

Singing The Dots

Report For The Australian Kodaly Scholarship

Jodie O'Regan - March 15 2018

"I was always amazed at how an intelligent adult was willing without the slightest protest to let himself be treated like a parrot."

Zoltán Kodály, on musical illiteracy in adult choirs

Activities Undertaken

In my career I have developed and delivered various introductory sightreading courses for adult choristers, drawing on the Kodály techniques and philosophies I studied at UQ and Cuskelly College Of Music. In the process of delivering these courses, and gaining feedback from participants, I have shaped the material to the needs, interests and capabilities of adult choristers - who are often older folks.

Kodály designed his approach for children so developing an older adult focused approach has taken some time and thought. I have been keen to share my materials with others who work with this age group. My initial proposal for the Australian Kodály Scholarship was to fund a stipend for a short sabbatical, allowing me time to polish and publish this material freely online, aimed to appeal to community choirs.

I began my sabbatical by talking to a number of directors of community choirs about what they and their choristers would like in a sightreading course and how to shape the course materials to best suit them. This led to an important insight which completely changed the direction and scope of my project. The directors told me that community choristers don't want to spend time learning sightreading exercises! One director said his predecessor was fired for devoting 30 minutes of weekly choir rehearsal to sightreading training. Another director had choristers leave her choir and accuse her of elitism when she introduced a similar learning program. It became obvious that my initial plan to publish a sightreading course for community choirs, however pedagogically sound, was going to be of limited appeal.

I was committed to finding ways for choirs to develop sightreading skills together. If a whole choir learns sightreading, the choir changes. The choir develops a new and shared vocabulary for relating to and learning repertoire in an efficient and literate way. Working together on sightreading means the director can choose repertoire that supports the sightreading learning, so new skills and ideas can be reinforced and applied throughout choir rehearsal.

Singing songs is at the heart of Kodály. A child-focused approach to Kodály uses a highly curated library of songs that engage the child and introduce musical elements in a child-focused sequence. An adult-focused approach could be the same. Given that I have composed works for community choirs for many years, I decided to compose a pedagogical collection of SATB choir songs to engage adult choristers and present

an adult-focused sequence of musical elements. This would allow choirs to learn sightreading through singing 'real' songs, bridging the gap between time devoted to learning sightreading and time singing actual repertoire.

For this to work, it was imperative that the songs were singable and tuneful and didn't feel like boring exercises. I also didn't want the music to feel artificial. Kodály's disdain for sentimentalised, manufactured faux-folk compositions guided me to tread very carefully in approaching the music. I composed and refined the melodies for the songs by singing them the way I sing folk songs, while bushwalking or washing the dishes, far from the piano or manuscript paper. I knew each tune was sufficiently catchy when Emlyn (husband/baritone/whistler) began whistling it around the house.

In June 2017, I ran a half day workshop with the South Australian branch of ANCA looking at the songs I had composed at that stage. A number of the participants were choristers who wanted to improve their own sightreading, and the songs and supporting material were not designed to build skills in one morning. This was a clarifying experience: in future workshops, I will focus on demonstrating the material for directors. Nonetheless, the feedback was very positive, the participants were enthusiastic and engaged, and the songs were successful.

Through the project, James Cuskelly provided expert consultancy and we communicated regularly online and met several times to consider the songs in terms of pedagogical use and appeal as choral pieces. James has vast experience teaching students of all ages, profound insight into Kodály methods and philosophies, and refined musical understanding. He was an excellent mentor and sounding board for this material and I'm extremely grateful for his specialised expertise and input into this project.

Over time I expanded the material into a choristers' book, with written introductions, short exercises, and explanations scaffolding each song. At James' suggestion, I adapted this to create a second edition aimed at directors, addressing how to use Kodály tools and techniques to teach the material.

To finish these two books a number of erudite folks - largely retired academics - kindly donated their time to proofread the manuscripts.

Outcomes Of The Project

The Books

At the time of writing there are two self published books available as pdfs - one edition for choristers and one for directors. They are a collection of sixteen choral pieces that progressively introduce musical elements, and combine sightreadable melodies with harmony lines to create full SATB arrangements.

Future Plans

Because the scope of this project changed and increased so dramatically, many of the activities I planned to undertake in the original timeframe have been moved back. During the course of this project I was also inspired with new ideas for future directions and possibilities. Consequently one of the main outcomes for this project is an exciting list of future plans.

Firstly, I would like to create some supporting videos for the books. It would be valuable for directors to be able to hear the songs, so I would like to record all the songs and share this recording online. I would also like to record and publish teaching demonstrations of some of the key Kodály concepts for non Kodály directors.

Secondly it would be valuable for me to test the entire book by working through the material with community singers, making revisions as necessary.

Thirdly a supplementary book of extension exercises and practise ideas might be helpful. I'm not sure at this stage if I would create this resource for directors to use in choir time, or for choristers to be able to use for home practise, or both. This wouldn't suit every choir, but for choirs who 'get the bug' it would be useful to have access to material to consolidate and extend their skill development.

Fourthly I would like to write two more books in the series, with similar supporting videos. This first book only covers simple **do** based pentatony within the range of a sixth. There are obviously many more musical elements to introduce to provide a thorough grounding in musical literacy.

Personal Outcomes

What started as a small polish 'n' publish project has turned into a major life direction! I discovered that composing adult-focused pedagogical songs is a very effective way for me to impart what I have learnt in my work with community singers. Through composing I am able to document and pass on my knowledge, conveying concepts that I would struggle to express verbally. During one session together, James commented that the vista before me - the expanse of possibilities that has opened up through this discovery - will shape my work for many years to come.

The Heart Of Kodály

"Below the age of fifteen everybody is more talented than above it."

"In grown ups this sickness (musical ignorance) is in most cases incurable."

Zoltán Kodály

Over my years of working with older adults, I have adapted the child-focused aspects of Kodály including the sequence of elements, the teaching rhythm, and the tools used, to better suit adults. This led to great discussions with James Cuskelly during our supervision sessions on whether what I do is strictly Kodály - especially given Kodály's insistence that music education must take place in childhood to be effective. James felt that the practise of Kodály needn't be an unexamined adherence to a rigid sequence. It can and should be about placing the needs of the student, whoever they are, as the central consideration in creating a joyous, meaningful, intelligently sequenced song and singing based music education. This project ended up being a journey to define the heart of Kodály.

Potential Benefits To The Australian Community

Overview Of Australians In Community Choirs

In 2013 the Music in Communities Network estimated there were around 2000 community choirs in Australia, a figure they arrived at by doubling the ANCA membership rate of 1000 choirs. In the choirs and singing groups I have worked with in the past 15 years, ANCA membership was closer to 10%. If my experience is representative, the numbers of choirs in Australia will actually be much higher than the report estimated. Although America is a different country, it's worth noting that research from Chorus America conducted in 2003 found that 23 million Americans - nearly 10% of the American population - sang in adult community choirs.

The Music in Communities Network report found that the majority of singers in Australian community choirs are over 45 years of age. Of these, nearly a third are over 65. A significant number of Australians sing in community choirs and these choirs are filled with singers who are middle aged and older. Given the Australian population is aging, the number of Australians singing in community choirs may well increase.

This report also identified that only a very small number of choirs require sightreading, however the majority of choirs consider reading 'useful'. This suggests that choirs value sightreading and, given access to engaging, effective resources, may well be interested in developing the sightreading skills of their choristers.

Adults Learning Music

"We learn music because it is good. We learn music because it is unique. We learn music because it stimulates creativity at a very high level. No other reasons for teaching music are needed."

Richard Gill

Writing about older adult choral activity is often framed in terms of extra-musical benefits. As a typical example, I have included in the list of references a paper by Lee, Davidson and Krause which explores a number of social ways older adults benefit from community singing. This is important, but I'm interested in how older adults can develop musical skills for musical outcomes. If, as Richard Gill says, it is enough to teach children music simply for music's sake, exactly the same can be said for older adults.

I don't want to trivialise the changes to aging brains, and the challenges for older learners, but I know older choristers can learn new musical skills. In my own experience, when I first started directing a choir of newly retired people, we huddled together and nervously sang simple rounds and three chord gospel songs. After ten years - with many choristers aged well into their 70s, we performed Vivaldi's Magnificat and toured Banchieri's Il Festino. I believe there are vast opportunities to explore, understand and develop choir based music education for older adults, and that Australia is in an excellent position to undertake this.

Promotion And Funding

During this project I have so far focused on creating musical materials. Now that the first book is completed, I can consider how to reach and appeal to community choirs. This will involve creating a website with the books and supporting materials, and implementing a communication campaign targeted to ANCA, soft media, social network groups and so on to promote the site.

I am proud to support community choirs by continuing to releasing pedagogical materials for free. To do this, I will need to organise funding and I'm currently looking at Patreon and other similar models.

Thank You

The simplest way to thank everyone involved in this project is to quote from the Acknowledgements page from *Singing The Dots - Book One*.

“Thank you James Cuskelly for being an extraordinary teacher, mentor, supervisor and friend. Thank you Jason Goopy and the National Council of the Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia for the funding, support and encouragement that made this work possible. Thank you to the proofreaders: Kerry O’Regan, Fergus O’Regan, Monica Christian, BJ Moore, Margaret Piech, Clare Faurie, Michele de Courcy and Wendy Stanton. You guys are awesome. Thank you to all the singers I have worked with in Adelaide and around Australia, with a special shout out to Voices In The Wilderness who were such willing Kodály guinea pigs. Thank you for teaching me how to teach music. This book couldn’t exist without you. Thank you to the community choir directors who kindly shared their thoughts and insights into their choirs’ learning wants and needs. A special thank you to Ben Leske whose reflections shaped the direction of this book. Thank you to members of the Australian Kodály community who have become beloved friends and inspirational teachers and colleagues especially Ali O’Connell who teaches adults so beautifully. Thank you to friends and family for all your practical, emotional, intellectual and musical support. Thank you to Emlyn for everything.”

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