings or not in a way it has been applied in the Hungarian context should not result in the rejection of the whole.



Australian aboriginal man playing the didgeridoo. (from soundcloud.com)

Let me quote Dr Anthony Young, from one of my reports I made about Australian Kodály adaptation.

„Dr Anthony Young: We were trying to destroy the indigenous culture for a couple of hundred years. Hardly any people survived in Tasmania. We made a conscientious decision to wipe out the whole race. We took children from families and gave them to white families. And we finally apologized for that as a nation 10 years ago. We have got bad history with them. Now we try to recognize their culture, but there is not much left. Their music is strongly connected with actions in communities. You cannot just hear a song and go and sing it. It would be an insult. You need permission. And some of those songs relate to certain private events such as male initiations ceremonies or secret women business. We, men could not sing women songs. Girls are not allowed to play the didgeridoo as it is a boy's instrument. The whole set of cultural things is we are not very well aware of and we do not do very well. So, we sing Islanders songs instead. Because they are more accessible. And the Islanders, people from

PapuaNew Guinea, Tonga, the Philippines do not mind that other people singing their songs. So that is not good but it is better than nothing.”²

Multicultural society and the significance of folk music



That is a very interesting and intriguing observation. I have never looked at it from that angle. But you are right it is a challenge. It is correct that certain elements of the Kodály’s vision may be difficult to adapt on certain cultural/educational settings. And it is a good statement to say that: Kodály Music Education should not be forced into a one-size-fits-all manner.

Often I have been thinking how Kodály would have approach the ‘multicultural classroom. Interesting is that he saw a ‘multi-cultural society’ when he traveled to the USA and some of his remarks on folkmusic from the visit in 1966 are interesting.

“One wondered, in view of all this, whether Mr. Kodály believed that folk music was an indispensable ingredient of living music, or merely a locality that might serve to limit the significance of a composer’s art. Mr. Kodály, who does not rush into ex cathedra statements, thought a moment before he replied. “First of all,” he said, “that question has different answers according to the age, or let us say the maturity of the national culture concerned. For instance, we in Hungary, in our musical culture, are 300 years behind Germany. In Germany folk music, more or less in its original form, was a predominant idiom in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It bestowed national identity and national esthetic upon German music.”³

What strikes me is the fact that the question was: is it an indispensable ingredient... (of course the context of the question was not directly related to

² Tóth, Teréz: Interview with Dr James Cuskelly, Parlando 2018/6. [Tóth Teréz-James Cuskelly \(parlando.hu\)](#)

³ Richard Johnston: Zoltán Kodály in North America, 1966

music education.) But Kodály’s answer reveals, in my opinion, quite a lot. So it seems to be logic to see the current ‘multi-cultural’ situations perhaps in that light: the age and maturity of a national culture... And consider the input of ‘folk music(s)’ in music education not in a ‘patriotic’ (or even ‘nationalistic’) sense but rather as materials from ‘differing cultures which can enrich everyone in that multi-cultural society... After all, I am quite convinced that Kodály’s advocacy for the use of folk music was not only ‘patriotic’ (which is understandable for an Hungarian) but also, and equally importantly, because of the intrinsic musical value of folk music.

Two stories from Australia and Malaysia



Filipe Afou: I am Tongan. My granddad was a conductor of a church choir. When we went to gatherings, like funerals, or wedding celebrations we all sang traditional Tongan hymns and I was listening. I tried to sing those hymns so I’ve got a strong foundation of singing and harmonies as well. A Tongan hymn has two parts sung by women and men. It was word of mouth when I learned the hymns but two years ago I went to a Tongan choir where I saw them reading sheet music but it was notated by numbers. I wanted to learn that system but I was never brought up with it so I wasn’t sure how they read that music. You cannot stereotype all Polynesian music as one although they are kind of similar.⁴

Dr Chong, Pek Lin: “Despite the emphasis on the use of folksongs in contemporary music pedagogy, music teachers in Malaysian schools have little access to genuine folksongs from the nation. The emphasis was on “suitable lyrics”, “simple” melodies within a small vocal range, and “straightforward rhythms” Often, we resorted to clumsy translations of American songs or substituting lyrics with an entirely new context. Yet, I

⁴ Tóth, Teréz: Interview with Dr James Cuskelly, Parlando 2018/6. [Tóth, Teréz-James Cuskelly \(parlando.hu\)](http://parlando.hu)

was a proud resident of Borneo, the third largest island in the world, home to over forty indigenous groups. Surely, I wondered, we had indigenous melodious songs in various tonalities, which would appeal to schoolchildren. The Kenyah possess a rich vocal tradition of melodious songs with a secular text, many sung in two-part harmony. They also play several instruments such as the *sape* (a boat-shaped lute) and *jatung utang* (a wooden xylophone) tuned to pentatonic scales. Due to the remote location of Kenyah villages, most of their vocal repertoire is unknown to the public, and when I began fieldwork in 1996, hardly any had been documented.”⁵



Kenyah singers in Borneo, Long Semiyang, 2004

Integrity



Another point of yours I would like to reflect on is the question of integrity. I also believe the high importance of teachers’ integrity. Instead of mechanically copying any good methods or concepts into their classroom practice , great teachers with their up-to-date professional knowledge and

⁵ Chong, Pek Lin: Kodály Inspired Music Research in Malaysia, Parlando 2020/4, [Kodály-inspired-research Dr Chong Pek-Lin.pdf \(parlando.hu\)](#)

experience adapt and put into practice or even change , innovate, modify the original method and concept. I know, and I think I understand your point that some changes can be a far cry from the values and concept of the original Kodály. But some adaptations can bring real values which can be and must be transferred back to enrich and nurture the original method/model/ knowledge. And yes, to my understanding it applies to Kodály philosophy, too.

Hungarian music pedagogy – outdated?



Teachers in Dynamic model research group⁶ had to break through the wall of current, more intellectualized way of teaching in Hungarian music classrooms and bring joy through free movement, dance, creative singing of folk songs and letting children engage with music on their own way, unearth and actually develop their creativity while connecting their experience with learning elements in the music curriculum. At the end of the lesson, the teacher teaches musical knowledge and skills. In this way, the method of the Kodály student Klára Kokas is integrated into the practice of Kodály-based Hungarian music pedagogy.



That is also true but I am always a little bit unhappy that some people seem to use the argument of: *“bringing joy through free movement, dance, creative singing of folk songs and letting children engage with music on their own way, unearth and actually develop their creativity while connecting*

⁶ Dynamic music learning model, adaptation of the Kokas pedagogy in music teaching; 1-4 Grade: music learning model implemented during the joint subject pedagogical development program of the Liszt Academy Kodály Institute and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The development has been created by integrating Kodály-based music pedagogy and the music pedagogical model named after Klára Kokas

their experience with learning elements in the music curriculum...” as an argument to say that Kodály’s vision is ‘outdated’...

Nothing is less true. After all did not Kodály⁷ himself say: “What is to be done? Teach music and singing at school in such a way that it is not a torture but a joy for the pupil; instill a thirst for finer music in him[/her], a thirst which will last for a lifetime. Music must not be approached from its intellectual, rational side, nor should it be conveyed to the child as a system of algebraic symbols, or as the secret writing of a language with which he[/she] has no connection. The way should *be paved for direct intuition*. “⁸

⁷ Kodály: Children’s Choirs (1929)

⁸ And by the way he said that in 1929, 92 years ago! (GG)