

**THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLK MATERIALS: THE “LITTLE STORY” AND
THE “BIG STORY”
JAMES CUSKELLY (HEAD OF FACULTY – CREATIVE ARTS; ST
AIDAN’S ANGLICAN GIRLS’ SCHOOL)**

Kodály believed that folksongs were of the greatest importance and his manifesto for music education places singular emphasis on the inclusion of folk materials within the pedagogical framework. While Kodály believed that the folksong was “the mirror of the spirit of the entire Hungarian people” (Selected Writings, p. 24), he spoke more broadly of the value of folksong in terms of the embodiment of cultural identity, societal values and personal meaning. In this paper, I suggest that the use of such materials as the building blocks of teaching and learning not only elegantly and comprehensively achieves desirable educational outcomes, but also provides all those involved - students, teachers, parents and the wider society - with a deep sense of meaning, in both intrinsic and extrinsic senses of that concept. For the purposes of this paper, I intend to reflect upon the ways in which that sense of personal and shared meaning is engendered by the inclusion of folk materials within the overall context of teaching and learning.

The most obvious benefit of working with folk materials in music education is the way in which such materials are used to promote true musicality in children, even at the very earliest levels. Dobszay explains that the “most essential material for music education lies in monophonic folk songs” (p. 52). There is a vast amount of folk material suitable for teaching and learning within the classroom context. Further, this repertory exhibits key musical characteristics in simple, explicit or miniaturised form, thereby presenting students with unparalleled opportunities for learning. The simple and appealing nature of these materials encourages active engagement and fosters learning through the development of discipline specific skills and knowledge. A great deal of energy

and expertise has been already dedicated to the collection, analysis and sequencing folk songs and games drawn from and employed across a range of linguistic and cultural contexts, thus giving further proof of the efficacy of such repertoire choices for teaching and learning. Kodály's emphasis on folk materials alongside his understanding of the benefits of sequential learning, appropriate to the maturation, development and context of the learner, provided the basis for the evolution of an educational philosophy and practice that is breath-taking in its simplicity and effectiveness.

However, if it were simply a matter of finding materials and carefully sequencing them to maximise learning, then surely other materials would serve just as well? Could we not use pop music or jazz? Why not just write some music which would start with the simplest elements and then progress steadily onto the more complex elements? Indeed, such thinking is often seen in a myriad of publications but few of these sorts of materials persist and it is clear that a staged progression in learning is but part of the solution.

I suggest that the inclusion of the folk materials does so much more than just provide access and a logical progression in learning. Firstly, the basic musical activity within the Kodály approach is singing, and Kodály himself considered singing as the "essence" of his ideas on music education. From a broader educational perspective, it is important to note that singing requires the active involvement of learners. Dobszay states that

"Music education must firstly aim at the active participation of the pupils and not at passive listening to music, and voice is the only instrument accessible to all. Besides, singing evokes the fundamental experience of music since music originates, according to Kodály, in singing..." (p. 52).

Singing as fundamental stimulus for active engagement

The idea that learners need to be actively engaged is one that is universally endorsed by many researchers (Brown, 2008; Dobszay, 1992; Elliot 1995; Gardner, 1993; Silberman, 1996) and indeed, active engagement in the processes of education is fundamental to the idea of the construction of knowledge. Constructivism is predicated upon the fact that students learn more by doing and experiencing rather than by observing (Dewey, 1963). At its core, constructivism holds that humans are not mere empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, but rather that they are motivated by the search for meaning. In this vein, Brown (2008) contends that learning is most meaningful when the students are “actively connected to the creation and comprehension of knowledge” (p. 31). In a Kodály-based classroom, children sing and chant, dance and play music games, they are involved in a range of literacy tasks such as notating or sight-reading, and they apply their knowledge through combining rhythms and improvising melodies – in short, a Kodály based classroom is fundamentally characterised by active, minds-on learning.

Given this scenario, it is important to emphasise that students are not only experiencing the music and constructing knowledge, but that they are also taking on the role of musician. Through performing the music, the music itself is a product of the students, and the quality of that product is a reflection not only of the careful guidance of a teacher, but also of the actualisation of the latent musical abilities within the children themselves. The essential point to be made here is that music education in this sense is not condescending, a watering down of music so that the children are able to do it, but rather the elevation of the children into authentic musical activity. There is an increasing trend to patronise children and to diminish their potential for learning and intelligent engagement and it seems clear to me at least, that children are perfectly capable of precise and excellent musical performance. Even very young children may be performing as musicians in the earliest classes; the students are evidencing the

behaviours and attitudes of performing musicians, and this experience of music-making forms the basis for of a personalised understanding of music more broadly. The point here is not that the children lack ability, but rather that our education systems fail to provide suitable opportunities for the students to achieve their potential.

This induction into the world of music and music making has profound import in terms of the long term development of a sense of meaning. A key component of this framework is the process of experience before intellectualisation, and for me, this is fundamental to the development of a sense of meaning. Laurens van der Post explains:

It is one of the laws of life that the new meaning must be lived before it can be known, and in some mysterious way modern man knows so much that he is the prisoner of his knowledge. The old dynamic conception of the human spirit as something living always on the frontiers of human knowledge has gone. We hide behind what we know. And there is an extraordinarily angry and aggressive quality in the knowledge of modern man; he is angry with what he does not know; he hates and rejects it. He has lost the sense of wonder about the unknown and he treats it as an enemy. The experience which is before knowing, which would enflame his life with new meaning, is cut off from him. Curiously enough, it has never been studied more closely. People have measured the mechanics of it, and the rhythm, but somehow they do not experience it (van der Post, *Patterns of Renewal*, p.2).

I believe that we could insert the word “music” here and the significance would be all the more apparent:

The experience of music comes before knowing, this experience of music which would enflame life with new meaning. Curiously enough, the

experience of music has never been studied more closely. People have measured the mechanics of it, and the rhythm, but somehow they do not experience it.

Long before van der Post wrote this, Kodály understood that it is only through the experience of music that a person could be awakened to the potential of music in the human spirit, that it is the experience not the knowledge of music that must come first, and that it is the experience of music which forms the basis of all the meaning. I believe that this also explains in part why Kodály had such admiration, almost a reverence, for folk music and the people who sang it.

The importance of text

The singing is important for another very significant reason. Singing is based upon text and that the texts themselves inevitably engage the imagination, portray the natural world and the creatures in it, or describe an event which involves characters in some way; in short, the text tells a story. Story telling is fundamental to our very humanity and people everywhere and of all ages respond on the deepest level to storytelling. The great mythologist, Joseph Campbell reminds us that story and symbol are universals, stretching across cultures. According to Bill Moyers, stories and myth are full of the essential components of meaning which are most directly relevant to the human condition, and he explains that the remnants of the ‘stuff’ of mythology “line the walls of our interior system of beliefs” (p.xiv). He goes on to explain that myths and stories provide an interior road map of experience, drawn by people who have travelled it (Moyers, 1988, p. xvi). The presence of such fundamental attributes in all human endeavours highlights a “constant requirement in the human psyche for a centering in terms of deep principles” (Moyers, 1988, p. xvi).

From the work of Campbell and others we have come to understand the significance not only of folk song and story, but of all cultural artefacts, in that these artistic endeavours serve to remind us of who we are and where we have come from. However, in thinking about folk songs, there is another aspect which I would like to consider here. We have already discussed the idea that the folksongs tell stories and the ballad in particular has served as a particularly notable way of transmitting the story.

It worth investigating an example to illustrate the point, and to do that I would like to use the well known English ballad, Barbara Allen.

Barabara Allen

In Scarlet Town where I was born there was a fair maid dwellin',
Made every youth cry 'Welladay'; her name was Barbara Allen
All in the merry month of May when green buds they were swellin'
Young Jemmy Grove on his death bed lay for love of Barbara Allen
Then slowly, slowly she came up and slowly she came nigh him
And all she said when there she came, "Young man I think you're dyin'."
As she was walking o'er the fields, she heard the dead bell knellin'
And every stroke the dead bell gave cried "Woe" to Barbara Allen.
When he was dead and laid in grave her heart was struck with sorrow
"Oh, mother, mother make my bed, for I shall die tomorrow."
"Farewell she said, she virgins all, and shun the fault I fell in
Henceforth take warning by the fall of cruel Barbara Allen."

I would like to reflect upon the text and to summarise the story from two perspectives, that of the 'Little Story' and of the 'Big Story'. From the point of view of the little story, this is a tragic tale of ill-fated love, of the vagaries of beauty and attraction, and of the sad loss of two beautiful young people. Do we hear of similar instances of doomed love in the modern world? And do we also all too frequently hear of the tragic consequences of such unrequited love in contemporary times? Such stories feed the sensationalism that is the modern day press, but I am always deeply saddened to hear of such events.

However, from the perspective of the 'Big Story' this song recounts a sadly recognisable tale which may have happened anywhere, to any group of people, at any time. This is not an experience unique to a particular group of people or relevant only to specific point in history. The commonality of human experience is embedded in tale, and in the telling of it through singing we are reminded of such events within our own worlds. While the recounting of such a story serves to directly tell the 'Little Story', it also transmits a deeper message. Thus, the song represents a certain wisdom, distilled from a myriad of human responses, and it is in this way that the folksong serves the purposes of the 'Big Story'. I am not suggesting that these songs overtly serve as morality tales but rather, that such materials serve to artistically capture and recount this essence of human experience that is both particular and universal.

The significance of the "Big Story"

One final point to briefly consider here is that connection which Kodály always made between folk song and the best of art music. For me at least, it is clear that this dual purpose of recounting the 'Little Story' and the 'Big Story' is evident in the finest folk materials and that this same process is in play in the masterworks of the great composers. Thus, Moyer's 'stuff' of mythology,

apparent in the folklore and which “lines the walls of our interior system of beliefs”, is both the foundation of and the basis for great works of art.

Kodály stated that Hungarian folk music was so important because “there is not a single experience of a single segment of the Hungarian people which has not left its mark on it” (p. 24). Such thinking is echoed by Dobszáy who asserts that there are “profound relations between music and other manifestations of folk life”, and that folk cultures give “elaborated forms to the great events of life by means of folk customs” (p. 80). Equally, the great works of the music literature – the lieder and songs, the oratorios and masses, the symphonies and operas, the chamber music and solo works – are laden with the archetypes, stories and symbols of our deepest, but often tacitly held, beliefs and values.

These defining aspects of our culture and community are captured in the folk materials and laid down in us all. Standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before, gifted composers are able to draw upon this interior system and engage us directly in the story – both the ‘Little and the Big Stories’. The search for meaning is a basic human instinct, evident in all peoples irrespective of culture or history. Indeed, van der Post would posit that it is meaning not happiness that has the most profound impact and long-term influence upon the human condition. He says:

There's nothing wrong in searching for happiness. But we're using happiness there in a term as if it were the ultimate of human striving. And actually what we found in prison, and I find in life, which gives far more comfort to the soul, is something which is greater than happiness or unhappiness and that is meaning. Because meaning transfigures all. And once what you are living and you are doing has for you meaning, it is irrelevant whether you are happy or unhappy. You're content. You're not alone in your spirit. You belong. (van der Post, 1996)

For me, Kodály had a deep understanding of the potential of music to engage us, to give us meaning, to connect with ourselves and others and place, and to give us a sense of belonging. His philosophy for education provides a framework in which we can eloquently speak the music of the spheres with our children and in so doing, share the wisdom of the ages. He said, “Folksongs are.... the ancient furniture of the soul”, and he admonished us to “cultivate them further” (p. 31). I encourage you to cultivate your own awareness of the importance of folksongs. I urge you to sit on the ‘ancient furniture of the soul’ and to feel its comfort and support – and I exhort you to share the beauty and depth of folksongs with the children so that they too may know that sense of belonging that comes with being connected.

References

Brown, J. K. (2008). Student-centered Instruction: Involving students in their own education. *Music Educators Journal*, 94: 30-35.

Campbell, J. *The power of myth*.

Dewey, J. (1963). *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Dobszay, L. (1992). *After Kodály*.
Kecskemét: Zoltán Kodály. Pedagogical Institute of Music.

Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Kodály, Z. (1974). *The selected writings of Zoltán Kodály*. London: Boosey & Hawkes.

Moyers, B. (1988). *The power of myth*. New York: Doubleday.

Silberman, M. (1996). *Active Learning: 101 Strategies to teach any subject*. Iowa: Prentice-Hall.

<http://jmt.sagepub.com/content/16/2/75.extract>

van der post, L. (1962). *Patterns of renewal*. Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications.

van der post, L. (1996). *Hasten Slowly, The Journey of Sir Laurens van der Post*.