

Pre-Instrumental Training 3

Colourkeys

by Stephen Baron

COLOURKEYS is a Kodály-based approach to teaching piano beginners which takes as its model the much more widely used Colourstrings teaching approach developed by the Szilvay brothers, Geza and Csaba. It is now widespread throughout the world.

Both Colourkeys and Colourstrings follow the premise adopted by Kodály: the development of the musical ear must come before instrumental skills are attempted. In an ideal situation, a child will spend several years attending a music kindergarten where accurate pitching, solfa singing, pulse, rhythmic understanding and simple 2-part singing are all nurtured. The musical material used is largely folksong, i.e. music that has stood the test of time with its uncanny feeling for structure, melody and rhythm. With these skills in place, instrumental study can begin – normally around the age of six. But the skills gained in the kindergarten classes are not forgotten. Children attend a weekly musicianship class in addition to their instrumental lesson.

Children are taught the piano either individually or sometimes in pairs for the first few years (interestingly with no loss of progress as a result of the shared lesson, but considerable gains in musicianship and the not insignificant issue of companionship!). Instead of the common middle C approach, Colourkeys starts with the hands placed one octave above and one octave below middle C – a more natural position for the arms. A colour band is placed behind the keys to indicate which octave is to be used: the four octaves are green, blue, red, and yellow (introduced with a picture of a bear, father, mother and bird respectively), representing the four octaves from C, two octaves below middle C, to the C two octaves above. The child immediately recognizes the colour of the notation and therefore in which octave they should play.

At first the child learns a free arm movement by playing clusters of notes and letting the whole arm weight drop gently onto the keys with a flexible wrist (I call it 'swan's wings': a movement we practise away from the piano first). Basic rhythms (minim, crotchet, and quavers in pairs) are then introduced, employing the same free arm movement. Very soon the child is ready to attempt pitched notes – not using the awesome 5-line stave, but instead a one line stave where both hands read identical notation (i.e. the C one octave above middle C hangs from a single line in the same way as the C one octave below middle C).

All the work undertaken by the pupil and teacher follows the Kodály principle of hearing the music in your head before you play it. Thus at this stage the child will be expected to clap the rhythm of a piece or play it on percussion (very popular), using the rhythm names TAAA, TA, TITI and a sssh for a crotchet rest. Then they will sing the melody, using handsigns and singing tonic solfa (DO=C, RE=D etc) and finally play it. Soon the child will be mastering DO RE, then DO RE MI tunes and the stave gradually increases to the full 5-line stave. Many of the pieces in Colourkeys are folksongs and will be familiar to the child from music kindergarten classes. This frees up time for the teacher to concentrate on matters other than note-reading, and also gives the child a feeling of confidence when playing the piano from the very start. The use of traditional note-names (ABCD etc) alongside solfa is gradually introduced – similar to bringing up a bi-lingual child.

The security with which simple Colourkeys pieces are played, both rhythmically and technically, allows the teacher to introduce concepts to the pupil which in more conventional teaching often appear much later:

■ Independence of hands:

This occurs already in the very early stages of Colourkeys and is made possible because the child already has a developed inner hearing ability. The whole range of the keyboard is also explored at the first opportunity: this is important as it allows the child's enthusiasm for piano sound to be captured while it is still a new experience.

■ **Phrasing and dynamics:** Colourkeys pieces are printed without phrasing and dynamics. The pupil is asked where they would breathe in the piece when they sing it (the voice is almost always infallible) and phrase marks then added. In a similar way, the pupil is told to experiment with lous and softs and, when they have found a pleasing way of using the dynamics, to write them into the music. This creative approach often brings the music much closer to the pupil.

■ **Transposition:** Many of the pieces learnt will be transposed into different keys – not a problem for children who know their solfa and 'feel' the intervals between the notes.

■ **Musicianship:** Pieces are used for various musicianship exercises: singing one hand while playing the other, or clapping the rhythm of one hand and singing the other etc

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► ■ **Playing in canon:** As large numbers of pieces are folksongs and pentatonic, they make perfect canons, with either two children playing in canon, or a child singing their piece before or after they have started playing (in effect the beginnings of chamber music).

■ **Ostinati:** Simple rhythm patterns are added by a second child, while a piece is played.

■ **Chromatic alteration:** Pieces using a simple group of notes can be chromatically altered (the choice of note left to the child) e.g. CDEFG becoming CD^bEFG

throughout the piece. This completely changes the character of the piece and the child is unwittingly drawn away from the ubiquitous C

major into other sound worlds. There is also the possibility of starting a C major piece on another white note – a way into the church modes (as they only use the white notes on the piano) or transferring a CDEFG piece to the whole-tone scale.

■ **Improvisation and composition:** Because of the simple nature of many Colourkeys pieces, children often feel at ease with the concepts of improvisation and composition, and are able to write very competently or improvise using the same musical vocabulary as the pieces they are playing at the time. Ostinato-based ideas with simple rhythm/note patterns give children the confidence they need and avoid the feeling that they are merely doodling with notes. Simple concepts of high v low, *f* v *p*, *staccato* v *legato*, chord v melody all elicit ready responses.

■ **Duets and ensemble playing** are introduced in the first year of piano lessons and become an important part of the child's repertoire.

Colourkeys gives the child a fulsome experience of music from the start, not just because of the concepts mentioned above, but also because the quality of the material is consistently high. The great advantage of Colourkeys is that it is not a method, but an approach that allows both pupil and teacher enormous leeway and opportunities to exercise their

creativity and imagination. Many of the aural skills gained in the early years continue to serve the child much later: the idea of singing and playing, singing

solfa before playing, or using rhythm names are all very useful tools, even for the advanced musician. The beauty of Colourkeys is its simplicity and child-friendliness. ■

■ *Stephen Baron is Head of Piano at the North London Colourstrings Centre. His series of books, Piano Explorer, are available from Nymet music.*

Training in the Colourkeys approach can be undertaken at the annual International Summer Course in late July/early August. Please call 020 8330 7500 for further information. Exciting opportunities to teach using the Colourkeys approach as part of a dynamic, enthusiastic team exist at the North London Colourstrings Centre (London N10) and in other parts of London, as well as Kent, Dorset and other locations. Please contact Deborah Harris (020 8444 9435) for more information.

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