



Mary Palmer

The Method Dilemma in Elementary Music Education

by Peggy Bennett

In the following guest column, Peggy Bennett presents some helpful thoughts for our consideration as we develop our own methodologies for teaching music. She emphasizes teachers' responsibility for evaluating and making choices that "fit" their personalities, teaching situations, and goals for student learning.

Do you consider yourself a specialist in a particular methodology? Do others consider you a specialist even if you don't? Have you had negative as well as positive experiences as a result of being considered a specialist?

As the practice of specializing in a method has gained in popularity among elementary music teachers, the advantages of such a choice have been clearly apparent in many of our classrooms. The disadvantages of specializing, however, are also worth noting, because they have affected how we see ourselves as colleagues and as professionals: "She is a Kodaly teacher... That district is all Orff... That sounds like an Education Through

Music (ETM) workshop." The generality and casualness of these statements exemplify the "buzz word" status with which most of these methods are being treated and identified.

What Is Method?

Very simply, "method" is the way in which students are led from one point to the next in their skill development and conceptual understanding. Ideally, we *each* use method in our teaching. While materials, techniques, theories, and curriculum aid in accomplishing learning, they are not the same as method.

Because method is the nature and sequence of experiences that are intended to result in students' learning, using the same term in reference to any one of several popular approaches can become confusing. To distinguish between generic method and specialized method in this writing, the latter reference will be capitalized.

How Do We Choose?

When we decide to seek training in a particular Method, what factors affect

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our choice? How do we decide which Method we will use? Realistically, our own personal preferences may play the strongest role in this selection process. Consider the following reasons and their applicability to your choice of Method:

- The caliber of musicianship expected and practiced during teacher training
- The level of musical challenges a musical potential within activities
- The quality or appeal of the song material and recordings that are used
- The availability and convenience training and materials
- The appeal, enjoyment, or "fun" the musical activities
- The degree of decorum practiced activities and teacher-training sessions
- The cleverness or "flashiness" of materials
- The camaraderie among the people involved
- The organization and clarity of principles and sequence
- The freedom and flexibility in working within the Method
- The degree and quality of movement required for activities
- The charisma/expertise/role model of the clinicians/instructors
- The personal feeling of success within teacher-training sessions and your classroom

These are only a few examples of preferences that may draw us toward studying a Method or toward choosing one Method over another. While some could argue that personal and professional preferences should be secondary to pedagogical validity in selecting a Method, many would agree that good teachers are "at home" with whatever methods and materials they have selected to use. And, teachers must find the method/Method that works best for them. This necessary compatibility between method and Method can be professionally and personally difficult for teachers within a district that mandates the use of only one Method.

Few of the reasons for preferences listed above relate directly to students' learning needs. Is there a point at which *our* training can become incompatible with our students' needs? Can *our* need for structure, freedom, sequence, or creativity block our sensitivity toward and become detrimental to students' learning? Is there a point at which the cleverness of materials or

activities actually *detracts* from students' learning?

The Pros and Cons of Method

With the increased popularity of Methods has come the casual use of their titles by parents, administrators, and teachers who may have little background or knowledge about the principles involved. To some extent, recognition has brought distortion. Misconceptions and misunderstandings of each Method are common.

For many of us, the training and study that accompanies Method specializing has been professionally and personally rewarding. Consider these advantages:

- A network of teachers who have common goals and experiences can provide a valuable support system for us, whether we are new or veteran teachers.
- Specialized training is available and focuses on developing specific skills and understandings, often resulting in our continued study through various levels of a program.
- With advanced training, we can develop increased organization, continuity, and definition in our line of thinking, study, and teaching.
- The Method becomes a convenient label for us to indicate a recognizable body of experiences, techniques, and materials and to quickly define what and how we are teaching.
- For some, being considered a specialist can equate with being considered "progressive." Also, our professional initiative is demonstrated as we invest our time, money, and energy to study a Method in order to improve our teaching.
- The added prestige of certification in a Method can add to our self-esteem and, in some cases, can lead to job advancement.
- Expertise and guidance are provided at a time when we are most open to suggestions and implementation, and the training programs serve as much-needed refresher courses to our undergraduate methods classes.

Valid as these advantages are, nearly every one of them has a correlating disadvantage:

- Our excitement and relief at finding a method that "works" can sometimes appear as "missionary zeal." This gleeful enthusiasm and the proselytizing that may accompany it can be a "turn-off" to colleagues.

- When we band together to share and study a Method, we can appear cliquish and exclusive to other professionals.

- Some of us presume that choosing *one* Method means disagreement with all others: "If this is right, then that must be wrong." Feelings of rejection and alienation can be strong when a colleague vigorously endorses a practice in which not all are interested.

- Competition among Methods can also occur as organizers vie for enrollment and attendance at courses, workshops, and conferences. To some of us, enrollment figures equate with the success and the popularity of the Method.

- In short exposure settings, the focus tends to be shifted more to the techniques and materials than to the *method* of the Method. Therefore, the Method itself can be misrepresented during its dissemination.

- Sometimes critics base their judgment on impressions drawn from brief observations or from knowledge of a particular teacher's work then generalize their criticisms to indict any teacher using that Method.

- Unfortunately, our enthusiasm can sometimes close our minds to the strengths and weaknesses that exist within *each* Method. Rather than being "cautious consumers," some teachers take an instructor's "word" for what is being taught, what is being learned, and the validity of the approach (Bennett 1986). Questions from teachers are not always encouraged.

What role might any of us have played in perpetuating these negative "side-effects" of method specialization? Is it possible to study a Method, yet remain open to investigating the most effective method for our students?

What Can We Do?

While at this point the argument *against* specializing may seem fairly strong, the ideal is to create a professional atmosphere in which we accept and respect each other's choices for our classroom methods. Some of us have proudly avoided specializing in any *one* Method by saying that we use "what works" from all of them. To eclectic teachers, this approach signals a broader, more ecumenical view of music education. To other professionals, however, eclectic teaching implies

the lack of *any* method of instruction, and, additionally, the misuse of techniques and materials from *each* of the various Methods.

Is there a way to retain the positives of Method specialization in elementary music education without also promoting the negatives among our colleagues? Awareness and sensitivity would seem to be most important first steps to minimizing misunderstandings and alienations among professionals. Furthermore, some personal goals regarding our own work and the work of others may help maintain a perspective on the importance of and balance between method and Method in our classrooms:

- *Look for the principles which underlay a Method.*

The principles will help us reconstruct the ideal of the Method while the techniques and materials alone may not.

- *Maintain curiosity.*

Are we really teaching what we think we are teaching? We must remain open to rethinking our own and others' methods and Methods.

- *Be a watchful teacher.*

Good teaching involves looking for clues from students to help us know what they see, hear, and understand.

- *Distinguish between music experiences and music study.*

Unless students are focused and engaged to examine a concept or skill, they are merely experiencing singing, listening, or moving. Experience does not equal study.

- *Distinguish between our goals and students' needs and understanding.*

How flexible are we at adjusting our pacing, materials, and methods to meet students' learning needs? Are we more intent upon following a Method than upon searching for the method that becomes apparent from our students' learning patterns?

- *Ask questions at courses and workshops.*

Good teachers, like good doctors, should welcome the opportunity to clarify and explain the reasons behind their selected practices. The valid challenges and subsequent improvements that come as a result of teachers' questioning a Method are important and should be encouraged by teacher trainers.

- *Be experts in our own classrooms.*

Good teaching involves looking for clues from students to help us know what they see, hear, and understand.

While suggestions from experts can be helpful and educational, those experts have not been in our classrooms, and they have been known to change their minds about their own theories.

- *Be researcher-teachers.*

By combining the resources of our own intelligences and our intuitions, we can take a research approach by becoming "learning detectives" for our teaching methods and Methods. By always investigating whether or not our students are learning what we think we are teaching, the fragile balance between choosing a method and choosing a Method in our classrooms can be better maintained.

Reference

Bennett, Peggy. 1986. "When Method Becomes Authority." *Music Educators Journal* 72, no. 9: 38-40.

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