

A Critical Reflection on the Kodály Approach and the Lens of Praxial Music Education



Dafu Lai

China University of Petroleum in Beijing, Dept. of Arts & Social Science
Beijing, China
didalai@yahoo.com.cn

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to offer a critical, reflective analysis of the basic philosophy of Kodály's approach to music education in comparison with David Elliott's concept of praxial music education. Drawing on detailed contemporary examples, five issues are highlighted in the paper: music literacy as common ground; the problems of the "Singing-first" principle; the best time to start children's music education; mother-tongue and musical mother-tongue; and the "unquestioned quality music" issue. The paper is not suggesting that the Kodály philosophy is outdated but advocating the need for critical reflection whenever we study or apply a theory.

KEYWORDS

Kodály approach; praxial music education, critical reflection

INTRODUCTION

For years, I have been studying Kodály's approach to music education through attending special workshops and other inputs (such as the Kodály Institute). I had absorbed a rich mosaic of understandings from different scholars but never really thought about the basic theory until I read Elliott's (1995) *Music Matters* and the concept of *praxial music education* at NYU. This enabled me to reflect on what I have learned from a more critical standpoint and to evaluate the relevance of Kodály in our modern society. Subsequently, I discovered new things in my studies.

Kodály's approach is one of the most popular contemporary music education methods in the world. According to Lois Choksy's (1981) summary, the basic principles of the Kodály approach to music include the following five points:

- True musical literacy is the ability to read, write, and think music; and it is the right of every human being.
- To be internalized, musical learning must begin with the child's own natural instrument, the voice.

- The education of the musical ear can be successful only if it is begun early, in Kindergarten and the primary grades or even earlier if possible.
- As children possess a mother-tongue (i.e., the language spoken at home), they also possess a musical mother-tongue in the folk music of that language. It is through this musical mother-tongue that the skills and concepts necessary to musical literacy should be taught.
- Only music of unquestioned quality, both folk and composed, should be used in the education of children. (Choksy, 1981)

Some of these points have close links to David Elliott's theory of *praxial music education*. However, the application of a praxial view of music education suggests that the Kodály approach is not sufficiently comprehensive. Let me explain my critical application of these five points one by one.

MUSIC LITERACY AS COMMON GROUND

Concerning music literacy, Elliott appears to adopt a standpoint identical to Choksy's (1981) view of the Kodály Approach. For example, Kodály was seen to advocate a very powerful concept that music belongs to everybody. Similarly, Elliott does not believe that musical talent is a defining, characteristic requirement for individual musical development. He says "Anyone who receives competent instruction can develop musicianship to a reasonable degree" (NYU website, 2005). Also, Elliott advocates equality for everybody in terms of access to music education. He believes that music is an asset for everyone, not the special privilege of a few "talented people." He says, "Music, like many practices, is something people can do (and learn to do) without being licensed professionals" (Elliott, 1995, p. 43).

In order to emphasize the significance of music education, Kodály regarded music as important as language (both the reading and writing of language). He said "Music is a manifestation of the human spirit, similar to language." Music and

language are seen as subconscious keystones of Hungarian-ness. "In the kindergarten, music is perhaps even more important than language" (Kodály, 1964, p. 130). Just like learning how to speak, read, or write, it is necessary to develop singing and the ability to read music "The promotion of music literacy is as pressing as the promotion of linguistic literacy" (Choksy, 1981, p.6) I think that this concept supports Elliott's tenet that "music is the first and most basic art" (NYU website).

Elliott mentions Kodály's approach four times in his *Music Matters* (1995, p. 31, p. 103, p. 105, and p. 271), implying several key connections between Elliott's music philosophy and Kodály concepts. For example, in terms of music listening, Elliott writes:

If the body is in the mind, then it makes perfect sense (as Dalcroze, Orff, and Kodály specialist maintain) that the kinds of moving involved in music making (including conducting) are essential to improving musical understanding which, I have argued, is essentially procedural. (p.104)

Just as every coin has two sides, however, Kodály's approaches are not beyond question and require us to engage in critical reflection about these concepts, not simply agree with them.

THE PROBLEMS OF "SINGING-FIRST" PRINCIPLE

Based on Kodály and Elliott's common ground, we know the importance of music education. But where and how do we start for the very young beginners in music education? In the second principle of the Kodály concept declared by Choksy (1981) above, he advocates a "singing-first approach." That is, music teaching is highly sequential: singing first, sight-reading second, and then the use of other musical instruments. Kodály said, "Singing without any instrument, free singing is the really deep training of the child's musical faculties" (Kodály, 1964, p. 131). He also declared: "A musical culture that has real depth must always be founded on singing... The playing of instruments is inevitably a matter for the privileged few" (Eosze, 1962, p. 85).

The singing-first method is certainly one approach to access music education. However, as the saying goes, many roads lead to Rome. We cannot say that other methods, such as "listening-first," "movement-first," or "instrument-first," are necessarily wrong. Whatever the teaching sequence, the approaches that help developing children's musicianship are usually grounded in experiencing the music as sound before learning the written symbols. In practice, it may be that a singing-first pedagogy (at least in a formal

educational setting) has certain limitations. For example, in my own experience, when I taught in a primary school several years ago, I found that some young children simply did not like singing or were too shy to sing aloud. Others might have difficulty in matching the correct pitch, tempo, or rhythm without hearing the accompaniment or clear hints. Thus, if the teacher does not recognize this diversity and merely asks the students to sing aloud, it may be that the students could simply be unable to respond appropriately, such as when the teacher is indicating that the students should sing by singing "Here we (you) go." How do we help them open their mouths and sing comfortably, confidently, and naturally? "Using your own song to elicit other's song" is a common tradition in China's rural area. In this tradition, if you want to hear somebody else's singing, you should sing first, then they might sing in response. In a music class, except when the teacher demonstrates singing, it may be a good idea to provide a clear introductory accompaniment as this may help students follow the music more readily.

In fact, what Kodály emphasized is not only "singing-first," but also "pure-singing first." That is to say, the teacher should teach student to sing without any instrument accompaniment initially because "any accompaniment tends to cover the young child's voice" (Choksy, 1981, p. 17). Unfortunately, the children's own voices can cover each other too! How might we prevent that? Actually, this is may not be a real problem as children are able to hear different sounds at the same time. Nevertheless, I found many advantages using accompaniment when teaching very young children. Firstly, accompaniment can help them to get the right tempo, pitch, rhythm and sense of musical expression quickly. Students can follow the music accompaniment and be involved with the music so that the teacher can avoid a lot of explanation. Secondly, good accompaniments usually attract children's interest and involvement. They can find the colourful sound exciting and active rhythmic patterns can motivate their movement and motor response to the music. A strong accompaniment can give students a deeper, more complex sound impression than just a single voice. Thirdly, when children are singing with accompanied music, they hear several parts of the music: their own individual voice, the other children's voices, and the colourful accompaniment. It means that they are exposed in a rich musical world that has different timbres, rhythmic patterns, and musical layers. Singing with accompaniment can help developing children's polyphonic concept and assist them to a better understanding of musical

cooperation or collaboration, that is, the social aspects of music making. As to the potential problem that Kodály pointed out, the teacher should be sufficiently skilled to be able to control the accompaniment volume so that it will not cover the children's voices. In short, children need to hear colourful music that includes a wide variety of musical elements. They are learning music, not merely learning voice. I am not saying that a singing-first method is not good necessarily, but I am arguing that children should also be exposed to a broad range of music from the very beginning.

MOTHER-TONGUE AND MUSICAL MOTHER-TONGUE ISSUE

Based on a Kodály approach, there are several factors to consider with regards to the concept of mother-tongue. First, most individuals (unless they are developed in a multi-lingual household) have one mother tongue and one musical mother-tongue (in the sense of the underlying musical language structures that predominate within the musical examples of the culture). Kodály said, "The basic layer of the soul cannot be made from two different substances." (Kodály, 1964, p. 131.) Secondly, for him, folk songs include the "most perfect relationship between language and music" (Choksy, 1981, p. 8) Thirdly, children should not learn a second language until they have consciously mastered their mother tongue. "Anyone who has learned a foreign language at an age under ten will only mix up the different structures of the two languages, their different ways of shaping images" (Kodály, 1964, p. 131.)

I only partially agree with this point. It seems unequivocal that folksongs present a close relationship between language and music. However, both music and human languages are very diverse. Today, immigration, culture exchange, and hi-tech connection technologies are, on one level, making our world smaller than ever. People are inevitably exposed to various musics and languages. In many urban cities, children are likely to be learning more than one language and exposed to different musics from all over the world. For example, in the Chinatown areas of New York City (include Manhattan Chinatown, Flushing and Brooklyn Chinatown), most children speak at least two languages: English, Chinese Mandarin or Cantonese. Most daycare centers and Kindergartens in Chinatown offer bilingual or even trilingual services. As a result, most students there are exposed to a multilingual environment. Fortunately, they appear not to mix up the different language structures. On the contrary, I found that my landlord's five-year-old son, a second generation of Chinese immigrant, spoke

English, Cantonese, and Mandarin fluently. He could interpret English games and chants into Chinese very accurately for my son when the two were playing together. Here, I did not find this little boy mixing any of these languages.

Another example occurred at last Summer's Kodály Institute when we learned the song "Make a Joyful Noise to the Lord" which has five languages in the words. We very easily found native speakers for each language: Italian, Spanish, Korean, Hebrew and English. All of our foreign language tutors were living in the U.S., an immigrant nation that has probably the most diverse set of languages in the world. Many families speak more than one language. How do they decide which one is the real mother tongue? I think the non-English descent families could regard English as their mother tongue after living in an English-speaking country for a few generations.

In "Music in the Kindergarten," Kodály said "Kindergarten is not the place for music with an alien rhythm or an alien melodic line, just as no place for a foreign language either" (Kodály, 1964, p. 145). However, today is a much different world than when those words were written. Even the concept of *alien* seems out of place in today's educational context. In fact, all children today could hardly avoid their non-mother-tongue or non-mother-tongue music when they are very young. For instance, let me offer my son as an example again. When he first learned to speak at one year old, he learned "Papa" and "Mama" (in Chinese). The third word that he learned was "Bye-bye," not in Chinese, but in English! And he was born and raised in a real Chinese family with a completely Chinese cultural background! Actually, it's not a wonder. The English term "Bye-bye" is very commonly used among young people in China today. Instead of the original Chinese word "Zai-Jian" (which means good bye), people tend to say the English word "Bye-bye" when they leave each other. The English word "Bye-bye" has become a simple Chinese word even though we cannot yet find it in a Chinese dictionary. So language is like music as even toddlers are simply learning what they are exposed to by inevitably learning foreign words.

After the Chinese government adopted a more open policy, English has become more and more popular in China. Most primary schools and lots of Kindergartens have begun to provide English lessons for students. Some private schools even provide bilingual instructions in their curricula. Most of them will hire English native speakers as their student's oral English teachers. Since students are perceived to benefit from two

languages when they are very young, most parents are very willing to send their children to these bilingual or “English-Chinese” schools. There, children are learning foreign language and non-mother-tongue music when they are only three or four years old. Many English songs, such as “Old MacDonald had a Farm,” “Happy Birthday,” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” are as popular as any Chinese folk songs and chants. However, there is no evidence that these *alien* songs and language are having a negative effect on the children.

China is not an immigrant country, but the languages that people speak there are very diverse. Due to the limitations of transportation and exchange in the past, even two very close towns could have totally different dialects. Fortunately, it does not block them from learning the official Chinese language, Mandarin, which is based on a Northern Chinese accent, Beijing dialect. Most Southern people speak very fluent Mandarin and sing Mandarin songs very well.

Scientific research suggests that children who were exposed to a bilingual environment have higher IQ than those with a single language background. A bilingual background is believed to make children think things more broadly and differently. Just as one thing can be expressed in different ways in different languages, so children tend to have more than one way to solve problems if they know more than one language. Besides, children seem to pronounce foreign languages naturally and accurately if they start learning these at an early age.

From a praxial viewpoint, Elliott (1995) has a very good summary in terms of multicultural music education today: “If music consists in a diversity of music cultures, then music is inherently multicultural. And if music is inherently multicultural, then music education ought to be multicultural in essence” (p. 207).

ABOUT MUSIC OF “UNQUESTIONED QUALITY”

I agree with Kodály that children’s music education materials should be chosen as carefully as choosing food for them. As he said, “Food is more carefully chosen for an infant than for adult. Musical nourishment which is ‘rich vitamins’ is essential for children” (Kodály, 1964, p. 122). However, when it comes to the point that “only music of ‘unquestioned quality’ should be used in children’s music education,” we have to bring another question: how do we define music of “unquestioned quality” for children’s music education, especially music of very different cultures and standards?

From Kodály’s writings, we sense what he means. The music of “unquestioned quality” could be “masterpieces” or “good folk songs” of the European culture (Kodály, 1964, p. 125). Today, people are always puzzling, confusing, or even troubling with too many options. If we cannot define “unquestioned quality music,” we are going to be really in trouble selecting materials for music education if we must stick to this “unquestioned quality” principle.

The real problem with this principle of quality is that it involves the matter of musical taste and appears to set some standard that we all can agree upon. However, we know that tastes differ greatly and are often related to preferences for styles, genre, or musical practices. What is a good folk song, and what is a bad folk song? In my experience, good music is not necessarily a masterwork. I can find many really fabulous musical works that have been composed by unknown young musicians, even young students. For instance, one of my favorite short piano pieces, “The Clever Bunny,” was composed by a middle school student. I have used these “non-masterpieces” as my teaching materials and they have been well received. Here, I am not arguing that masterpieces should not be included in music education, but saying we must be open to many alternatives.

Francis Aronoff (1979) makes the point that the best music materials are not merely about quality:

The teacher must seek out a variety of material - appropriate “pop” songs, art songs, advertising jingles, folk ballads. Sometimes it is advisable to focus on just one segment of a longer song, or even on a theme from traditional or contemporary instrumental music. It is of prime importance to use a song only when you know it well, and when you enjoy singing it and moving with it. (p. 197)

Here, Aronoff (1979) raises another important point. That is, how familiar with the music is the teacher? How much does the teacher like the teaching materials? Not all masterworks are suitable for children. For example, some of them might be too sophisticated (complex) for young students to learn. If the teachers know the music well, they can perhaps re-arrange the sophisticated masterpieces and make them suitable for children. If the teachers are not familiar with the material that they want to teach, the best masterpieces cannot work well. So I think the best quality music for children’s music education should include these features:

- It must be music that the teacher knows well.
- It should be music that the children like or that raise children’s interests, no matter who is the composer.

- It should be music that the children like, or that raise children's interests, no matter where are they from, whether foreign music or mother-tongue music.

In short, if we reflect on the standard of "unquestioned quality music" critically, we will discover that emphases on the quality or the composer of the musical material are far from adequate.

SUMMARY

New York has one of the most diverse cultures in the world. This diversity is reflected in its range of musics and music education approaches. Every time when I attend an Orff workshop, I always meet some friends from the NYC Kodály Association. Some of these have more than two memberships, such as Kodály, Orff, Dalcroze, or Suzuki. When I have asked them which one they apply most in their teaching practice, the usual answer is that they assimilate virtues from each of these music education approaches and teach with a comprehensive approach, but not a specific one. As a music educator, I think that this is the best way to enhance music education. We cannot take any music approach as gospel. Contrarily, a critical reflection of such diverse music education approaches helps us to understand them better and improves our teaching practice. A praxial music education philosophy provides us with a good basis to reflect on any approaches that we encounter.

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