

# 2009 OAKE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS: JORGE GARDOS

### MEETING KODÁLY: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN



Jorge Gardos giving keynote address. Photo by Beth Pontiff

To meet Kodály, let me take you on a personal trip, a little time travel.

The year is 1949, and the place is the Liszt Ferenc Music Academy in Budapest, Hungary. It is a difficult year for Kodály's efforts: the Academy just dropped solfège from its curriculum. Kodály is waging a strong campaign to restore it again, but it takes 3 years before the Academy picks it up.

He regularly complains about the low level of musicianship at the Academy, letting students graduate and giving them (as he called it) charity diplomas: "At the sol-fa competition we looked into a shocking void. Brilliant pianists who were unable to write down or sing flawlessly a simple one-part tune after hearing it 15 or 20 times ... They are not musicians but machine operators."<sup>1</sup>

We were sitting in his folk-music class, waiting for Kodály to arrive. It was a small class. This was going to be my first time to meet him. Students were talking about his physical fitness, his regular swimming routine, and his frequent ski trips. Soon Kodály arrived. He was

tall, distinguished looking, trim and energetic, sporting a small goatee and an artist's hairstyle similar to Liszt's, as you see it in pictures—an imposing figure, especially for us, a group of teenagers. We were sitting in a semicircle, fairly close to each other, all directly facing him. He never called us by name, but rather just looked at the person he expected to respond to him. Occasionally it caused some consternation for us, not being sure which of us was supposed to answer. He had a no-nonsense air about him; he always made it very clear what he considered important, leaving out what he considered superfluous. (In that academic culture there was no small talk between teachers and students anyway.)

We started analyzing the folk songs, line by line: looking at their structure, the scale, the rhythm, the ornaments, et cetera. Kodály felt strongly that it was our obligation to know Hungarian folk music and its core, the pentatonic scale, very well. "Pentatony is not only 'a segment' of the treasury of Hungarian folk songs but its very center."<sup>2</sup> "The pentatonic scale—the basis of the music of so many ancient peoples, perhaps even of all peoples—is alive and flourishing here, too."<sup>3</sup>

In most of the class we were singing through a large selection of folk songs. At the end of the class, Kodály gave us homework: memorize 10 or more folk songs for the next class. Some students started protesting that we were already overburdened with homework. Kodály said, "when you ride the bus, take your book out and look at the songs. Then try to hear them with your inner hearing (without singing it aloud) and memorize them right then and there. At home, you can check if you succeeded."

Later, in his essay "Who Is a Good Musician?" he wrote, "Today there is much talk about overburdening the students ... If he [the student] realized ... how much easier it is to learn every music subject, and how much time is won if he trains himself to be

a quick and sure reader."<sup>4</sup> Robert Schumann said, "You must reach the point where you can hear the music from the printed page."<sup>5</sup>

Kodály, to promote further his ideas, started organizing solfège competitions. He also encouraged extracurricular activities like participation in singing groups, organizing a folk ensemble, and so on. He also recommended studying the great ancient cultures, to understand how, in earlier times, music was taken very seriously, not as it is now, unfortunately.

A personal note: after trying his "silent" singing suggestion, I became a strong follower and advocate throughout my (violin) career, even using it with my violin students.

The Academy had a great faculty, a dream team of professors of international stature. Many of them were students of Kodály himself, sharing his philosophy and dedication to provide a strong music foundation. Among my professors were Pál Járdányi, Jenő Ádám, Antal Molnár, Bence Szabolcsi, and Erzsébet Szönyi.

Pál Járdányi, a student of Kodály, was the composer of the *Vörösmarty Symphony*, also of concertos and chamber music and champion of the implementation of movable *do*.

To look at the background of movable *do* and of the history of music notation and solfège, we need to go back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century:

Boethius was a Roman scholar, philosopher, and statesman. He wrote the *Principles of Music (De Institutione Musica)*. It provided the basics of musical theories recognized and still used until recently. He divided music into three classes:

- *Musica mundana*: harmony of spheres, concord of the elements, and consonance of seasons
- *Musica humana*: harmony of soul and body
- *Musica instrumentalis*: instrumental music (string, wind, and percussion)<sup>6</sup>

To name the notes, he used the first 15 letters of the alphabet. They were used for

the notes of a two-octave scale. It was called the Boethius notation. In more recent times, the use of the alphabet for note names became common among the non-Romance language countries, like United States, England, Slavic countries, et cetera.

Guido d'Arezzo, from around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, was a medieval music theorist. He wanted to create a system to help the singers to remember Gregorian chants. He used the first syllables of every line of an old hymn to St. John, the Baptist: *ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la*. *Ut* was changed later to *do* (maybe from *Domine*?) to make the note easier to sing and *si* was added as the seventh note. Finally *si* was changed to *ti* to avoid duplication of consonants. At the present, this is the only designation used for the notes in Romance languages. Guido d'Arezzo also created the staff notation. He claimed that his system reduced the 10 years normally required to become an ecclesiastical singer to a year.<sup>7</sup>

John Curwen, a 19<sup>th</sup> century educator, and one-time minister from England, based his work on Sarah Glover's *Manual of the Norwich Sol-Fa System*. He invented the hand signs for the notes. He also used the "principal of shifting tonic," creating the tonic sol-fa system. In 1853 he founded the Tonic Sol-Fa Association (later it was called the English Schools Music Association). In 1879, the Tonic Sol-Fa College was opened.<sup>8</sup>

Zoltán Kodály adapted and enhanced the system and called it movable *do*. He added names and signs for modified notes (sharps and flats) and created a whole education philosophy and method connected with it.

We are fortunate that Kodály was born in Hungary and not in France or Italy or another Romance language country; having the alphabet for absolute note names freed up the sol-fa syllables to be used for building musicianship.

Járdányi had the difficult job of training or "breaking in" the pianists and the string players and even the singers, including the ones Kodály called "machine operators." Bertalotti's (an 18<sup>th</sup> century singer and voice pedagogue) book, *Ötven (50) solfeggio* was one of the required class materials. It was used for both sight-singing two-part music, with all the G, C and F-clefs, and dictation. Járdányi set a high standard in his class, and

if it was not met, he sent students back to repeat the exam without hesitation.

Jenő Ádám was a choral conductor and composer of orchestral, choral, and chamber music works. Also a student of Kodály, he had a major role in the development and implementation of the Kodály "method." As I recall, he was a stocky gentleman, seemingly full of life. They said of him that the folk music "came pouring out of his pores." He taught two classes we had to attend: chamber chorus and instrumental performance of folk songs. In the second one, we were to learn to play the folk songs, getting the freedom, the style, and the abandon of folk music.

Antal Molnár was a composer and also a concertizing violist member of the Waldbauer Quartet, which introduced Bartók's early quartets. He was also a folklore researcher and published close to 20 musicology books. His book *Classical Canons* was published both in Hungary and in France and remained as a "textbook" for many decades.

He taught us harmony and gave us harmonic dictation. The emphasis was, after listening to his examples, to be able to identify the individual harmonies, or entire harmonic sequences, and write them down. He also gave us homework: memorizing short segments of operatic or symphonic works and playing them on the piano (e.g., Verdi's *Aida*, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*).

Bence Szabolcsi, also a student of Kodály, was a musicologist-historian. He was our music history teacher. He was known to be fluent in 10 or 11 languages and had books published in several of them. He had such an amazing overview of music history that he never brought any notes to the class. He also played excerpts from the operatic or symphonic works he was discussing without any scores or printed material.

Unique among historians, his course went all the way back to the primitive world. He emphasized (as Kodály did) that, in those early great cultures, music was taken very seriously, like during the times of the legendary Yellow Emperor Huang Di, who lived about 4,600 years ago in China.

Legend says that Huang Di asked one of his ministers to go to northern China, to a place known for its excellent bamboo, and bring some back. He ordered the bamboo to be cut to a specific length and declared the

note produced by it to be the Note of the Yellow Emperor or the Yellow Bell (according to one source, it is close to an F,<sup>9</sup> to another, closer to F#<sup>10</sup>). And anybody changing that note was considered an enemy of the empire. There is no account of the punishment rendered. [See Mr. Gardos demonstrating the bamboo sound in figure 1.]



Figure 1. Jorge Gardos demonstrating the bamboo. Photo by Beth Pontiff.

From the overtones of the bamboo pipe, the Chinese started a circle of fifths (each note "giving birth to the fifth above").<sup>11</sup> For example, if starting from F, you get a C, a G, a D, then an A. As they believed that the number 5 ruled the universe (5 fingers, 5 elements, 5 directions, 5 social classes, 5 colors, et cetera), they used the first five notes of the circle of fifths. To fit them into an octave, they used the cosmic number sequence of 81-54-72-48-64 and their ratios: 2/3-4/3-2/3-4/3 to build the panpipes, resulting in a sequence of F-C-G-D-A.<sup>12</sup> This was the birth of the pentatonic culture. Note of interest: they also believed that the numbers 3 and 2 symbolized heaven and earth respectively. Together they also represent the magic number 5 while the 2/3 ratio represents the interval of a fifth.

According to legend, the emperor's wife, Lei Zu, began cultivating silk worms, effectively starting the silk trade. As the silk routes or Silk Road developed, together with commercial trade, the pentatonic culture was spread west through continents

over about 5,000 miles and survived close to 5,000 years.<sup>13</sup>

Kodály wrote, “In recent decades, Pentatony has made many inroads into European music ... No doubt, with its primitive but virile energy, pentatonic melodies provided a refreshing novelty after the over-chromatized melodies of the previous period.”<sup>14</sup>

About 2,000 years later, in the great Greek culture, music was considered essential to educating the young. But, as Plato warned, not all kinds of music. He contends in his doctrine of ethos, “that music shaped the character not only of the individual citizen but of the state as a whole; music could in fact uphold or subvert the established social order, for—as Plato testifies in the *Republic*—“when the modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them.”<sup>15</sup>

In his *Republic*, Plato judges the different scales-melodies, what is good for the state and what corrupts it. He states that Mixolydian is for wailing, lamentation, it is not good even for women, and the Ionian and the Lydian are for the soft, the lazy. Only the Dorian and the Phrygian are acceptable, with the Dorian, the courageous is educated, while the Phrygian raises the peaceful, moderate man.<sup>16</sup>

The roles of the instruments were important also: kithara (a seven-string plucked instrument) was used in the cult of Apollo, the bright and pure god, connected with the sun; while the aulos (wind instrument) was used to worship Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy.<sup>17</sup>

Erzsébet Szönyi is a composer (recipient of Prix du Composition du Conservatoire, Paris), choral conductor, a top educator, and protégé of Kodály. A calm, even-tempered person, she never got frazzled from all the young egos ending up in her class.

In 1953, Szönyi created a curriculum of 100 lessons: starting with simple rhythms and two- or three-note children songs (*so-mi, la-so-mi*), introducing the hand-signals.

Szabolcsi writes that “in the form of fossils under our feet: the primitive man still lives among us in children’s songs. The child somehow relives the evolution of man; he does not learn the first songs from adults but rather from his young predecessors.”<sup>18</sup> “Csigabiga...’ (‘Snail, snail’) or other ‘lyrics’ may be different

but they all sound the same in Hungary, in Brazil, in Greenland or in Malaysia.”<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the lessons, Szönyi has the students tap multi-part rhythms and sing harmonies, two- or three-part pieces, and sections of compositions by Bartók, Debussy, Puccini, Ravel, Richard Strauss, and others with increasing complexity. Using those lessons, she was preparing us for practice-teaching at elementary schools.

Great artists always promoted singing and solfège, emphasizing how crucial it was for their career to get an early exposure. Some examples:

Van Cliburn, the only American pianist to win the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow: “Mother, a pianist who studied with one of Franz Liszt’s pupils, was my principal teacher until I entered Juilliard at age 17. She always made me sing the music before I played it.”<sup>20</sup>

Hans von Bülow, conductor, virtuoso pianist: “He who cannot sing, be his voice good or bad, should not play the piano either.”<sup>21</sup>

Stephan Grapelli, jazz violinist: “That is the only thing I learned in my life—solfège. (My father taught me.) He said “If you want to play the violin or the piano, the best thing to do to learn quick is to study solfège and to learn to read music.”<sup>22</sup>

Sigismund Thalburg, virtuoso pianist, composer: “It might encourage young artists to know that I studied singing for 5 years, under one of the most famous masters of the Italian school.”<sup>23</sup>

As a result of Kodály’s effort, in 1952, the Academy reinstated solfège as part of the academic curriculum. The Academy instituted other major changes, also: during the “Artist Preparations” (or “Artist-Teacher”) years, they added music education courses, like General Pedagogy and Teaching Method. Practical Teaching in Violin was also added. This was an unusual course: we had to sight-read and discuss several years’ worth of violin study material. The idea was to show that we were comfortable enough to demonstrate what we were teaching. Practice-teaching of solfège at elementary schools also became part of the standard curriculum.

The successful completion of all these courses was required for graduation. At the beginning, passing solfège was difficult for some string players and pianists, and even

for some singers who were new to sight-singing and dictation. But slowly, Kodály’s and the other professors’ great effort to give students a more solid music education started showing results.

We educators are a special brand of people. Our work has long-reaching effect, which may last a lifetime. We are able to help people to develop their talent, fulfill their ambition, and experience the wonderful high of music-making. But there may be a few instrumental teachers who dwell on technical difficulties so much that they intimidate students, especially the ones who would badly need some encouragement. Teachers like these could have prompted Yehudi Menuhin, the great violinist and humanist, to say, “It is as dangerous going to a teacher as it is to go to a doctor. If you can keep clear of them, you are better off!”<sup>24</sup>

Kodály’s teaching started spreading beyond the walls of the Academy: beginning in 1950, elementary schools started incorporating solfège into their curriculum. Due to his influence, soon it became standard in every primary school in Hungary. So when the next generation of music students came to the Academy, they brought a new standard of musicianship with them. Some of those elementary school students became fine educators, taking Kodály’s philosophy even beyond the boundaries of Hungary.

And Yehudi Menuhin, who warned us about teachers, became a Kodály admirer and follower. Inspired by Kodály’s work, his Foundation started the international MUS-E “Arts at School” program, concentrating on the development of the child from an early age through the arts.

In Hungary, the Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music was established in Kecskemét, Hungary, and started attracting teachers from other countries, including the United States. As they say, the rest is history.

And that brings us here to the Organization of American Kodály Educators. I am just slowly getting acquainted with the work done by the organization. I met some dynamic leaders from Minnesota and from the Kodály Music Institute in Boston. I also saw a class demonstration at the Peabody School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The creativity, the drive I found is very impressive.

Maybe that is why the OAKE mission statement (“enrich the quality of life of the people of the USA”) seems quite modest to me. You have the tools in your hand to provide the musical foundation to a future great composer or performer, to a new generation of chamber music players or orchestra members, and to a musically literate concert audience.

Kodály’s vision goes even further: “We must look forward to the time when all people in all lands are brought together through singing, and when there is a universal harmony.”<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

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2. *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 162.
3. *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 11.
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5. Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) p. 31.
6. Calvin M. Bower, *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 146.
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15. Lewis Rowell, *Thinking about Music* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), p. 52.
16. Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (Basic Books, 1991), pp. 77–78.
17. Calvin Bower, *Greek Music and the Greek Gods* (Grolier Electronic Publishing, 1993).
18. Szabolcsi, *A Zene Története*, p. 10.
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20. Scott Simon, “Van Cliburn: Treasuring Moscow after 50 Years” (NPR Weekend Edition,

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21. *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 193.
22. Matt Glaser and Stephane Grappelli, *Jazz Violin* (New York: Oak Publications, 1981), p. 23.
23. *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 193.
24. Glaser and Grappelli, *Jazz Violin*, p. 11.
25. *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 215.

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