

# Music Teaching in Early Years and Primary

*The firsts of a series of articles for early years and primary music teaching from the Kodály perspective (Introduction and focus on So and Mi)*

**by Len Tyler**

How do young children really learn? This is one of the most important questions all teachers, not just music teachers need to ask themselves. The answer is that all human learning is initially experiential, and all done at an unconscious level. It is for this reason that a child brought up in an English speaking environment ends up speaking English, regardless of their cultural background. They hear speech whether it's broad Scots or Cockney being used in a fully functional way and that's what they learn. It's exactly the same if they are brought up in a Chinese speaking environment. It's nothing to do with cultural background and everything to do with what they actually hear. Learning unconsciously and aurally is one of the fundamental underlying principles of Kodály work.

Unconscious aural learning all starts before the child is born and once they arrive in this world they soon start to understand what they hear, albeit at a very basic level to start with. This unconscious learning continues and it is not that long before they start to utter their first words, possibly Mamma or Dadda. By the time a child is three years old they are able to string together simple sentences and make themselves understood. When they start primary school they are already using verbs, adjectives, nouns and so much more but without realising what they are actually doing. This is all achieved by experiential unconscious learning and virtually all learned aurally. Nobody would give a newborn baby a dictionary and expect them to learn from that. You wouldn't dream of asking a child to read before they could speak, or try to get a child to play football before they could walk. The conscious level of learning comes much later in human learning after a great deal of unconscious work. It's exactly the same with music. If the first musical task a child is asked to perform is the playing of an instrument or learning the names of the notes there will almost certainly be little or no depth of understanding behind the activity and the chances are that the child will remain unmusical for their entire life. The child needs to build up a bank of underlying skills and experiences to be able to have meaningful music as part of their life in the future. It's a bit like putting money into a current bank account. If you don't put things in then you can't draw on them later. It is for this reason that early years and primary music is so important and fundamental for the longer term musical progress of every child.

With all this in mind where would we start with music learning at the unconscious level for our preschool or primary children? The starting point for musical pitch, the equivalent of Mamma and Dadda in language, are the notes that are sometimes referred to as the falling minor third. This is the fifth and third degree of a major scale or if you use solfa then it's the notes So and Mi. How come these notes can be considered the starting point? They are inbuilt in the human mind from before the child is born so as such they are already present in all young children. Without any formal training a child will use these sounds to chant "mummy" with that distinctive falling sound. As they get older the basic chanting of "Na Na Na Na, Na Nani Na Na" uses the same notes (*with one small additional note (La) which will be the subject of a future article*). This phenomenon is found in most if not all cultures. During a recent lecturing trip to Pakistan the chanting there was referred to as Na Na Na Na, Na Nani Poo Poo. The traditional British song "Cobbler Cobbler mend my Shoe" contains just these two initial notes and is one of the best songs for teaching early years

and primary. There are two well established versions of Rain Rain go Away, one version has just these two notes and the other has that third note (La) that can come up in the chanting. This will be referred to later.

**Cobbler Cobbler mend my Shoe** – has to be one of the best songs for youngsters. There are four identical lines of music in this song. It only contains the pitch notes So and Mi and the rhythmic elements Ta (crotchet) and Titi (paired quavers). Just four basic musical elements produce what is in reality a mini-masterpiece. This song has been passed down by word of mouth over many generations as is the case with Rain Rain go Away.

s s m m s s m s s m m s s m

Cob - ble cob - bler mend my shoe, get it done by half past two.

s s m m s s m s s m m s s m

Half past two is much too late, get it done by half past eight.

This song lends itself to many activities that can be used to develop a number of underlying musical skills. Virtually all these activities can be undertaken while using social distancing.

1. Sing the song for its own sake, possibly the most important of all. If a song isn't good in its own right then it's worth finding a better song that delivers the sort of lesson the teacher requires.
2. Tap the Ta pulse (heart beat) of the song while singing. This could be done by tapping one fist on the other as it banging in large nails to repair the shoe.
3. Tap the Titi pulse of the song while singing. This could be done by tapping two fingers onto the palm of the hand as in tapping in small nails.
4. Children can be divided into two groups with one tapping the Ta pulse as in 2 above and the other group tapping the Titi pulse as in 3 above
5. Children could walk in a circle or a line to the Cobbler's house to get their shoe mended. In this activity the children walk the Ta pulse thereby establishing the pulse with major muscles of the leg and supporting kinaesthetic learning\*. If they need to hurry they could run to the titi (quaver) pulse but make sure you ensure accuracy of feet for this one.
6. Tap the rhythm of this song (Titi Titi Titi Ta x 4) while they sing, ensuring that the Ta (crotchet) at the end of each line is correctly observed and performed.
7. Items 5 and 6 above could be combined so the children walk the pulse while tapping the rhythm and of course singing the song.
8. Much more difficult would be to get the children to invert item 7 above. Clap the pulse and walk the rhythm. Primary children find this sort of activity great fun and tend to achieve it more easily than adults do, so it is strongly recommended that the teacher has a good go at this themselves before working with the children ...!
9. Ask the children to listen to the song and list all the numbers that they can find in it. This activity encourages accurate and details listening. See if you can find all those that children have found (*half, two, six, eight, twenty, thirty – think about the clock ...!!*).

10. This song can be sung in canon, something that can be done if parents are present and the song is very well established. The canon works at any point but produces a very good effect if done at the interval of just one beat. This is not easy but so well worth working on.

s s m m s s m s s m m s s m s s m m s s m s s m m s s m  
Cob-ler Cob-blemend my shoe, get it done by half past two, half past two is much too late, get it done by half past eight.

s s m m s s m s s m m s s m s s m m s s m s s m m s s m  
Cob-ler Cob-ler mend my shoe, get it done by half past two, half past two is much too late, get it done by half past eight.

**Be adventurous and make up more of your own actions for this song.**

*\* Kinesthetic learning is one of the three fundamental ways that humans learn, the others main ways being aural and visual. By including all three learning approaches in as many activities as possible helps to establish whatever is being taught. The aural learner may learn from the aural perspective in which case the visual and kinaesthetic aspect of the lesson further supports the learning. Likewise with the visual or kinaesthetic learner the other two approaches support the learning. If all three approaches are included then the message to the brain stronger and the learning is more substantial and long lasting.*

In the next article we will look at the addition of the next note in the learning sequence and some possible applications for instrumental work.

***Go to [www.lentylermusicschool.co.uk](http://www.lentylermusicschool.co.uk) for free downloadable resources and video examples of Kodály teaching for early years and primary, and for teacher training. There are over 200 videos on the Len Tyler Music School Facebook page.***

***The link below is for adult Kodály musicianship training (designed to improve personal subject skills) and is available at various of levels including a course for complete beginners. The first lesson of the intermediate course (over 40 minutes) is free to watch as a taster.***

[https://kodaly\\_with\\_esther.teachable.com/?affcode=547596\\_rjogr3e](https://kodaly_with_esther.teachable.com/?affcode=547596_rjogr3e)