

# Teaching Strategies

## 1 Teaching the piano to very young children

by Elza Lusher

IF YOU HAVE EVER had to teach the piano to very young children you will know that in general progress is slow using conventional techniques. In fact most piano teachers will not take students below the age of six or seven. Younger children usually have difficulty finding notes on the keyboard and reading musical notation. Since playing musical notes on the keyboard is quite mechanical the children often do not listen to the sounds they are producing.

As a native Hungarian, my music education was based on Kodály principles from the start. All students there study solfege (usually twice a week for around 45 minutes) for at least a year before starting to learn an instrument. Therefore all instrumental teachers assume a basic level of musicianship.

I trained as a piano teacher at the Liszt Academy. However it was only through my piano teaching experience (in both Hungary and England) that I came to appreciate fully the importance of the inner ear. One only needs to hear Glenn Gould, Richard Goode or Alfred Brendel to understand how singing, or at least hearing the music in your head, can enhance the quality of a musical performance. It is clear that in order to foster musicianship it is vital to start teaching children to sing as soon as they begin to learn any instrument, if not before. This is the basis of the Kodály Approach.

### When should we start to teach?

As with any other language, the language of music is best learnt from an early age. Kodály, Dalcroze and Colourkeys methods are used to some extent in this country, and are now being adopted in some schools and kindergartens. However the practice here is not as widespread as it is in Hungary. In addition there are many pre-school courses for young children with or without their parents, which provide an excellent basis for learning any instrument. In these ways some young children are given a very solid musical foundation.

But what if you wish to teach the instrument from the start, in the absence of any previous musicianship training? I am becoming increasingly aware, in this result-centred society, of the pressures towards teaching an instrument to very young children and of getting results quickly. I had to adapt to the demands of parents and discovered that it was necessary to give piano lessons to very young children and to build basic musicianship into those lessons.

As a piano teacher, I was sometimes jealous of colleagues who taught the violin. Here the well established Suzuki and Colourstrings methods allow good progress to be made with the very young – children as young as three years old being able to learn quite satisfactorily. So why was it so difficult to make progress with the piano? In some ways the keyboard is easier than a stringed instrument. It is not necessary to have

a good ear initially in order to produce a sound, but it is technically more demanding as a whole set of notes needs to be played simultaneously. My initial progress with teaching five year olds was very slow but over a period of years I discovered techniques that enabled much faster progress to be made.

### My approach to teaching music

I now teach the piano to children as young as four years old quite satisfactorily. In addition I have found that all children are able to sing and no one is 'tone deaf'. Pupils just need encouragement in most cases. This observation was actually made many years ago by Kodály. The benefits of teaching music to very young children through the keyboard are enormous. As well as learning to read, sing and play music, they also develop a basic sense of pulse, and improve their memory and concentration span.

I was keen to adopt a Kodály approach from the beginning and to get the children to sing straightaway. I therefore started by teaching sol-fa as well as the absolute names of the notes. This immediately caused confusion with the very young. Not only could they not distinguish between 'B' and 'D' (which meant nothing to those who were too young to read and write) and 'C' and 'F' (due to the position on the keyboard), but the added complexity of solfege (soh and mi) was just too much. It is difficult for them to learn two 'languages' at once. It was necessary to find some other symbolism to help describe the notes in order to aid reading. After a few unsuccessful attempts, using the names of fruits or toys to describe the notes, I discovered that using animal names was ideal. I chose monosyllabic names to enable them to be sung instead of sol-fa. By choosing animal names that start with the letters of the notes it is possible to combine the sol-fa method with the absolute name.

With very young children it is most important to start simply and build up the notes systematically. I start with 'D' (or 'Dog') as the easiest recognisable note on the keyboard, followed by 'B' ('Bird') as 'mi' in sol-fa. In this way the first notes the children learn are D and B (s-m in sol-fa). They play the minor third with both hands and sing at the same time. By using the keyboard the children are able to practise daily and have the option of singing as they play. Pentatonic music is gradually introduced to the students and finally the whole scale. I encourage children *always* to sing the animal names as they play (for example 'dog, dog, bird, bird').

### How do the animals help?

The use of animals makes learning music fun and much easier. Associating the notes with animal names helps the children to remember, especially if they are very young and haven't learned to read and write. In this case I give them

- ▶ music with the animals printed inside the notes and they do not need to struggle with reading difficulties. They can practise their singing in parallel with the piano and gradually learn to play without the animal symbols. The other benefit for pianists is that they do not need to associate notes with finger numbers (which can later cause reading problems and confusion as more than ten notes are introduced).

## The value of singing

The voice is the child's first instrument. It is essential to link playing with singing, and the use of an electronic keyboard, or a properly tuned piano, can support the singing perfectly. Students can play and sing each day, without the need for daily lessons or parental help. By using the keyboard, children can learn to sing easy melodies in tune, and subconsciously they become able to hear and recognise different pitches and intervals. Even students who are unable to sing at all initially will sing confidently after ten lessons. Talented students will soon be able to sing one part whilst

playing another. The child should always sing whilst playing. In this way solfège can be incorporated into the piano lessons.

## Conclusion

There are many excellent approaches to teaching music and musicianship to very young children and ideally every child should be trained in solfège before learning an instrument. In the absence of this, it is possible to build musicianship into instrumental lessons from the start. I have outlined here my approach to keyboard teaching for the very young. I have recently been using similar methods to teach music and singing in a Montessori nursery school. By the age of eighteen months all the animal names are familiar to most children. So the question now is 'What is the earliest age we can start?' ■

■ *Elza Lusher's tutor books using her method, 'Dogs and Birds', are reviewed on page 44. For more information contact Elza on 01784 437801 or [lusher@lusher.eclipse.co.uk](mailto:lusher@lusher.eclipse.co.uk).*