

Developing Music Literacy: An Aural Approach for an Aural Art

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WHAT IS "TRUE MUSIC LITERACY"?

Jason, a young undergraduate music student, answered an ad for part-time employment at the Russian Embassy. Besides the telephone number, the only other information in the ad read: *"Better than average pay; some computer keyboard skill preferred."* When he arrived for the interview, he was among 30 other hopefuls who had been told to arrive at the same time. After a short wait, the entire group was brought into a large room where they were each seated at a computer terminal with a document on one side. The group was instructed that as part of the interview they were to type the first five pages of the document into the computer and hit the "control" button as they finished each page. They would be given 10 minutes. The typing commenced, and to Jason's dismay, he discovered the document to be typed was in Russian. He decided to do his best, but his hope for the job quickly faded. Sideways "E"...he searched the keyboard. Eventually finding the letter, he touched the key. Circle with a line through it ... another hunt resulted in an eventual press of the key. Backwards "R"...hunt... hit. And so it went, with Jason's occasionally remembering the location of one of the foreign letters.

"Time! Please stop typing and return to the waiting area. You will be called back in for a short interview one at a time." Jason exited with the rest of the group. When Jason's name was called, he came back into the computer room and was asked to sit at the same terminal as before. The interviewer reviewed his work and commented that he had not entered very much of the text and in fact had not completed even one page; however, he had not made very many mistakes either. *"Do you read Russian?"* asked the interviewer. Jason responded with a simple "No." *"Can you be in on Monday?"* was the interviewer's unexpected next question. Jason responded with a surprised "Yes!"

Jason finished his first day at work a little fatigued from the grueling hunt-and-peck exercise. But by the end of the week he was beginning to know the keyboard location for most of the letters. At the end of two months Jason was employee of the week, typing faster and more accurately than any other who had started when he did. In speaking to several of the other students who also worked in the computer room, he learned that none of them spoke or read Russian but were hired because of their typing accuracy during the interview. The following fall he transferred to a new school and resigned from his job. He was told his talents would be missed. Not long after that he learned from one of his friends that the Russian agency had been closed down upon discovery that it had been set up to dispatch confidential political documents to Russia. Jason had "played" the Russian typewriter better than average all the while remaining Russian illiterate.

How does this compare to the way many of us were taught to read music through playing an instrument? When you see this dot in this space, press this key. This dot...this key. Slowly at first and with practice you gain familiarity with the location of the keys for each symbol. In time, reading and playing proficiency progresses. Does this mean you have become musically literate? When looking at a printed piece of music, can you tell what the music sounds like without the instrument to interpret? Why do so many choral directors spend their summer months at a keyboard "playing through" prospective choral literature? Could it be because they aren't able to read and hear the music without the aid of a keyboard interpreter?

True music literacy is often misunderstood. The ability to identify "letter names" (i.e., F, A, C, E, D#, Bb, etc.) when looking at notes on a staff and to press the corresponding keys on an instrument should not be confused with true music literacy. Identifying ♭ as "delta" or ♯ as "sigma" or knowing the location of those symbols on the keyboard does not enable one to understand the meaning of those words—any more than recognizing "letter names" or instrumental fingerings ensures understanding of the musical meaning of tones. When one becomes truly musically literate, playing an instrument becomes a natural extension of one's personal musicianship. Developing music literacy prior to instrumental instruction will enable instrumentalists to express music through their instrument rather than using their instrument to hear the music.

We should not allow anyone even to go near an instrument until he or she can read and sing correctly. This is our only hope that one day our musicians will be able to "sing" on their instruments. 1

True music literacy develops the ability to hear what is seen and see what is heard. This is not a recent insight. The sequential development of skills which allows for true music literacy has been explored as far back as Guido d'Arezzo in the 11th Century. Other historical advocates for hearing eyes and seeing ears have included among others, Lowell Mason, Sarah Glover, John Curwen, Fritz Jöde, Thaddeus Giddings and later Zoltán Kodály, Edwin Gordon, and their students.

READINESS FOR LITERACY

During the first five years of life we are busy making aural sense out of the complex labyrinth of language. After achieving a certain level of conversational competence, we enter school and begin a structured reading and writing curriculum. A similar process takes place when one studies a foreign language first at a conversational level. The development of ear comprehension precedes reading, writing, or grammatical structure education. These models of learning language can be applied to the development of music literacy.

Before embarking on a music literacy program, readiness skills must be in place. The higher the musical goals, the more secure the foundation must be. Children can begin a literacy program at a very early age, but should they? If the goal is to achieve reading comprehension beyond basic levels, it is better to invest time in building a foundation than in emphasizing reading skills too soon.

In building the Sears Tower in Chicago, many months passed before the first floor was constructed. During that time a foundation was being created that would support 104 stories. Plans for such an eventual achievement required careful thought and time invested in building a foundation that would support a great building. If the goal had been only to construct a building a few stories high, the foundation would not have needed to be as secure. But achieving great heights is not possible on an inadequate foundation.

Designers of kindergarten curricula have long advocated spending the year in reading readiness programs. Postponing the teaching of reading skills in order to build stronger readiness skills does not delay ultimate reading skills—it actually enhances reading.

In one program first graders did not even get reading textbooks until January. [When] doing exercises in pure sound awareness students rapidly overtook and passed children in control groups when they finally got their reading books. 2

Music literacy also requires laying a proper foundation. Before embarking on a music literacy program, three readiness skills should be in place:

1. Comfortable and accurate singing skills;
2. Comfortable and accurate moving skills (with the beat in metrical groupings of 2 and 3);
3. Expressive sensitivity.

Unfortunately, this third requirement is often overlooked in music literacy curricula. One of the mysteries of music reading is that the subtleties of expression cannot adequately be represented by notation. It is the inherent expressiveness, however, that is the artistic part of music. What appears in notation is merely the skeleton of the music-the interpreter of the notation must breathe life into this skeleton. Development of expressive sensitivity can be traced to good musical models, as well as to quality literature that embodies expressiveness. A preschool child who has been read to in an expressive manner will later integrate expression into his/her reading. A child who is sung to in an expressive manner will later sing with expression and will be sensitive to the inherent expressive qualities in music.

CONVERSATIONAL SOLFEGE: A LITERATURE-BASED CURRICULUM

Conversational Solfege is yet another permutation of the "hearing eyes-seeing ears" axiom. It synthesizes the logical, practical, and philosophical views of earlier music literacy advocates, while integrating contemporary thinking and research. It also merges music literacy skills with the finest quality music.

From a philosophical perspective, Conversational Solfege is greatly influenced by Kodaly philosophy as well as by the Whole Language Approach, in that it is a literature-driven curriculum. As recently as two generations ago, beginning reading texts taught children general reading skills through contrived stories such as:

See Tip. See Mitten. See Tip and Mitten. See the ball. Tip sees the ball. Mitten sees the ball. Tip and Mitten see the ball.

By contrast, whole language promotes the development of reading skills with "real literature." More than a skill, the love of reading involves an affection for the wonder of books, which is developed through immersion in quality literature. Reading should not be taught simply for the thrill of being able to decode the printed page, but for the hidden messages to be found below the surface of the printed page. Such messages are buried only in quality literature that genuinely reflects the pathos of people and artists.

For generations there has been a subclass of music literature introduced in general music classes. This contrived "school music" was developed for every imaginable reason-thematic unit, rhythmic patterns, formal structure, scale passages, suitability to the beat, meter, tonality, harmonic function, or simply because "the kids liked it." By contrast, Conversational Solfege is built on the natural folk music of people and artists, rather than on artificially contrived "school music." Zoltán Kodály often wrote about the shallowness of the "school music" that permeated Hungarian schools through the mid twentieth century.

So by communicating only inferior music the schools cut off the way to a higher development of the musical sense. In the name of good taste and of the Hungarian spirit alike school literature generally used today must be protested against. I include in this the greater part of unison school songs, too. Some writers of textbooks consider Hungarian children idiotic by tutoring them with such little verses and songs as could be improvised much better by any sound child given the chance.3

In another presentation Kodály stated:

It is not advisable to peruse (these) collections. At first one laughs, then one becomes annoyed and finally one despairs and cannot imagine that in a country where such things are printed and even sung aloud, there may still be room for anything better. And what about the masses for whom this remains their only music? Can we be surprised if, by the time they grow up, they cannot get further than the music of the trashiest hit?4

Most music educators are aware that Kodály considered folk music to be a good source of quality music. He also cautioned, however, that there is much second-rate music masquerading as folk music.

But nothing is as harmful as a distorted Hungarian folksong. The child will become bored: in fact he will come to loathe the hackneyed outward trappings of the superficial Hungarian character before he comes to know the genuine one. It is the greatest crime to fill the child's soul with that sort of thing instead of the traditional songs.5

Kodály was equally concerned that children have the opportunity to experience great composed music, both historical and contemporary examples. But, again, he cautioned against composed children's music that was childish rather than child-like.

...but bad taste in art is a veritable sickness of the soul. No one is more instinctively susceptible to pure art than the child, for as young people recognize in their hearts, in every great artist there is a survival of the child. Indeed, the superstition should be completely reversed; only the best art is good enough for children—anything else will only do them harm.6

Kodály was greatly troubled about the inferior quality of composed music frequently used in music education classrooms.

Nobody can be forbidden to compose melodies—if he keeps them to himself. But what about someone who uses the authority of his official position to spread his worthless rubbish?7

If, nevertheless, something new is needed, let it be written by talented and qualified composers—there are plenty of them.8

Nobody is too great to write for little ones; indeed, he must do his best to be great enough for them.9

MUSIC LITERACY "NATURALLY"

The first priority of a literature-driven curriculum is the assembly of excellent musical materials, including authentic music of a society and the music of artists. Early in the 20th century, Kodály and Bartok spent decades collecting, analyzing and cataloging Hungarian folk music. Once these materials were organized, a sequence of instruction emerged that ordered the songs from simple to complex, beginning with the simplest rhythm and tonal patterns, meters, and tonalities in the gathered literature.

Patterns, meters, and tonalities occurring frequently in the authentic music of a society and its artists represent the most natural musical characteristics of that society. Patterns, meters, and tonalities occurring less frequently are less natural. A literature-driven curriculum presents musical materials from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the most common to the least common, from the simple to the complex. In France Kodály curricula often begin with the "lower so" to "do" pattern, while in Japan many Kodály curricula begin with the "re do la" pattern. Analysis of American song content results in a different sequence from the one created by the Hungarians, reflecting the differing characteristics of each country's music. American sequencing begins with "do re mi" and simple rhythm patterns in 2/4 and 6/8, demonstrating the abundance of these patterns in America's "natural music." Other cultures should likewise investigate their people's music and create a sequence of instruction that reflects their culture's

common patterns, meters, and tonalities. Literature-driven curricula should reflect the natural musical characteristics of a given society.

THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING MUSIC LITERACY SKILLS

Experiences with pictures attached, even when they involve looking at picture books and learning new words, are not as valuable (as learning through the ears) because the child needs to learn "sooner, rather than later" to go beyond just naming things that can be seen.

Language that always comes with pictures attached will produce different brain organization than that which must be processed only through the ears.

Whatever the cause, studies have shown that early experience with careful, analytic listening can dramatically improve auditory processing, listening comprehension, and in turn, reading ability-even in children with an inherited weakness.

Unless the adult community decides to help us wrap these growing brains in the mental garments of language, reflection, and thought, I fear we will continue to see increasing numbers of children categorized as "educationally sick."**10**

Development of music literacy should follow much the same process as that which naturally develops in our own speaking, reading, and writing skills. In learning one's own language, one goes through five or six years when language skills are developed by ear-before reading and/or writing of language is introduced. This natural process instinctively enables one to communicate verbally with words and later, after learning to read, to learn to write those thoughts. Conversational foreign language curricula are developed from the same premise. For example, students of conversational French develop an ever increasing spoken vocabulary before the introduction of reading or writing skills. Words are introduced aurally by rote. After sufficient repetition, students are asked to recall and gradually rearrange words to express themselves. Once conversational skills are in place, reading and writing skills can be developed.

Perhaps because Kodály's first area of study was linguistics, he also advocated, as in language development, that the musical ear be developed before the eye.

*But the singer first understands the meaning of the sound and learns the symbols later, which he then understands better.***11**

Conversational Solfege borrows from these language models and develops music literacy skills through a 12-stage process that culminates in one's ability to write original musical thoughts(compose). Beginning with the simplest rhythmic and tonal patterns, each stage introduces a new level of understanding while building upon previous understandings. Gradually, expanded rhythm and tonal content is learned through these 12 stages. Learning to understand music by ear-before learning to read and write music-ensures that the ear and musical mind play an active role in the processing of musical ideas. It also ensures that understanding and creating music occur through the musical manipulation of sounds rather than the mere manipulation of symbols. Manipulation of symbols does not necessarily evoke musical thinking, whereas manipulation of sounds pursues the desired task. In some European countries, the word "music" does not refer to the printed copy; rather, the printed copy is referred to as the "notation." After all, "music" is not the symbols found on the printed page but the sounds that reach the ear.

DEVELOPING LITERACY SKILLS WITH "MUSIC ART"

An individual is considered literate when he/she can read new material with expression and can write his/her thoughts Likewise, an individual is considered musically literate when he/she can expressively read new musical material without the aid of an instrument and can write his/her own musical thoughts. Using quality literature to develop music literacy skills enables students to hear, read, and write music while introducing them to the rich repertoire of great composed pieces as well as their culture's expressive music. With these skills and musical influences, we may just develop a new generation of citizens who will not only be able to read and write music but will be able to understand and appreciate the subtle expressions of music that are embodied below its surface as art.

ENDNOTES

1 Kodály, Zoltán, 55 Two-Part Exercises. New York: Boosey and Hawkes, p. 2.

2 Healy, Jane, Endangered Minds. New York: Touchstone, 1990, p. 287.

3 Kodály, Zoltán, "Children's Choirs," The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály. London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1974, p. 125.

4 Kodály, Zoltán, "Music in the Kindergarten," The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály. London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1974, p. 142.

5 1bid, p. 145.

6 1bid, p. 120.

7 1bid, p. 137.

8 1bid, p. 147.

9 Kodály, Zoltán, "Children's Choirs," The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály. London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1974, p. 125.

10 Healy, Jane, Endangered Minds. New York: Touchstone, 1990, chapter 7.

11 Kodály, Zoltán, 24 Little Canons on the Black Keys. New York: Boosey and Hawkes, p. 2.

See also: <https://www.giamusic.com/bios/john-feierabend>