

# CASE STUDY: TEACHING MUSIC THROUGH SONG

Sing Up meets Music Coordinator **Will Green**, who champions the power of singing to spark and sustain children's musical learning.

**'M**usic should belong to everyone' said the composer and pioneer of music education, Zoltán Kodály.

At Manorfield Primary School in East London, Kodály's creed rings as true as ever, all through the skill and enthusiasm of Music Coordinator Will Green. Drawing on the principles established by Kodály, Will leads his classes through a lively and ambitious music curriculum, taught almost entirely through singing. Sing Up spent the day with Will to find out about his work, discovering just how he brings musical learning to life through song.

Having been a classroom teacher for many years, Will became a Music Coordinator in 2010 and now teaches music full-time at Manorfield Primary School. He works with every age group at the school, as well as running choirs for pupils and staff, and organising a colourful array of visiting

musicians and musical school trips. For Will, singing is an inspiring and empowering way to get children engaged in classroom music-making: 'When you're singing, your body is the instrument. Everything is connected, especially the ears: you can't help but engage deeply with music.'

Will notes how singing also supports individuals to develop the skills needed to make music *together*: 'teaching music through group singing encourages children to work together as musicians from the very youngest age', but without the 'technical challenges' of learning an instrument. Singing as a medium for broader musical learning is practical too, allowing teachers to get the best out of the often limited time available: 'children can be singing from the moment they walk through the door.' Crucially, Will believes singing is the best way to develop children's core musical

understanding: 'I see my role as teaching musicianship through the voice.'

Will's lessons are packed with singing games and movement activities. Having trained at the British Kodály Academy ([bit.ly/su-kodalyacademy](http://bit.ly/su-kodalyacademy)) with such luminaries as Lucinda Geoghegan and Cyrilla Rowsell, he draws strongly on the approaches established by Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály in the 1930s. Kodály advocated a child-centred approach that placed singing at the heart of all musical learning, using games and activities that follow on from children's instinctive play. Kodály used simple rhythm names (such as 'ta' and 'ti-ti'), combined with a series of hand signs and solfa ('do, re, mi...') as a step to learning to read musical notation. These powerful tools, involving the whole body in learning, develop recall and musical memory and are used during singing exercises.



Will's classes are founded on creating a strong sense of play teamed with structured musical learning. Moving swiftly between different songs and activities, he covers an extraordinary gamut of musical learning in his 30-minute lessons, using singing to teach a range of musical principles, including pitch, pulse and rhythmic notation.

### Hearing pitch, showing pitch

Will builds awareness of pitch through the idea of 'musical pencils'. Before beginning a song, Will asks the children to conjure up an imaginary musical pencil and then to 'draw' the shape of the melody as they sing. These shapes help children gain a practical sense of how musical pitch rises and falls, also connecting pitch to the physical sensation of singing the different tones. Try it yourself with *Up and down* or *A little echo* from the Song Bank.

### Developing pulse

Will supports pupils to develop a strong sense of musical 'pulse' through a range of lively methods. One technique involves singing a familiar song, inviting every child to mark the pulse in whichever way they choose: tapping the head, marching on the spot, patting the stomach: the more playful the better! Songs such as *The grand old Duke of York* and *The animal fair* would work well for this.

Another approach he uses is to take a familiar, steady-paced song (eg. *Who stole my chickens and my hens?* or *Roll the old chariot along*), stand in a circle, and ask the children to 'pass' a steady clap one-

by-one around the circle as they sing. To make the exercise more challenging, try this activity while singing a song with a variable speed (such as *Five fine bumble bees* or *Kalinka*). Don't worry if it takes a few goes, and notice that the next child in the circle can help stabilise the pulse if it wobbles every now and then.

### Listening skills and 'inner hearing'

Will is a huge advocate of call-and-response songs as a way of 'attuning the ear' and regularly uses Song Bank songs *Kye kye kule* and *Down by the bay* as a way of encouraging careful listening to a song's 'call'. Singing also supports the development of what Kodály refers to as 'inner hearing' or our 'thinking voice'. As Will describes, this idea of inner hearing is 'the ability to hear music inside our heads without needing to play an instrument or sing'; it helps us sing and play in tune, to make music sensitively and responsively with others, and to read and eventually 'sight-sing' notation.

The Song Bank songs *BINGO* and *Baby one, two, three* are great for using our 'thinking voice' to fill in the gaps in our heads, eg. in *BINGO*, try 'singing' one of the letters in your heads rather than out loud (starting with 'B') – it's wonderful fun! You can develop 'inner hearing' further through rounds such as *Shoes of shining leather*, *Si si si* and *Janie Mama*, learning to sing and listen simultaneously, adjusting to become part of an ensemble.

Singing at Manorfield is infused with musical learning. As Will says, 'it's about constantly challenging the children: building a sense of discovery and a sense of achievement.' From singing with an imaginary musical pencil to developing 'inner hearing', there are countless ways to explore musical learning through the magic of the human voice – give them a go!

Words by Kate Wakeling



## Activity: Explore pitch notation

Try these fun activities over several weeks to develop understanding of pitch and introduce music notation using a simple call-and-response song.

- Sing the call-and-response song *Who are we?* inserting words relevant to the class, eg. 'Who are we? [echo] We are class nine. [echo]'.
- Once the song is learnt, draw the shape of the first phrase using imaginary pencils. Ask questions like: How many notes are there? But how many *different* notes are there? Show the phrase written out as graphic symbols then sing together following the shape.
- Using graphic cards you've created, set groups the challenge of working out the next phrase of the tune, firstly using the imaginary pencil and then matching it with its corresponding graphic representation. Ask questions like: Is the second phrase the same as the first? What clues will help us work this out?
- Able students could move on to draw the graphic symbols for the final two phrases themselves. Others could repeat the process and match up the remaining phrases with the cards.

Who are we?



We are ...



What's our school called?



We are ...



- Next we're going to work out the notes of the song. Draw a staircase on the board with six stairs. Pick a note to represent number one (C is good) and sing the numbers from one up to six. Do this several times up and down to get a sense of the pitch. The song starts on step five. Where does it go next? How many steps down?
- There are endless possibilities to explore pitch and notation further, such as moving on to instruments and working out the song using the notes C, E, G and A, and learning to write the notes out on staves.

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