

MUSIC TEACHER

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NEW DIRECTION The NCO's Catherine Arlidge



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They say a passion for music is frequently passed down the generations but rarely can it come through merely reading the diaries of a long-dead grandmother. Yet for violinist and Colourstrings teacher Rachel Erdos, reading the diaries of her Hungarian grandmother, who studied with Kodaly and ran music kindergarten classes during the war, proved an inspiration which led her to train in the Colourstrings method.

Classes start children off at around the age of 18 months and can follow through to conservatoire level. It is a child-centred approach, Kodaly-based and concentrating wholly on music with children first subconsciously learning musicianship through singing, to develop an inner ear, before starting an instrument.

Central to the approach is the role of play and imagination – songs have been composed to explore different musical concepts - rhythm, pitch, melody, dynamics, tempo, character, form and style – leading to an intrinsic understanding of how music works.

By 5 or 6, children learn to sight sing, along with the basics of notation and at this stage they can choose an instrument.

It was being a late starter and having some poor early teaching herself that led Erdos to look for a more inspiring method.

“I knew I wanted to teach and after Oxford, Trinity and study in Montreal, coming across Colourstrings was a revelation because it offers such a completely intelligent and integrated approach” she says.

“When children come to pick up an instrument they already know the tunes they are going to play, they are already inside and that makes so much sense. All the characteristics of a good musician; inner hearing, technique, emotion and expression, listening, understanding and creativity, are developed in constant equilibrium”

Children's capacity for enjoying repetition never ceases to amaze me, but Colourstrings believes children are reassured to find familiar melodies reappearing in instrumental lessons, giving them confidence and a feeling of success from the very first time they pick up an instrument.

In Finland it's been a core part of the state music education for more than 30 years; here it has been perceived as the preserve of the privileged but some education authorities in the UK are now introducing Colourstrings into their schools. Demand for Colourstrings-trained teachers outstrips supply. The Colourstrings new teacher training initiative is designed to make training more accessible for teachers in Britain. One of the new projects which started this autumn is at the new Kings Cross Academy primary school, where all pupils will enjoy the benefits of early years music making and instrumental lessons using the Colourstrings integrated approach.

"The system appealed to me for its efficiency" she says. "Very complex ideas and techniques are simplified, not dumbed down, so they are within the child's sphere of understanding."

It is completely based on music but it takes into account every part of a child's development.

"We are setting out to teach musicians but we are also helping develop many other parts of the personality too ... in addition to individual lessons, group lessons and orchestra allow children to encourage each other as well as encouraging practice. Learning an instrument is hard and it's important to see that others struggle too. It teaches team work, waiting your turn, problem solving, helping others, listening. Because of the intelligence of the materials and because it is well taught, by well-qualified teachers you get very well set up players."

Erdos is pleased to see these qualities developing in her charges and musically she is moved by the way they play and sing. “We all have our own voice when we sing” she says “but other people have commented on this to me as well, when they play, pupils have an individual voice; the sound comes from inside them and that’s a very important thing to be able to develop so young.”

Erdos is currently enjoying maternity leave from running the Colourstrings music school at Roehampton University and, in a year’s time, her son Isaac, now two months old, can be sure he will be attending kindergarten classes with her.

Erdos’s grandmother would have been proud her grand-daughter is not only continuing a family tradition but also spreading the message of the importance of Early Years music education.

www.colourstrings.co.uk

- The Szilvay Foundation is a charity which promotes Colourstrings and provides teacher training. It also runs projects in private and state schools throughout the UK and Ireland and provides INSET training. It can be contacted at
- www.colourstrings.co.uk