

The National Music Matters Conference, held in Melbourne at the end of September 2010, provided an invaluable source of inspiration for many of the teachers who attended. As an instrumental strings teacher, I made it my mission to attend the workshops that were conducted by the International Guest Speaker and co-founder of the Colourstrings Method, Geza Szilvay. Due to my Kodaly training, I found the method to make sense as it built on the basic principles of the Kodaly method while incorporating aspects that were specific to instrumental strings training. In addition, the traditional sequencing of the instrument-specific training is reordered in the Colourstrings Method in order to maximise correct technique and musicality from the very first lesson.

Traditional strings methods begin by teaching the open strings and then the notes of first position. The combination of the stopping action required (fingers pressed on strings) and the use of only a single position for months often leads to children developing a tense grip on the neck of the instrument that later leads to difficulties when learning to shift to the higher positions. The Colourstrings Method begins by teaching the open strings and then harmonics in low, middle and high positions. The use of harmonics ensures that the students become comfortable with shifting all over the fingerboard from the very beginning and also reduces the likelihood of a tense grip because the finger must only lightly touch the string in order to produce a harmonic. An added bonus is the fact that the children learn to play with correct intonation because the finger must be in exactly the right place for a harmonic, otherwise a kind of “white noise” is produced. Children are therefore able to correct themselves when practising at home between lessons. After learning to produce harmonics in the three positions on all strings, the students then move on to other natural harmonics in first position, enabling the progression to the traditional beginning hand position and allowing short songs to be played, using the same sequence as is taught in Early Childhood Music, starting with so-mi songs.

Because Colourstrings is based on the Kodaly Method, the materials used tend to be based on Hungarian children’s songs, however there was another interesting workshop at the conference, conducted by Dr David Banney, in which attendees were introduced to ideas on how to incorporate materials used in Australian Early Childhood Music. Geza Szilvay even professes the need for a student’s own “mother-tongue” music to be used with his method and the books leave pages blank for the teacher to write such material. Furthermore, the Method introduces notation gradually, just as Early Childhood Music does. The first book uses pictorial or graphic representation of the length of sounds, similar to those used in the Early Childhood Music curriculum. The second

book then gradually introduces the staff system so that children are reading traditional notation by the third book, dispelling the myth held by many traditionalist teachers that Colourstrings does not use traditional notation. Personally, I have found this method of gradually building literacy skills useful not only for beginners, but also as a remedial tool for students who have begun learning with one of the more commonly used method books but are struggling with reading.

Overall, I found the Colourstrings presentations at the National Conference to be highly beneficial and inspirational for strings teachers. The performances at the final concert by the children who had been working with Geza Szilvay during the Conference was a testament both to his method and to the amazing teaching capability of the man himself. For those of us who believe strongly in the benefits of the Kodaly method, Colourstrings is well worth a look.

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