Nursery rhymes and the importance of pedagogical ecumenism *by Nikhil Dally*

Nikhil Dally is Principal of the Stepping Notes Music School. He runs frequent training courses for early-years music teachers: see www.dally.org.uk/teachertraining.htm.

'She told us the traditional nursery rhymes were bad.'
'They change all the nursery rhyme tunes to make them fit their theories.'
'He told me never to sing Humpty Dumpty.*'*

These are some of the stories told to me by some British music teachers, allegedly in reference to some of the Kodály early-years training they have undergone. Such stories, I have found, whilst not universal, are not untypical. Even allowing for a considerable amount of misinterpretation, exaggeration or lack of context in their telling, and despite the vast strides made in recent years by fine organisations like the BKA, it seems that there remains a slight problem in British Kodály public relations. We must not ignore this fact, or blame it entirely on the other side. If we want the Kodály concept to thrive in this country, we need to think carefully about how we present it to the British public. I would like to start by looking at nursery rhymes.

I know, of course, that there are many good reasons behind the Kodály community's attitude of caution towards many traditional British nursery rhymes. I am not seeking to overturn that. The importance of giving our children high-quality folk music to sing, which initially uses simple rhythmic patterns and limited tone sets, in order that they should have a good chance of learning to sing in tune, and later to develop towards a conscious understanding of the music they are singing, is not in dispute. However, in our zeal to preserve our pedagogical purity, we may be in danger of sometimes throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

First, we must not use spurious pieces of historical theory to buttress our pedagogical claims. One such theory is that the Western pentatonic scale (consisting of tones and minor thirds), and most particularly the *so-mi* minor third, are fundamental to the subconscious of every musical culture in the world. This is simply not true. Some cultures may well give pride of place to pentatonicism and to the *so-mi* interval, and there may well be a good deal of that in British folk-song – but it is not universal. For instance, I have spent many years of my life studying Javanese classical music – which contains not a single minor third, and whose 'pentatonic' scales are far more varied and complex than anything in Western musical theory: for these people, '*so-mi*' is simply irrelevant. In multi-cultural Britain, we need to cultivate a certain humility with regard to the claim that 'everyone' does, or should, fit into a standardised musical mould.

Another dubious piece of theory holds that traditional British nursery rhymes are not 'real folk music', either because they are modern inventions or because 'they were originally spoken rhymes' to which a host of inappropriate tunes were added later. Of course, it may well be the case that our nursery rhymes do not reach back into the earliest wellsprings of the British musical consciousness, but two facts mark them out for me as genuine folk music. One is that many of these tunes and texts have been around for a very long time, i.e. since the 17th and 18th centuries. In the manner of much genuine folk music, tunes and texts have been frequently separated, changed, recombined, and revised over the centuries – so that the idea that a tune is disqualified because it was not originally attached to a given *urtext* is of dubious relevance. The other fact is that the 'folk' of this country still sing these songs! When a tune like *Polly Put the Kettle On*, for instance, has survived for some 250 years, and still resides in the collective memory of young mothers and their toddlers all over the country, then we are dealing with a cultural phenomenon which we need to treat with some respect.

Second, by avoiding British nursery rhymes, we may put ourselves in danger of failing to recognise the real musical and pedagogical qualities of many of these songs. Many British nursery rhyme tunes are cast in the mould of country dance styles: this often expresses itself in wide ranges, interval leaps, a strong sense of upbeat (anacrusis), and a lot of compound metres. As Kodály enthusiasts we may recoil in horror, but by doing so we may fail to see that it is precisely these qualities which can give these tunes such great pedagogical potential. There is no better way to develop a good sense of pulse in young children than by using upbeat-rich compound metres: it is the strong sense of anacrusis which contributes greatly to feeling the beat accurately, for instance through skipping and galloping. So, by taking these songs back to their roots in country dance, we unlock their massive potential as tutors in pulse and metre.

Another wonderful benefit of nursery rhymes is as conduits for learning about phrasing and structure. Contrast the phrasing patterns implicit in songs like *London*

(continued on page 16)

Above: By taking nursery rhymes back to their roots in country dance, we unlock their potential as tutors in pulse, metre, phrasing and harmony.

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The Trustees appreciate all the work done by Cyrilla Rowsell, on behalf of the Communications Committee, in preparing this newsletter.

Please email articles for future newsletters (Microsoft Word format) to Cyrilla Rowsell. (cyrilla@blueyonder.co.uk)

The copy deadline for the next issue is ***Monday 16 April 2018***

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(continued from page 15)

Bridge / *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (i.e. 8 + 8 beats: look for the marker words 'London' or 'Mary', respectively) with, say, *Polly Put the Kettle On* / *Hickory Dickory Dock* (i.e. 4 + 4 + 8), or *Jack and Jill* (8 + 4 + 4) – and you have a treasure-trove of vocabulary with which to talk to young children about phrasing. In movement terms, the parallel of musical phrasing is change of direction – and so English historical (Playford) dance, its phrasing delineated by simple but graceful floor patterns, provides a wonderful context in which to learn about the phrasing patterns embedded in nursery rhymes.

The reason that many British nursery rhyme melodies contain relatively wide leaps is that these songs are often harmonically-, rather than modally-conceived. This too can be harnessed to excellent effect. The melodic shapes of tunes like *Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?* (s-m-d'-s-m-d) or *Pop Goes the Weasel* (d-m/r-f/m-s-m-d) and their implied chord progressions (I | V7 | I | IV–V7–I and I–V7–I | I–V7–I | I–V7–I | IV–V7–I, respectively) are perfect tutors for basic three-chord functional tonal harmony, with which any child, to become a competent musician, needs to become fully conversant.

By saying all this, I am *not* suggesting that we should abandon the many positive things we have learnt from Kodály. But if we look carefully at our British nursery rhyme repertoire (or indeed, show tunes, jazz standards, or pop songs), we may find that we can use a good amount of it to excellent pedagogical effect, in a manner which is entirely in harmony with the best Kodály principles. I am *not* suggesting that, if our objective in any particular lesson is to teach children to sing in tune, *Hickory Dickory Dock* is the best choice; but I *am* suggesting that it may well be a really useful pedagogical song in other ways, if we look carefully at it.

This is a principle which I feel is important in music pedagogy in general. Far too often the Kodály concept, in a hypothetical pristine form, is placed in righteous opposition to the directionless mess that passes for much contemporary British music education. But this opposition between, as it were, sectarian *fundamentalism* and wishy-washy *liberalism*, falsifies itself by ignoring the vast complexities of the middle ground. If I may be forgiven for continuing the theological metaphor, I suggest that *critical ecumenism* may be a better way forward: looking at the variety of pedagogical sources out there and noticing how many of them, though not codified in the 'official' structures and repertoire of our Kodály subculture, are adaptable to and supportive of the fine pedagogical goals and methods which Kodály has taught us all.

One Kodály music teacher once asked me, 'Where do you find all these amazing songs?' Well, the answer is, of course, by trying to keep an open mind, looking around all over the place, grabbing what I think might work, and trying it out – in other words, exactly what Kodály himself did when developing his concepts. Doing so makes us Kodály enthusiasts into learners as well as teachers, gainers as well as givers, listeners as well as preachers, welcomers as well as judges, vis-à-vis the wider music teaching world – and demonstrates that fact to all comers. It enables us to be perceived less as saying 'Don't!', and more 'How about this?'. To quote Kodály's friend and biographer Percy Marshall Young, 'I believe Kodály would encourage you to start *not* where he stopped, but where he started.'[1]

1 Quoted in Peggy D. Bennett, 'Questioning the Unmusical Ways We Teach Children Music', in *Teaching General Music: Approaches, Issues and Viewpoints*, ed. Carlos R. Abril & Brent M. Gault (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016)

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