

APPLYING THE SUZUKI AND KODÁLY METHODS TO BASSOON INSTRUCTION

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Most bassoonists start learning the instrument with only the help of a fingering chart and a band director who likely does not play bassoon. Even if students are fortunate enough to have private teachers, the published methods currently available emphasize technique over musicianship, especially in the initial lessons. This approach encourages an unmusical, technical attitude towards bassoon playing. While these methods are effective once students are comfortable reading music, or for students who have switched to bassoon from another instrument, they are generally not appropriate for a true beginner who does not yet comfortably read music in bass clef.

As a private teacher in Austin, Texas, trying to teach my beginner students to read music and play the instrument at the same time was a challenge. Students of all ages struggle to effectively hear the sounds they produce when also reading music. Inspired by the wealth of knowledge and resources available for teaching beginning violin, I researched what I believe is an optimal approach to beginning bassoon instruction.

In this article, I lay out the foundations of a philosophy of bassoon instruction that emphasizes playing by ear and uses folk songs to teach fundamental concepts of technique and musicianship in order to encourage musical expressiveness from the first lesson. Drawing from the philosophies of the established Kodály and Suzuki methods, I hope to show that teachers can expect all students to perform simple music with a high level of artistry. In addition, I published a website (www.bassoonsolos.com) that includes sheet music and recordings of folk songs and solo repertoire as a resource for teachers and students. Ultimately, I aim to improve the quality of bassoon instruction, resulting in students with a deep appreciation and love of music.

Shinichi Suzuki believed that “any child is able to display superior abilities if only the correct methods are used in training.”ⁱ From this realization, he created his enormously successful Talent Education Method for violin, calling his method the “mother-tongue approach,” referring to the way children learn their native language. The Suzuki Method is now also used for teaching flute, recorder, piano, viola, cello, double bass, guitar, harp, and organ. Suzuki’s philosophy is based on the belief that “talent” is not genetically inherited, but is a result of education and nurturing. Suzuki encourages children to start their musical study as early as possible (preferably while still in the womb!), listen to recordings of their repertoire in order to learn the music by ear, and continue to review their repertoire once they move on to another piece or book.

Ideally, according to Suzuki, listening to music should begin at birth and formal training can begin at age three or four. Just as children hear words hundreds of times before learning to talk, they should listen to music, especially music they will later play, so they already know how it sounds before learning it on their instrument. Suzuki suggests that reading music should be delayed until children are proficient and competent at their instrument.

Repetition is also important. Once a piece is learned, it should continue to be played and refined, just as children keep using words they learn. Suzuki writes in *Nurtured by Love* that

In most cases, if one is able to play a piece of music, there will follow in rapid succession other pieces —this one, that one too, and many others. But just ‘playing through’ many pieces is not good training if there will be no one piece that is really played excellently. Just being able to say ‘I can play all these pieces’ is in fact insufficient, for it results in not developing musical sense, fine interpretation and so on.ⁱⁱ

Finally, Suzuki believed in positive encouragement. Every child learns at his or her own rate and must master each small step before moving to the next. Suzuki believed strongly that

“talent” is a result of environment, not something that is inherited. He says, “First you must educate the mind, then inculcate the skill.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Teachers can apply Suzuki’s philosophies to bassoon instruction. While it is impractical to begin bassoon study at an age earlier than nine or 10 due to the size of the instrument,^{iv} the other principles are applicable. First, beginning students can learn to play their repertoire by ear. In my approach, the first thing students learn, by rote, is a familiar American folk tune. Students should listen to recordings of folk songs in order to develop their ear for the song they are learning. Ideally, beginner students should play without reading music so as to become aware of the instrument and sounds they produce on it. According to Elizabeth Mills, a Suzuki expert who helped introduce the Suzuki method to the United States, reading music makes it more difficult to listen to others in an ensemble, control technique, play in tune, keep a steady tempo, and memorize music. She writes

The obstacles occur most frequently when a student approaches reading and learning to play an instrument at the same time. It seems best either to learn to read while using the voice only—as in the approach of Zoltan Kodály—or to learn to make music on an instrument and then proceed to learn to read, as in the approach of Suzuki.^v

If students are already in band they likely will read music in class. However, in private lessons, students can play their music from memory, developing their musical ear along with reading skills in class. Ideally, students should begin private lessons the year or summer before starting in band class so they can gain fundamental skills prior to playing in an ensemble. My goal is for my students to learn the set of folk songs included in Appendix A before beginning to learn to read music and printed repertoire.

Bassoon pedagogues can also apply the Suzuki principle of review, in which students are

expected to continue practicing all the pieces they have learned. Teachers can begin each lesson by asking students to play through their repertoire. Starting a lesson with familiar music is an excellent way to warm up the ears, fingers, lungs, and mental focus, and performing repertoire at a high level builds confidence. When students feel comfortable with the fingerings, they are able to focus on sound and pitch. Once students successfully perform all their review pieces, they can learn new material. Just as children repeatedly use the first words they learn in addition to learning new words, constant repetition of music allows students to continue to refine their skills.^{vi} Once students have mastered the set of folk songs and begin learning new repertoire, folk songs can continue to be used as warm ups in lessons. When learning a new scale, students can figure out how to play a familiar folk song in that key.

While the Suzuki Method was developed specifically for violin and has been adapted for different instruments, the Kodály Method is an approach to general music education. The Method, developed by Zoltan Kodály's colleagues and students based on his teachings, is most often used in schools as primary music training. Kodály believed singing is the foundation of music learning. He advocated for the use of solfège and hand signs, promoted using folk songs and music with "high artistic value" as the basis of music education, and encouraged coordinating music learning with the way a child naturally develops. Educators can adapt Kodály's philosophies for bassoon, most significantly the philosophy of the child-developmental approach.

The child-developmental approach uses sequencing that corresponds with a child's maturity and interests. The contrasting subject-logic approach presents information in a logical way, but not necessarily one that is compatible with how a child learns.^{vii} Lois Choksy, an internationally recognized authority on the Kodály method and founding member of the

International Kodály Society, maintains that most music teachers are accustomed to the subject-logic approach to teaching. For example, teaching rhythm typically begins with teaching the whole note first and then proceeding to half notes and quarter notes. This is mathematically logical, but very difficult for a child who may not understand how to feel pulse yet. In the child-developmental approach, rhythms that children are already familiar with are taught through folk songs and nursery rhymes. “Hot Cross Buns” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” for example, are made up of quarter and eighth notes. Thus, these rhythmic values should be introduced first to a student.

The child-developmental approach can be applied to the teaching of bassoon by using recognizable melodies and folk songs as the initial repertoire. Teachers should also consider which notes to teach first. Some methods begin with F2.^{viii} Although this logically is “easy” to play since it is an open fingering, it is a very unstable note on the bassoon, and often flat in pitch. In an effort to get this note high enough in pitch, students may use too much jaw pressure and develop a tight embouchure, rather than using proper air support. Using this method, students also may learn improper hand technique by keeping their fingers far from the instrument.

It is important to first teach sonorous notes on the instrument that encourage a beautiful sound and supple embouchure. These notes can be used to play folk songs and familiar melodies. The ideal initial range for a beginner is G1-E2 in G major. These notes are resonant on the instrument and encourage bassoonists to use a relaxed embouchure. “Hot Cross Buns,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and “Fais Do Do,” in C Major and G Major are all excellent initial songs that students can sing and play. The Suzuki Flute School also uses “Mary Had a Little Lamb” as the first piece in the first book.^{ix} Below is a list of folk songs, many of which are used in the Kodály method, and a suggested sequence and key for bassoon instruction.

LIST OF FOLK SONGS^x

Range: F1, G1, A1, B-flat2, B2, C2, E2, F2

Suggested Sequence

Hot Cross Buns: C Major
Mary Had a Little Lamb: C Major
Fais Do Do: C Major
Hot Cross Buns: G Major
Mary Had a Little Lamb: G Major
Fais Do Do: G Major
Twinkle Twinkle: G Major
Ring Around The Rosy: F Major
Yankee Doodle: C Major
London Bridge: G Major
Twinkle Twinkle: F Major
Joy to the World: F Major

Students should learn these songs by ear in this manner: the teacher models the song, and then the teacher and student sing it together. Some students may be uncomfortable singing, especially before they know and trust their teacher. It is important to sing with the student so he or she does not feel intimidated by singing alone. Students should never be forced to sing, or made to feel badly if they do not want to participate. Rather, the teacher can simply take a few moments each lesson to sing folk songs the student is working on, encouraging, but not requiring, the student to sing along. Eventually, students will want to join in. If students have trouble matching pitch, scooping up to the note is helpful. Also, sing at the child's voice range, not the range of the bassoon, which will likely be too low for students to sing. After singing, the teacher demonstrates the new fingering. Students should be encouraged to "sound out" the song, not just memorize the fingerings. I often have my students close their eyes or have them watch my face when I demonstrate so they are not simply memorizing the fingerings. When not in lessons, students should listen to recordings of the folk songs before playing them.

Students should play at first without articulating in order to encourage a constant use of air. Once students successfully perform songs without tonguing, teachers can begin a discussion of articulation. It is helpful to work on tonguing for a few minutes each lesson, using just the reed and bocal. I do not encourage students to use articulation on their songs until they are able to control their air and play without stopping. I urge students to use, as Kristin Wolfe Jensen states, “one taste bud” to lightly touch the reed in order to produce a legato articulation style.^{xi}

For beginning students with small hands, playing notes that require the right hand can be a challenge. For this reason, if a student is having trouble reaching the correct keys and covering the tone holes due to small hand size, the first song I teach is “Hot Cross Buns” in C Major. If students play a flat E, assuming they have a working reed, they must be encouraged to use faster air, not “bite” on the reed, in order to play that note in tune.

While I am not proposing a “Suzuki Bassoon Method” or the “Kodály Bassoon Method,” bassoon teachers can integrate the following philosophies from these methods. These are:

- Use the **child-developmental approach** (Kodály);
- Use **folk songs** as the initial repertoire (Kodály);
- Play **music by ear** (Suzuki and Kodály);
- **Listen to professional recordings of the repertoire** (Suzuki); and
- **Review repertoire** in conjunction with learning new material (Suzuki).

These principles allow students who have just begun to play bassoon to perform simple music at a high artistic level. The current methods available, although suitable for more advanced students, approach beginning bassoon instruction from a technical standpoint rather than introducing recognizable music in the first lesson. Encouraging bassoon students to play familiar music by ear helps them develop important skills for the rest of their musical careers. Honing

ear-training skills improves intonation and sound, the ability to play a list of memorized pieces develops memory, and the ritual of beginning every lesson with a “performance” of review material builds confidence.

My application of the philosophies of Suzuki and Kodály to teaching bassoon, though proposed for beginners, will improve bassoon instruction at all levels. Most importantly, I hope that these ideas lead to students who love music and have the ability to continue to play and appreciate music into adulthood, regardless of whether they choose to pursue music as an amateur or professional.

ⁱ Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love: The Classic Approach to Talent Education*, 2nd ed. (Smithtown: Exposition Press, 1983), 1.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 96.

^{iv} The *fagottino* is a miniature bassoon, appropriately sized for a 7 or 8 year old. Their restrictive price (approximately \$2,500) and the absence of rentals make them impractical for study. However, perhaps in the future these instruments will be more widely accessible in the US.

^v Elizabeth Mills, “On Reading Music,” in Mills, ed., *The Suzuki Concept: An Introduction to a Successful Method for Early Music Education* (Berkeley: Diablo Press, Inc., 1973), 140-144.

^{vi} Edward Kreitman, *Teaching from the Balance Point* (Western Springs: Western Springs School of Talent Education, 1998), 85-89.

^{vii} Louis Choksy, *The Kodály Method: Comprehensive Music Education From Infant to Adult* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 15-18.

^{viii} See, for instance, Don Lentz, *Lentz Method for Bassoon* (New York: Boosey, Hawkes, Belwin, 1941).

^{ix} Toshio Takahashi, *Suzuki Flute School, Vol. 1* (Princeton: Summy-Birchard Music, 1971).

^x All songs except “Joy to the World” are adopted from Choksy, *The Kodály Method*, 147-218.

^{xi} Kristin Wolfe Jensen, Preliminary Exercises Video, “Music and the Bassoon,” accessed October 13, 2014, <http://musicandthebassoon.org>.