

Music Teaching in Early Years and Primary

The fourth of a series of articles for early years and primary music teaching from the Kodály perspective (Focus on Language and Rhymes)

by Len Tyler

Based in the mother tongue of the child the use of language and rhymes in particular are a very powerful and important part of music teaching. Every language is different and has its own different rhythmic content which then tends to be represented in the music from that language and culture. The English language is strongly pulse based so that there is a natural beat that highlights the important words in a sentence. For example, "Cows eat grass" has three basic components. By adding more elements to the sentence these basic components stay in the same place with a natural accent. The following shows in musical terms the sounds if these four different phrases are spoken naturally. Notice that the natural accent stays on the same words.

The image shows four staves of music in 6/8 time, illustrating the natural pulse of the sentence "Cows eat grass". The first staff shows the words "Cows", "eat", and "grass" on separate notes. The second staff adds "The" before "cows". The third staff adds "It's the" before "cows" and "that" before "eat". The fourth staff adds "cows that have eat - en the" before "grass". The rhythmic pattern remains consistent across all staves, with the natural accent falling on the same words: "Cows", "eat", and "grass".

As the English language is pulse based it is very useful for teaching basic pulse based rhythms. The following idea is all about rhythmic speaking. The concept is that the teacher or leader says something in a rhythmic way and the group echoes in the same way. It could be just spoken, or it could be that children could pat on laps in time to the pulse.

The image shows rhythmic speaking exercises in 4/4 time. It is divided into two sections: "LEADER" and "ECHO". The exercises are as follows:

- Let's go for a walk. (4 beats)
- Let's see what we can see. (4 beats)
- I can see the play park. (4 beats)
- Let's go on the swings. (4 beats)

The "ECHO" section repeats each of these phrases. The words "Swing swong swing swong." are written below the "Let's go on the swings." phrase, indicating a specific rhythmic pattern for that phrase.

The important matter here is that the echo is easy to follow, so it's best to have a four beat phrase and keep things very simple. Once the basic concept is well established then more adventurous activities can be explored. Instead of patting the pulse, the children can clap the rhythm while echoing the leader. An easy way to get this idea across is to ask the children to "blow the words onto their hands". They blow on their hands and then when they say something the clapping

follows the sound of the words. With more established children, perhaps in primary they can echo and name the rhythms instead of copying the words. The first line would then sound “Let’s go for a walk = Ta Ta Titi Ta”. This would help young children get to grips with a better understanding of rhythmic music. Pitch can be added, perhaps just on a single note. Once established things can progress to two or three notes but again make sure that everything remains relatively simple to ensure a successful outcome. With a well established group the children can take a turn to be the leader with any of the above activities. At this point we are beginning the concept of improvisation, especially if pitch sounds are involved. With improvised rhymes any subject material can be used. Here are some examples

Days of the Week

Mon - day, Tues - day. Wednes - day, Thurs - day.

Fri - day, Sat - ur - day. Sun - day too.

The notation consists of three lines of music. The first line has four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box, and then another four quarter notes, followed by another 'ECHO' box. The second line has four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box, and then four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box. The third line has four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box, and then four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box.

Colours

Red, ora-ange, yel-low green. Bright-est col-ours I have seen.

And there's more that I have met. Blue, in - di - go, vi - o - let.

Us - ing col - ours that we know. We can make a rain - bow.

The notation consists of three lines of music. The first line has four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box, and then four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box. The second line has four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box, and then four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box. The third line has four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box, and then four quarter notes, followed by an 'ECHO' box.

When using language to support rhythmic work it is important not to force the words to fit the rhythm but to use the natural sound of the words to support the rhythm being taught or focussed on. It’s interesting to note that in the above example the word “indigo” naturally forms a triplet. Many advanced rhythms are contained in the naturally spoken English language.

It’s also important to realise that the English language tends to have two different sorts of rhythmic feels. About half of our traditional rhymes and songs are have a natural simple (2/4) time feel and half have a compound (6/8) time feel. The song Cobbler Cobbler was introduced in a previous article as a two note song but like any song it can also be used as a rhyme. In this case it’s definitely a simple time feel. The rhyme Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat is a song with a compound time feel. As these rhymes have an identical structure we can compare side by side and see that when there are two notes in Cobbler Cobbler there are three in Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat. Performing them both at the same time gives an unconscious feel for the two against three feel that can lay the foundations for more advanced work later.

Cob - bler cob - bler mend my shoe. Get it done by half past two.

Pus-sy cat, pus-sy cat where have you been? I've been to Lon - don to look at the Queen,
Half past two is much too late. Get it done by half past eight.

Pus-sy cat, pus-sy cat what did you there? Fright-ened a lit - tle mouse un - der her chair.

Rhymes can also be very useful in instrumental teaching. With a known rhyme like Engine Engine Number Nine an instrumental pupil can be asked to play the rhythm on a single note. Two or more pupils, or a teacher and a pupil can play the rhythm on two notes at the same time at a set interval, perhaps a major third or perfect fifth as a tuning exercise. They can then be given a choice of two or three notes to choose from while playing the rhyme again. This activity is a simple way to introduce the concept of improvisation. Here are a couple of examples.

1. Eng ine, eng - ine num - ber nine. Go - ing down (Chi - ca - go) line.
2. C C C C D D D E E E E D D D
3. C D E G E D C G G A G E G D

If the train should jump the track. Will I get my mon-ey back? Yes, no, may-be so.
C C C C D D D E E E E D D D C D E D C
C D E G A G D E G D G C C C A G E D C

If you set the notes to be used as C D E you could get the result as in 2 above. If you set the notes to be used as the C pentatone (C D E G A) you could get the result as in 3 above. There are of course endless results available from any group of notes nominated. This sort of exercise can be adapted to use any new notes that the pupil is working on. For example an advanced flute pupil might be given the Gb pentachord (Gb Ab Bb Cb Db). This could be used to familiarise the pupil with this key structure generally and also to encourage the use of the long Bb where appropriate.

The next article will cover the use of pentatonic key structures