

Teaching Students To Sing in Tune: Kodaly for the Rest of Us

by Becky O'Brien

“Younger children are often not aware of the tunefulness of their singing, so we can keep them singing without self-consciousness while we enable them to improve.” — John T. Lyon, 1993



Every child is a singer. Every child needs to see themselves in what we do to be excited to sing and become a stronger music maker. We want students to match pitch using their head voice, so we must give them material to sing utilizing their head-voice range. The following examines techniques and ideas for teaching tuneful singing (Danyew, 2021).

General Vocal Range Guide:

0 - 4 years = Sing mostly above an 'E' or 'F' above 'Middle C' (E4 & F4)

5 - 6 years = Sing mostly above a 'D' by 'Middle C' (D4)

7 - 10 years = students will be able to match more than an octave. Most can match from 'B' below 'Middle C' (B3) to about a 'G' (G5) an octave and a half above

10 years - Voice Change = students will match about an octave and a half from about 'A' below Middle C (A3) to about an F or G a 14-15th above. (F5 & G5)

Why would we follow those suggestions above? Think of it like this: Larger instruments sound lower notes. Smaller instruments sound higher notes. The biological adult female's vocal cords are approximately the size of a penny. The biological adult male's vocal cords are about the size of a nickel. The average elementary child's vocal cords are about the size of a dime. Our instrument varies as does our vocal range.

What are some warm up techniques and ideas for helping students to explore (and consistently find) their vocal range using the head voice: yawns, sirens, sigh patterns all utilizing various vowels sounds; echo and chants with various sounds, poems, characters phrases which make use of exaggerated vocal inflections; imitations of animals with scoops, rhythmic variances; animated storytelling, fingerplays, and nursery rhymes; any vocalizing focuses on exploration and sliding to specific pitches/places; straw breathing for older elementary to promote development of diaphragmatic utilization; and diverse percussive sounds with sustained and short lengths and patterns, adding various pitches for layered development. (Danyew, 2017)

As we desire students to match pitches and produce a lovely tone, we must give them listening experiences which inspire those tones. High quality modeling becomes crucial for the developing ear. Students often learn by repetition. Students listen to teachers, recordings, their peers, their family, and other community and professional groups as they grow in their musical repertoire of sounds. What makes a good model? Of course the accurate pitch which is centered and easy to listen to; but we also want to keep in mind that appropriate pitch tessitura with head voice utilization is imperative. The model should be in the head voice with a tone which reflects tensionless sound. A clean singing, which means one without scoops, sliding, or hard glottal attacks until pitch matching and good technique has been established. To match pitch, the most healthy Elementary school students singing should have a warm and light tone which is free of vibrato and therefore the model with which they learn should, at least at first, reflect those qualities. (Lyon, 2023) “Children sing best with voices that are like their own or with adult voices or instruments that have a light quality as similar to their head voices” John T. Lyon.

In using high quality recordings, whenever possible use children's voices in a key that is accessible for the age: Be mindful of the tessitura or the general range of pitches found. Finding recordings with a pleasant, relaxed tone. If possible, make your own recording. It offers you the option of modeling it well once instead of multiple times. Sometimes this is the best we can offer when schedules are restraining. (Lyon, 2023)

Simple songs, once learned can be a tremendous asset in developing vocal skills utilizing repetition either as a warm up, a classroom routine, a brain break, a transition, a winding down activity, or as a goodbye tradition. Students enjoy quick 2-3 'sing through' songs which get them either excited for the next activity or prepared to leave, etc. when done consistently at the same interval in the class routine. Once established, the songs can be interchanged and new songs can easily be added.

Help students muscle memory for pitch matching by presenting and practicing songs/games in the same key. This provides consistency for the skill we are asking them to develop, as it provides the same repeated muscle requirement each time we use that resource. It sounds simple enough, but consistency is helpful for student growth and understanding. (Danyew, 2017)

Let's get the body to assist with matching pitches and making music beautiful! Adding simple movement can help students to free up their tone, can help their voice follow the movement, can help them channel their entire body into the song and focus their full energy into making music, can reinforce rhythm, phrasing, dynamics, etc. Moving to music feels good and as stated, adds musicality and expression to experiences. See example below. (Danyew, 2021)

Example Adding Movement to folk song:

GREAT BIG STAR 

Great big star, way over yonder
(hands apart, show far away going over)

Oh my little soul's gonna shine, shine!
(bring hands in close to body)
(make two circles - one for each "shine")

While it sounds overly basic, we need to remember that encouraging students to sing with others helps them to match pitch. Proximity with hearing and feeling how others their age sing, especially if they can model well, can further help students succeed with vocal control and pitch matching. If you can arrange strong singers close to those who need extra support, this could prove very beneficial for them. (Lyon, 2023)

Remember to support intentional listening. This too sounds basic, but is easily forgotten. Encouraging students to notice detail about the piece, to find patterns, to find one word, picture, or feeling that describes the sound. Allow students to share ideas and their discoveries. Sometimes helping students to listen consciously can change the experience and make it more understandable.

Repeated musical patterns and utilizing ostinatos give students many opportunities to find that pitch, hear it, feel it, and to do it over and over again to allow for muscle memory to support them. Pentatonic songs, because of the absence of half steps, is usually an easier starting point for students who need pitch support. Ear Training with these intervals can prove valuable. In the example below, students get four patterns which are repeated, providing them experiences to 'do over' and improve their pitch control. This type of song makes singing accessible to many. (Danyew, 2017)

After students experience success in a group, they can take turns leading in a call and response (or leader and echo) songs. This is excellent SEL training as either part of a small group or as a volunteer with a solo. See example below using the song from the prior movement example.

Another tactic to help pitch awareness sounds backwards from our normal process. Instead of having a student match our pitch, match 'their' pitch. If you get the luxury, or can arrange it, work with a child one-on-one for a short time, it can be helpful to match a child's pitch when they are singing. This gives them a chance to hear and feel what it's like to sing in unison with another voice. This can be useful for singers who are capable of singing

Find the Repeated Melodic Patterns

Rocky Mountain

(Beth's Notes, 2023)

'Great Big Stars' - Unison/movement - to small group/solo LEADERS

Solo or Small Group Example - Call & Response

GREAT BIG STARS

AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

(Beth's Notes, 2023)

correct intervals, (or correct directional singing) but may still be struggling with pitch-matching. Once you have matched the child's pitch and repeated the pattern with them, try moving the pattern up or down and see if they can match (Danyew, 2021).

Two additional ideas which can be helpful with older singers are first to model sliding up and down to specific pitches and intervals for students to echo and 'feel' to fix trouble spots. Once they have conquered the interval sliding, practice the interval without sliding. Secondly, rote teaching with older students can sometimes alleviate pitch awareness in a positive manner. By removing the visual staff, we not only force students to listen, but we also disconnect their knowledge of the pitch name from the production of that pitch. Many older students have an unplaced belief they can or cannot sing specific pitches. Once the element of the pitch name is removed, we can help them to focus on hearing and finding the pitch rather than their perception of the named pitch. It can be a delightful time when, once singing is successful, to add the visual staff and allow them to learn of their accomplishment by reading the same piece.

Side thoughts for Music Teacher Voice Care: Rest is key. Schedule demands can be detrimental to our own vocal health. Ideally we should give our voice 10 minutes of rest every hour we use our voice. Hydrate! Give yourself a little treat - as hard candy and gum can be helpful for keeping the vocal cords wet. (A few good choices with slippery elm would be lozenges and Throat Coat tea.) Do not use medications or lozenges which contain any numbing materials as they may cause one to overuse, push or strain vocal folds and increase the risk of injury. Remember to speak in the upper portion of your vocal register. Refrain from using your 'fry voice'. Limit caffeine

and use of anti-inflammatory substances. Make use of amplification systems. Use high quality recordings as you are able - making a recording of yourself can save lots of repetitive use in a day! Check for and treat allergies. Some issues, like acid reflux can be 'quietly' harmful if we are not aware of them. (Danyew, 2017)

Most importantly, keep encouraging students. Engage them in music making. Make learning fun for all. We need to be our students' cheering section, especially as they grow a bit older. They need to know we believe in them. Musical development is a process that takes time. Sometimes it takes a lot of time. The older a student is, the longer it may take them to be able to successfully match pitch. They will mirror us in our passion for singing and our desire to learn. Let's learn well.

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Biography

Becky O'Brien received a bachelor's degree in General Music Education, Choral Education and Music with a Piano Performance Emphasis from UW-LaCrosse in 1993. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in Music Education from UW-Stevens Point. Upon graduation from UW-LaCrosse, she taught Elementary General Music, Choir and Band in the Arcadia School District and then K-5 General and HS choral music in the LaCrosse Public School District from 1994-2002. After moving to northeastern Wisconsin, Becky taught Elementary General Music in the Kaukauna Public School District, Middle School Band at St. John Sacred Heart, and Early Childhood Music at the Lawrence Community Music School from 2003-2011. From 2011-2013 Becky taught Choral and General Music at Clintonville Middle School. And then returned in 2011-2018 to teach HS Choir at Kaukauna High School. This is Becky's fourth year teaching Elementary General Music in the Appleton Area School District.