

The Orff Method

Carl Orff was born and lived in Germany from 1895 until his death in 1982. Orff studied at the Munich Academy of Music and became internationally famous with his *Carmina Burana* first performed in Frankfurt in 1937.

With the help of some of his colleagues, Carl Orff developed the Orff-Schulwerk, (German word meaning ‘works for schools’) between the 1920’s and the 1950’s. It was Orff’s love of dance that led to his meeting with Dorothee Gunther, who opened up a school for dancers (the Guntherschule) that ultimately led to Orff’s composing the Schulwerk.

Orff believed that rhythm was the strongest element in music so when asked to compose works for children he focussed on rhythm. His approach has been called ‘elemental’ as it starts from the simple and works towards the complex. For this elemental approach, Orff took his model from our early, primitive cultures that meld dancing, singing, chanting, and use of body percussion all into the one process of the enjoying music. As he observed, children naturally have this ‘basic’ approach to music.

Orff’s method has parallels with both the Suzuki and Kodály methods in that they all share the *rote-before-note* concept. Orff designed his musical exercises to be learned and imitated, and used as a vehicle to experience musical concepts like beat, meter, tempo and rhythm, but also as role models for improvisation. The Orff process is stated as: observe, imitate, experiment, create.

Like Kodály, Orff developed several ‘tools’ to accomplish his musical goals. The first tool was to utilize the body as an instrument of percussion. Any part of the body can be used to express the beat or rhythm, so the body could function as the main instrument, or as an accompaniment to singing. Orff developed 4 different body percussion sounds, that move from low to high; namely stamping, patschen (which is thigh slapping), clapping and snapping. These skills need to be introduced in a sequential way, consistent with children’s development. Movement is very important in the Orff method.

The second tool was the voice, that can chant, speak or sing. In the Orff-Schulwerk the beginning songs are **pentatonic** (a scale which only has 5 notes), just as are used in the Kodály method with a sequential introduction to ‘do, re, mi, sol, la’, before the minor 2nd interval, associated with ‘fa’ and ‘ti’ are taught.

The third tool Orff developed is known today as the Orff Instrumentarium. He chose barred instruments including xylophones, metallophones and glockenspiels, recorders, and some percussion instruments, and had them designed to his specifications. The rationale behind the choices of instruments was to offer a variety of timbres (which means tone colour). The xylophones are made from wood and have a dry sound, compared with the metallophones, made from metal, that have a liquid, wet sound, and the glockenspiels have a distinctly high, bell-like sound. The Instrumentarium also offers different textures, with a variety of percussion instruments, and all are relatively easy and fun to play.

Orff’s Schulwerk compositions are complete with an Introduction, Accompaniment and a Coda. They serve as role models, providing a melodic and rhythmic vocabulary children can listen to, imitate, and go on to experiment, change and create their own compositions. Orff uses simple **motifs**, or ‘tunes’ that are taken from the melodies of songs children sing. He most often uses ‘**bordun** accompaniments’ (which means open 5th’s, like C and G, or F and C, or A and E) as these sound well with pentatonic melodies, and lend themselves to improvisation. To complete the composition, Orff added short introductions, and a closure or Coda. In this way the children are also introduced to ‘form’ in music. With this method, Carl Orff’s ultimate goal was to make music ‘live’ for children.

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