

MUSIC EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CORONA

Some Considerations about Music Education and the Content-Based Research Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This essay was written at a time when the coronavirus crisis was at its height. For many people having to stay at home is a new experience in their lives. There is hardly anyone on the street. The soundscape outside changes, and we experience for the first time what silence means. No one knows how this crisis will end, but among all the negative consequences that humankind will have to bear, one positive outcome will be that it will sharpen the eyesight for new offers and opportunities in delivering knowledge, also for music education.

Keywords: music pedagogy, Solfège, constructivist design, online music education

A short time before the MTA launched the content pedagogy programme, I discussed with a Hungarian colleague about Kodály's music pedagogy and Solfège, the central element of it. He told me about increasing problems to provide Solfège according to Kodály's tradition. These problems cannot only be attributed to the increase of electronic entertainment media and devices, but also to mainstream music, which had changed musical taste considerably, long before electronic services conquered the world. The purpose of Kodály's Solfège tradition requires practising music. Solfège should promote musicality based on relative solmisation and the Hungarian folk song tradition. Compared with this, in France, pupils learn Solfège to acquire music literacy and less to develop musicality. Should one, therefore, agree with the French composer and music commissary under Charles de Gaulle, Marcel Landowski when he demands that Solfège should be killed; otherwise it would kill music ('Il faut tuer le solfège qui tue la musique', Landowski, 1979, p. 61.) or should one proceed in a more differentiated way and understand that music education needs Solfège? Antoine Hennion, the French sociologist, points out that for (French) pupils music is what comes after Solfège (Hennion, 1988, Cf. among many: Patel, 2008). This means that Solfège is a means to an end.

In contrast, for Kodály, it stands at the beginning of the development of musical talent and everyone at school age should have the opportunity to learn music in both, general schools and music schools.

The admittedly extreme distress call of Landowski to kill Solfège makes one thing very clear: The situation of Solfège teaching in France and countries adopting this system is different to Hungary. Despite the advantage of providing firm reading skills, it has the disadvantage to discourage (a majority of) pupils; they resign from music education and mutate to passive music consumers during the rest of their lives. In this sense, Solfège is elitist because it separates talented music readers from less talented ones, whereas the real musicality of the latter has had no chance to develop so far. Music in itself is hardly taught today. It seems that in both traditions, the consumption of music has replaced active music-making. Active participation in musical culture – including differentiated listening – and, associated with this, emotionality should also be encouraged. Awakening emotionality is one of the core principles of music and a task of music education. However, the dosage counts: Too much emotional reaction leads to bias and subjectivity; it prevents abstraction and leads to the elimination of alternatives. On the other hand, alternatives must remain visible. An objective view of the musical material exists, but pupils must experience its potential through active practice. This includes knowledge of the versatility of musical forms and phenomena. Playful invention and improvisation lead to a deeper understanding of music.

Music education scholars in Hungary have drawn their conclusions out of these circumstances. They decided to make a virtue out of necessity and not to succumb to fatalism and secured funds to make music education fit for the future. The consequence would have been that an entire tradition, strongly linked to Hungary and its famous music pedagogy with its relation to folk music would run the risk of collapsing like a sandcastle. Two research groups recognised an imminent need for action. They had to accept that this almost hundred-year-old tradition necessitates critical questioning and modernisation. With their respective projects, they conceive models for maintaining and developing a tradition into which they were born. The *Content Pedagogy Research Programme* of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is – at least for music pedagogy – unique and a benchmark at international level. It makes available the ideal background and offers the scholars the following possibilities

- 1) to invent new teaching strategies,
- 2) to test these strategies in collaboration with teachers in schools,
- 3) to adapt them according to their findings,
- 4) to share these findings at an international level and
- 5) to establish an international network for improving music pedagogy at the beginning of the 2020^s.

Content-related pedagogy research has a direct impact on educational practice. The content-related distance between scholarship and implementation is shorter than in most other research models.

With their content-based research projects, the Hungarian colleagues have highlighted that music learning is so different: It cannot be compared to other school subjects. Music learning is based evidentially on a more constructivist design than mathematics, history, languages, sports, visual arts etc. The latter can be taught in classes without prior conditions. Active music learning requires musical literacy – or should we say “noteracy”? Besides, the provision of content is more time-consuming; music pedagogy is multifaceted: While music education in music schools is often limited to learning an instrument (a more profound training being limited to future professionals at university level), music education in general schools includes (or at least should include):

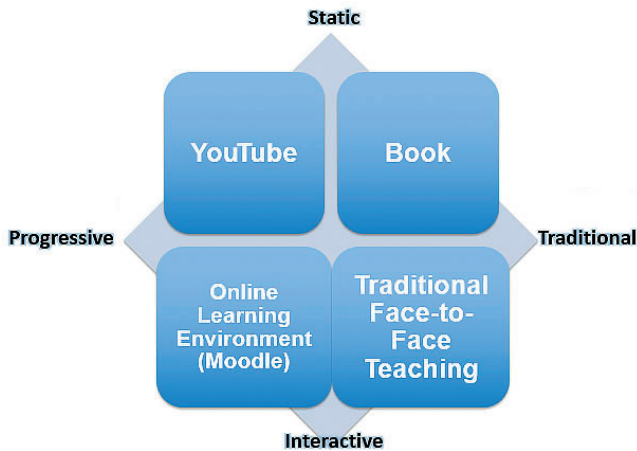
- musical knowledge, e.g. the history of music, awareness of genres, of composer’s biographies and of stylistic periods,
- listening to and understanding music from classic to Rock/Pop,
- multiple opportunities to sing or to make music with instruments: in class or individually – if one is confined at home – with the assistance of a computer or
- the social togetherness in a choir or an instrumental group,
- combining music education with other disciplines in a transdisciplinary approach, e.g. with visual arts (painting along to music),
- dancing and moving and
- encouraging creativity.

Music education is encompassing. Therefore, it requires more commitment, e.g. time and funds. It imparts more knowledge and provides more know-how. Since instrumental training is individual training, it is also more expensive. In any case, music education is education for life and most effective. The beneficial effect of music on cognitive processes has been the topic of many studies (Patel, 2008).

In one of the projects carried out by the two Hungarian study groups, Hungarian folk songs constitute still the basis of music education. They offer a playful background and adopt the possibilities offered by modern data processing facilities in a way that users will internalise idiosyncratic musical idioms subconsciously. The playful handling of the apps does not necessarily require didactic intervention. Nevertheless, the latter should initiate playful learning from home and interaction with the communication facilities made available by the increasing amenities of the Internet. Offers for online courses can be characterised as follows:

- they are conceived for beginners to advanced students,
- they include lessons from singing and piano to didgeridoo and djembe
- and consist of fragmentary, only a few minutes long course units to long teaching episodes.

The idea of online music education is not new. Matti Ruippo published a relevant article about this way of conveying musical knowledge already in 2003 (Ruippo, 2003). He distinguished between synchronous actions, which means that technology allows immediate access and asynchronous processes, which means that contents have to be prepared prior to use. Both categories can take place by interaction or by single use. This approach leads to the following model, where the learning dimensions are static vs interactive and progressive vs traditional:



Alas, the offers are barely complete. *YouTube* videos often provide ideas but no complete solutions. Therefore, learning music via Internet and *YouTube* is a supplement, never a substitute. In most cases, there is no interaction and control by a teacher. Many Internet sites offer only options for downloading documents, but no face-to-face courses.

Today, a faster Internet enables interactive facilities such as online instrumental courses. They deliver high flexibility in the communication process between teacher and student. Where Internet and *YouTube* offer music education without any time limit, inquiry learning needs time and often fails, due to the lack of time and due to rigid curricula in traditional learning environments. Furthermore, web-based pedagogical interaction has no geographical constraints. A student can reach his teacher even on a distant continent. Finally, the Internet and *YouTube* enable constructivist, dynamic approaches of music learning, whereas traditional methods are based on teacher-centered educational models. Regardless of the social distance and technical difficulties that may occur, these new teaching facilities will continuously develop, changing and complementing traditional music education.

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