Elementary Music Methods Overview

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Abstract

This paper will briefly outline my understanding of the following music theory and methods: Edwin Gordon’s *Music Learning Theory* *(MLT)*, *Orff Method* by Carl Orff (1895-1982), *Kodály Method* by Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967), *Dalcroze Method* or *Dalcroze Eurhythmics* by Emile Jacques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), *Comprehensive Musicianship (CM)*, and *Teaching for Musical Understanding (TMU)*.

Gordon’s Music Learning Theory

Gordon Music Learning Theory (MLT) is just that – a theory rather than a method in music education (Gordon et al., 2005). The theory describes how students learn and how they progress in understanding of what they learn through all stages of music learning development. MLT outlines two main categories of learning in order to describe how students learn music. These two categories are based on audiation research: discrimination learning and inference learning. Discrimination learning is the ability to determine through comparison if elements are the same or different. According to Gordon, there are five levels of discrimination learning described by MLT. These sequential levels include aural or oral; verbal connection; partial synthesis; symbolic association; and composite synthesis. Inference learning is students taking an active role in their own learning. Students learn to identify, create, and improvise unfamiliar musical patterns. Like in discrimination learning, MLT specifies separate categories of inference learning that students will naturally follow as they progress in their music learning: generalization of musical elements and concepts, creativity/improvisation of music and musical ideas, and theoretical understanding of music in general.

The Orff Method

The origins of the Orff method can be traced to Orff’s love of dance (Choksy, Abramson, Gillespie, Woods, & York 2001). Using folk music and bringing instruments on stage soon helped all to see music as a tool and motivation for the dancers. Music and movement was one and the same. Music and dance were broken down into components and those components were mastered through performance. Students felt beat, meter, tempo, and rhythm physically by doing rather than by learning about. The keys to the Orff method are exploration and experience. Inner motivation becomes part of outward expression since students explore outer motivations of movement, such as walking, running, hopping, skipping, tip toe and slithering to inner motivations, such as breath, heartbeat, pulse, and back to outer motivations but at a higher level as students combine inner and outer motivations together. Movement is the building block for all other musical learning since music must be felt.

The exploration of sound begins with environmental sounds and sounds without organization (Choksy et al., 2001). These sounds are sounds that are heard naturally throughout the day. The first instruments used are natural instruments found or invented by the students, such as tree sticks, gourds, and pods. The sounds created are organized into simple forms with beginnings and endings. Sound sources are grouped into families of like sounds. The voice is treated as a sound source to be explored. Children learn to manipulate sounds from the mouth and these sounds become a vocabulary to help with speaking and singing later.

Through ongoing assessment the teacher observes the role of the learner (citation goes here). As the learner’s understanding grows, the role of the teacher lessens. This pattern of student learning, observe-imitate-experiment-create, is repeated for each new concept presented. The most important instrument in Orff method is the body, and the second most important is the voice, since it is within the body. Any part of the body can be used to express a beat and phrase awareness, such as tapping on shoulders, patting on knees, tapping of feet, snapping fingers, patting on the palm. Speaking and singing become the basis for an exposure to the building blocks of music even though movement and instrument playing are primary in the Orff method. The instruments used in Orff method should always incorporate a variety of timbres, colors and textures. The Orff method includes exploration of space through movement – locomotor and non-locomotor movement; exploration of sound through voice and instruments; exploration of form through improvisation of movement and sound. During each step of the process, students move from imitation to creation, from part to whole, from simple to complex, and from individual to ensemble.

Kodály Method

The Kodály method is a combination of separate techniques into one unified approach. Choksy, Abramson, Gillespie, Woods, & York (2001) state that the philosophy of the Kodály approach is as follows:

1. All people capable of linguistic literacy are also capable of musical literacy. Music literacy should be for everyone, not just a chosen few. Music reading, like word reading, is a skill that should be taught to all.
2. Singing is the best foundation for musicianship. Singing is a natural activity just as speaking. Musical knowledge gained through singing is internalized in a way musical knowledge gained through playing an instrument can never be.
3. Music education must begin with the very young to be the most effective.
4. The folk songs of a child’s own linguistic heritage constitute a musical ‘mother tongue’ and should therefore be the vehicle for all early. Folk songs give children a sense of cultural identity as well as continuity with the past.
5. Only music of the highest artistic value, both folk and composed, should be used in teaching.
6. Music should be at the heart of the curriculum, a core subject, used as a basis for education. Music, more than any subject, can contribute to the development of the child in every way – emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, and physically.

Choksy et al., (2001) also state that the principal objectives of Kodály musical training are:

1. To develop to the fullest extent possible the innate musicality present in all children.
2. To make the language of music known to children; to help them become musically literate in the fullest sense of the word – able to read, write, and create with the vocabulary of music.
3. To make the children’s musical heritage – the folk songs of their language and culture – known to them.
4. To make available to children the great art music of the world, so that through performing, listening, studying and analyzing masterworks they will come to a love and appreciation of music based on knowledge about music.

The Kodály method is very structured and sequential (citation). The sequences are created to support the way in which young children progress naturally in music. Three-note songs, tetra tonic and pentatonic songs make up most of the earliest melodic teaching material. Melodies composed primarily with the use of major seconds, minor thirds, and perfect fourths are considered ideally suited to young singers. As voices mature and musical abilities increase, musical materials are extended to include more difficult elements. Tools of Kodály method include tonic solfa (movable *do*), hand signs and rhythm duration syllables (Choksy et al., 2001). The tonic solfa is a series of syllables – *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la ti, do* in which *do* is considered tonic or home. The purpose of tonic solfa is to train the musical ear. It focuses on pitch relationships and how pitch functions musically. Once students are confident with the syllables, the use of note names is introduced in conjunction with *do, re, mi…*. Hand signs are used as an aid to understanding pitch relativity. The hand signs show how pitch moves up and down in motion and are most effective when used with consistent placement in relation to the body; for example, *sol* can be placed at shoulder height and *mi* can be placed at tummy height, demonstrating that *sol* is higher than *mi*. Rhythm syllables are a way of voicing rhythm. They are simply sounds and sound relationships, such as *ta* and *ti ti* rather than mathematical values such as *1 and 2 and*, etc.

Sequencing for learning in the Kodály method involves two criteria (Choksy et al., 2001). The first criterion is child development. The second criterion is frequency of occurrence in the musical material. The first criterion may be the same or very similar from place to place since children advance through developmental stages similarly; however, the second criterion can vary greatly. The second criterion refers to what musical material or elements are contained within the folk music. This will change based on different cultures. A general overview of how culture affects the second criterion can be seen in rhythmic and melodic differences from culture to culture. Choksy et al. remind us that even though the broad outlines of sequence do not change since they are based on principals that do not change, it is important to remain flexible and adaptable to different regions, cultures and classes since that will determine the musical material or elements students will naturally learn first.

A primary goal of the Kodály method is to produce universal musical literacy (Choksy et al., 2001). All musical learning evolves from musical experience. Singing games, dances, folk songs, art songs, unison songs, rounds and canons, part songs – are the sources from which musical concepts are drawn and skills are practiced. Musical experiences and the memory of them are what make a good musician.

Dalcroze Method

Dalcroze Eurhythmics is a method of music education based on the idea that rhythm is the primary element in music, and that the source for all musical rhythm may be found in the natural rhythms of the human body (Choksy, et al., 2001). This method consists of three parts: Eurhythmics, Solfége, and Improvisation. Eurhythmics trains the body in rhythm and dynamics; Solfege (sight singing) trains the ear, eye and voice in pitch; Improvisation incorporates all elements together through the students’ design, in movement, with voice, and with instruments.

Choksy et al., (2001) share that this idea of music education came about when Dalcroze noticed his students struggled to express music even though they could perform it well. He worked to help his students connect their mind and body with their feelings and expression. Dalcroze came to realize that the instruments are the students themselves, not the piano, violin, flute, or drum. There were several questions and answers he came up with that addressed the true source of music, where and how it begins, and which instrument should be first in musical training. Dalcroze determined that human emotions are translated into musical motion and the human body is the first instrument to be trained in music. He also determined the foundation of all music is human emotion and that there must be a connection between the mind that conceives and the body that acts. The function of Eurhythmics is to introduce musical concepts through movement before the students learn about its visual representation on a staff. This sequence translates to greater body awareness and a connection of rhythm to a physical experience for the student, reinforcing concepts through feeling rather than through visual recognition alone.

Comprehensive Musicianship (CM)

Comprehensive Musicianship (CM) is a concept about the teaching and learning of music based on the idea that all elements of music study should be integrated and related (Choksy, et al. 2001). CM encourages students to grow in musical knowledge and skill at all levels by making conceptual connections through performance, analysis, and composition. CM encourages the creation of music rather than the performance of music.

CM is based on principles that are divided into three broad categories that include common elements, musical functions, and educational strategies (citation). Music is sound and sound has essential properties including frequency (pitch), duration, intensity (loudness), and timbre. The organization and interaction of these properties produce music and the music is organized in the following ways according to Choksy et al., (2001):

1. Horizontal organization – movement of sound and silence through time.

Rhythm – the durational division of sound and silence.

Melody – the horizontal organization of pitch frequencies as they interact with rhythm.

1. Vertical organization – organization of sounds in a simultaneous unit.

Harmony – sounds that are played or sung simultaneously.

Texture – qualities created by the density of the simultaneous pitches or the accumulation of individual lines.

1. Expressive qualities – aspects of musical production that contribute to the uniqueness of the sound.

Intensity – energy that gives sound its qualities of loudness (volume, dynamics, amplitude).

Timbre – the specific tone qualities or tone color of the sound produced from various sound sources.

A CM approach to music study advocates that students develop personal musical competencies through a balance of experience in performance, analysis, and composition (citation). Students assume all three roles of listener, performer and composer. Theory is related to historical performance practice and to specific musical literature, and musical elements are related to each other. Music is always viewed as a totality of learning.

Teaching for Musical Understanding (TMU)

In a social constructivist approach to music teaching and learning as described by Wiggins (2015), it is important to understand the roles of the learner and of the teacher. Being that learning is an act of the learner, learner engagement and initiative are critical to the process. The primary role of the learner is to engage actively, thoughtfully, and reflectively. The primary role of the teacher is to scaffold learner’s endeavors. Wiggins says that teachers also establish a supportive learning environment by finding out what the learner knows, encouraging musical expression, focusing learner energy, monitoring learner understanding and progress, and providing a model of musicianship.

In a social constructivist learning environment, Wiggins (2015) compares the relationship between teacher and learner to that of an apprenticeship. The apprentice performs the tasks and the expert fills in and provides support where necessary. Teachers seek to ask open-ended questions that promote higher level thinking on the part of the learners. Teachers do not seek one word answers. Learners must be solving meaningful problems.

Wiggins (2015) says that the problems a teacher presents should be designed in a way that allows learners to draw on relevant prior experience. Good musical problems involve and require musical thought, which is more than verbal thought about music. They should be designed so learners will need to engage in thinking in sound – in hearing musical ideas in their heads. As teachers, it is helpful to think reflectively about our own understanding of music because rooted in our own understanding and experience as professional musicians are the keys to knowing how to foster the development of musicianship and musical understanding in others.

As a teacher finds out what learners know, it is important to realize that learners know more about music than they are often able to articulate or communicate. In a social constructivist environment, Wiggins (2015) says that learners have the opportunity to share and express what they already know. Once learners understand a concept, it is easy to teach them an appropriate label. An example Wiggins gave is the difference between defining and identifying. More important than the ability to define the term *crescendo* is the ability to *hear* a crescendo and recognize that its presence plays a role in the effectiveness of the musical wok in the way a listener, performer, or creator perceives the work.

Wiggins (2015) goes on to state that one of the roles of a music teacher is to provide a model of what it is to be a musician; for example, a teacher must model good vocal quality when singing, excellent pitch and rhythmic accuracy. The teacher also needs to model musical thinking processes. According to Wiggins, the primary role of the learner is to learn – to engage in the learning experiences and construct his or her own understanding. Another role of the learner is to interact with peers to enable everyone’s learning and to provide scaffolding for peers.

All music teaching should take place within the context of performing, listening, or creating experiences within whole, authentic musical works or experiences rather than music created as exercises to teach particular ideas (Wiggins 2015). There are several important issues to consider when selecting music for teaching. Among them, the quality of music and the structural complexity of the music are important. Since music permeates life, experience with music of all kinds will nurture understanding of whole music. Throughout all of it, assessment is an ongoing process.

References

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