

# Music Teaching in Early Years and Primary

*The third of a series of articles for early years and primary music teaching from the Kodály perspective (Focus on Mi, Re, Do)*

**by Len Tyler**

In this the third article in the series we are looking at further simple songs with just three notes that are really useful for teaching underlying musical elements and skills. In the first article we looked at the fifth and third degree of the scale (So Mi) and the song *Cobbler Cobbler*, and in the second article we added the sixth degree (La) and looked at the song *Bounce High Bounce Low*. This time we are going to consider the first three notes of the major scale (Do Re Mi) and the songs *Hot Cross buns* and *Suogan*, and investigate the importance of this tone set for music teaching.

There are many well known songs with just these three notes, perhaps most notably of all is *Hot Cross Buns*. Based in the tradition of baking spiced buns with a cross on them around Easter time this song can trace its roots back as far as the eighteenth century and possibly earlier in the form of a street cry by bakers selling spiced buns that were traditionally eaten on Good Friday. The cross represented the crucifixion. As you might expect there were many different versions around that time, most of which included many notes over a wide range and some fairly busy notes as the song was then sung by adults. It is thought that an enlightened teacher many years ago realised that the song was great for teaching but that the musical content was outside the capability of most young children. There were too many notes and they were too widely spread hence this three note version was produced. This simplified version is now very well known and used in many instrumental tutor books as it's ideal for teaching the first few notes on most instruments. I will be looking at the simplified version in this article. You can see from the examples below that the original has large leaps and some busy quaver (Titi) work that could make it difficult for many young children to perform well.

The image shows two musical staves for the song 'Hot Cross Buns' in 2/4 time. The top staff is labeled 'Simplified Version' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Original Version'. Both staves use a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The lyrics are: 'Hot cross buns, hot, cross buns. One a pen-ny two a pen-ny, hot cross buns.' The simplified version uses a limited range of notes (Do, Re, Mi) and simple rhythms (crotchets and crotchet rests). The original version features a wider range of notes, including large leaps, and more complex rhythmic patterns like quaver pairs (Titi).

As ever the most important thing is to sing the song for its own sake. If the song doesn't represent good material then it's worth seeking out a better song, so the first thing to do is to sing the song with enthusiasm and enjoyment. This is a relatively short song so it might be good to sing it through twice. The musical content is too good to be sung only at Easter so I would suggest it can be included as a regular item any time of year. As well as the three pitch notes (Mi – Re – Do) already mentioned the rhythmic content is also interesting. We have the crotchet (Ta) and the paired quavers (Titi) as covered previously but here we now have the crotchet rest (Sh) making a small silence in the music. The musical format is also interesting. The first section (A) is repeated, followed by a different (B) section then the first section returns. This gives the song an AABA format and in this song it is not just the musical notes that create this pattern but also the words, making the format easier to see. Patterns are one of the main building blocks in education and are found in maths, language and many other subjects. As music contains so many underlying patterns

it naturally supports all other areas of education and learning. There are more cross transferrable skills from music to other subjects than from any other subject.

Here are some ideas for fun actions to do while singing this song. Most will help to work on pulse but other musical concepts can be focussed upon. Do remember to make the whole thing “fun”.

1. Knead some imaginary dough with actions in time to the musical pulse
2. Roll out the dough using an imaginary rolling pin in time to the musical pulse
3. Use an imaginary cutter to cut out the buns in time to the musical pulse
4. Put a cross onto the buns in time to the musical pulse
5. Put the buns onto a baking tray in time to the musical pulse
6. Put the buns in the oven (and wait for the timer - Teacher can produce a “ting”)
7. Take the buns out of the oven
8. As the buns are hot sing the song and blow on them during the rest (Sh). This will highlight the rest at the unconscious level
9. Once the buns have cooled down have a taste and do a “bite” action during the rest.
10. If you use teddies let the teddies have a “bite” during the rest.
11. Decide to take some buns to share with a friend so all stand up, put the buns in a bag and march around the room (or on the spot) in time to the musical pulse.
12. If the group is well established you could try singing (or playing) this in canon at two beats interval. It makes an interesting sound especially in the “one a penny” bit where it creates major seconds.
13. With an established group you can have half patting the pulse (heart beat of the song) and the other half clapping the rhythm (the sound of the words) at the same time while singing the song. This sort of activity can produce some interesting musical items and lays the foundations for ensemble music making.

Please keep in mind that there needs to be quality and musical depth to all activities if the teaching is to be meaningful and not superficial. Just having “good fun” isn’t really enough on its own.

As in the previous article I would like to include some ideas for higher level and instrumental teaching, partly for those that also provide instrumental lessons and partly to illustrate to the early years music practitioner the importance of including good quality material in the lessons that can benefit the child later.

If this song is well established within a child it can be used for many applications later especially when studying music at a more advanced level or when learning an instrument. The fact that there are three descending notes makes it ideal for woodwind instrumental learning as the pupil starts with a basic thumb and forefinger fingering and then add two more fingers, one at a time (E D C for Clarinet and Bassoon, B A G for Recorder, Flute, Oboe, Saxophone). This is one of the easier finger movements and if Hot Cross Buns is well known by the pupil will be more successful. In the strings world if you start with a down bow, then the crotchet rest (Sh) can be used to retake the bow. Different bowing techniques can be introduced in the repeated quavers (Titi) of the third section. Starting on an E (first line of the treble clef) can include a change of string or some position work on the G string. In brass teaching the song can be used to establish basic finger patterns, for example starting the song on a written G (treble clef) the pupil will need to find the Eb and use 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> valve. Starting on an F# gives the notes F# E D which can practice the finger movement from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. There is a bit of cross fingering here that can be practiced, or even the idea of teaching the use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> valve for the E. In both these cases this song can be used to practice

the use of the trigger or slider on a trumpet to help with the tuning on the Eb or the D. For the trombone (treble clef) starting on the G will have the pupil find 5<sup>th</sup> position for the Eb. For the more advanced pupil starting on the F will help them to find Db in 7<sup>th</sup> and if the song is well established in the mind there is a better chance of good tuning by having the sound in mind before producing the note. With any form of keyboard teaching the songs can be used to help a pupil discover accidentals by first starting the song on E (to produce E D C) and then try starting on a D (to produce D C Bb). Allowing the pupil to try starting on the D will help them to discover the Bb for themselves through trial and error. Hot Cross Buns could also be played starting on Bb (Gb Major) for those that prefer to start on black notes.

The song Suogan also uses the three notes Mi, Re and Do but initially in an ascending order, the opposite direction to Hot Cross Buns. This makes the song ideal for strings teaching as it can start with any open string and fingers are put down in sequence e.g. D E F# to produce the first three notes of the D major scale. For upper strings the pupil can place the first finger anywhere on any string and play Suogan. With the sound of the song in mind it will help the tuning when approaching position work where fingers need to be closer together. For brass playing this song can reinforce the three notes learned though Hot Cross Buns, and for keyboard work the song can be used to discover sharp sounds. Starting on C give a C D E tone set, but starting on D would give a D E F# tone set allowing the pupil to discover F# by sound. As with Hot Cross Buns this song can be played in canon which will help instrumental students to tune the major second.

Su - o - gan, do not weep. Su - o - gan, go to sleep. Su - o - gan,  
 Su - o - gan, do not weep. Su - o - gan, go to sleep. Su - o -  
 have no fear. Su - o - gan, moth - er's near.  
 gan, have no fear. Su - o - gan, moth - er's near.

For early years work Suogan is a lovely soft lullaby. Interestingly every “Suogan” is a “Do Re Me” so it is ideal for teaching this little musical phrase. Suogan is a lovely little lullaby and is good to sing perhaps at the end of a lesson as a quieter song when parents with little ones can rock gently while singing. Unaccompanied children can rock a real or imaginary teddy bear while rocking side to side. If sung in canon this song produces a few thirds, but mainly major seconds which can sound really nice if sung gently. Try singing to Lu Lu Lu rather than to words to achieve a more orchestral sound.

**In the next article we will be looking at rhymes and the many rhythms that can be learned from this type of activity.**