

# ALTERED

Using pictures of clouds and sheep to teach young children to read music may seem a little left-field, but the Colourstrings method is working wonders, as **TIM HOMFRAY** reports

A lack of communication can be a wonderful thing. In the mid-60s a Hungarian violinist, Géza Szilvay (b.1943), was invited to teach in Finland. He expected to be working with a small group of advanced musicians, but found instead 68 very young beginners. And he didn't speak Finnish. His solution was to find visual and aural ways of introducing music and the violin.

He had a young daughter, who had responded to hearing his violin even before she was born, and for whom he had been preparing little bits of material to introduce her to music. He started using these with his new pupils, adding to them lesson by lesson. He was also imbued with his great compatriot Kodály's educational principles of music for all, and the values of sol-fa. The materials he put together gradually developed into Colourstrings, a unique and fully fledged introduction to music and string playing, and a philosophy that carries far beyond the early years for which it was designed.

Today Szilvay is still in Finland, now head of the East Helsinki Music Institute (and with a reasonable command of Finnish).

As Colourstrings developed, and bore spectacular results (many of those original pupils are now professional musicians), it caught the Finnish imagination. A series of television programmes, *Minifiddlers in Musicland* (1979), was produced, made originally as a series of educational films for kindergarten children; however, it became popular among all ages, and prompted such an interest that Finland virtually sold out of violins. For players in their teens, Szilvay, with his cellist brother Csaba (b.1941), formed the

Helsinki Strings, which is recognised as one of Finland's leading music groups (according to a *Strad* review in April 2004 of a recent CD, 'Few chamber orchestras can dream of the Helsinki Strings' level of precision and lyricism').

Seven years ago an entire primary school moved into the institute, fed from a kindergarten where the musical foundations are laid, so that children could benefit from daily tuition and ensemble playing in addition to their normal lessons. The results are extraordinary. I heard an ensemble of 10- to 13-year-olds rehearsing Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and bringing to it a richness and depth of tone that would put many a more supposedly advanced group to shame. Bowing was full and flowing, and overall intonation impressive. It is a feature of all these young players that they know what it's meant to sound like, even if they haven't quite mastered all the notes. Nobody plays by numbers. In smaller groups, musicality is always in evidence.

They listen to each other and play responsively together. Eight-year-olds argue over bowings and fingerings; six-year-olds learn pieces through singing and sol-fa.

They do of course benefit from having music as part of their daily lives, with ensembles every day and individual lessons at least twice a week. This model, of music integrated into the school, is one Géza Szilvay wants to see replicated everywhere. It would constitute, he believes, a musical renaissance. At the institute, music is a social as well as an artistic experience, and technical development is matched by intellectual understanding.

Finnish children leave primary school at 12 or 13, so the older ones at the institute have advanced technically beyond Colourstrings. But, for Szilvay, the principles it has instilled continue to inform everything they do, and he can look on even the Helsinki Strings as a continuation of Colourstrings: 'Strictly speaking Colourstrings is for the first five or six years of instrumental playing, and then you go on to traditional material. But a child who goes through Colourstrings is already hooked. The child and the whole family are involved. It is a virtuous circle, which radiates force into the whole of society.'



ANNIE MOORE

Violinists from the Helsinki Children's Strings in rehearsal

That is what I call the Colourstrings philosophy. These children bring into all the new places they go – the academies, the orchestras – a new spirit of playing.’

Colourstrings begins, in an ideal world at least, with stories for the very young. The first Colourstrings book, *Little Rascals*, explains Szilvay, contains bedtime stories frequently used in Finland. ‘Into these I smuggle musical ideas, of pitch, length, dynamic and tempo, but [the children] don’t realise they are there.’ ‘Smuggle’ is a word he uses a lot to describe the way Colourstrings works: children learn things without realising they are doing so. They move on to little music books, with simple songs using minor thirds (the most commonly used interval in anything from nursery rhymes to football chants), gradually building up to pentatonic and later complete major and minor scales. Along the way sol-fa is taught, complete with its hand symbols. But there is no immediate introduction to musical notation; this too is smuggled in. ‘I looked at all the other music instruction books,’ says Szilvay. ‘Even the easiest has on the first page more than 50 bits of information – time signature, stave, bars, clefs. When the child asks what they are, the teacher just says he will explain later.’

Szilvay, teaching without the benefit of knowing the Finnish language, decided to combine as many senses as possible in teaching music to the young beginner; he began to teach children to read music using colours and images. A preliminary Colourstrings book will have melodies represented by pictures – of animals, perhaps, or clouds. When these are in a straight line, they all represent the same note; but if they move up and down, so does the tune. Smaller pictures represent shorter notes than larger ones: effectively they are quavers and crotchets. The sol-fa equivalents, with their hand shapes, are shown underneath. Later, horizontal lines are introduced, one at a time, until there are five. Add some vertical lines to the pictures of sheep or



VEIKKO HIRI

As part of the Colourstrings method, children learn pieces through singing and sol-fa

clouds, and the images transform into music notation.

On the introduction of the instrument itself, Colourstrings has two central features: left-hand pizzicato and harmonics. ‘When we teach a string instrument in the usual way, there is a stopping movement,’ says Szilvay. ‘The first finger goes down, and the second finger. This is all movement downwards, thus contradicting the nature of other movements on the fingerboard. Normally when children start like this they use too much pressure. Therefore, changes of position will not come easily, nor will vibrato and lightness of hand – because the beginning was too rigid. I use left-hand pizzicato before learning to stop on the strings, because that way they learn to use all their fingers independently. And they can move up and down the instrument. That way, the whole violin is being played, without concern for intonation. And when the left hand is light it gives a message to the right hand, so both hands are light. When we start to play notes we use natural harmonics. So again there is no pressure, they can

move up and down the instrument – and they can’t play out of tune.’

When they do come to stop the strings, they know what it should sound like, because they will be playing tunes they have already learnt. They know them through sol-fa and, through the concept of movable Doh, they can play them anywhere on any string. ‘Once they know a tune they can start transposing it, perhaps starting with a different finger, up and down the fingerboard. This opens up the whole fingerboard for a child. The traditional way of teaching always starts with the first position, and this can go on for years. It gets too rigid for the children, and first position becomes the home to which it is always safe to come back.’

A further fundamental part of Szilvay’s teaching is chamber music. ‘This is a social way of working, always involving more and more people. Otherwise children feel alone and different from their friends.’ >

# IMAGES



PHOTOS: VEIKKO HIRI

A young violin pupil at last year's International Colourstrings Symposium, which took place at the East Helsinki Music Institute

## At the institute, music is a social as well as an artistic experience, and technical development is matched by intellectual understanding

Repertory and points of departure aside, however, Colourstrings is not a conventional method. The 40-odd books now available do not constitute a teacher's guide to what to do next. Teachers must find their own way of ensuring good bow hold, good posture and the myriad other requirements of an advanced technique. But this, for those who use it, is one of

Colourstrings' strengths. 'That is something I particularly like – that it is very free,' says Pirkko Simojoki, a viola teacher at the institute and herself an ex-pupil of Szilvay. 'We all have our own ways of teaching, but all within the Colourstrings' philosophy.' Lauri Karkuvräki, a violin teacher there, agrees: 'As every child is different you have to teach them differently.'

'Because of how Colourstrings works, the children always really understand what they are doing,' says Simojoki. 'I have other advanced students who did not go through Colourstrings, and I can see the difference. Even very young children here have a real intellectual understanding. They ask intelligent questions.'

When Szilvay first went to Finland, he expected to return to Hungary in a year. But when all his original pupils wanted to carry on, he began a process of continuous negotiation with the Hungarian authorities to remain; this went on until the Finnish president intervened personally on his behalf. And after years of further negotiation, and encouragement from the likes of Menuhin and Rostal, Szilvay finally achieved his ambition of an integrated primary school at the institute, with a kindergarten to feed it. It is in such schemes that he believes ▶

## PRINCIPLES OF COLOURSTRINGS

- › Preliminary use of sol-fa and singing
- › Elements of musical grammar and notation, rhythm, melody and form introduced pictorially
- › Use of left-hand pizzicato and natural harmonics to develop fundamentals of technique
- › Integrated aural, emotional and theoretical development
- › Use of relative sol-fa
- › Development of creativity through colouring, copying, composing, transposing, performing and improvising
- › Individual teaching supplemented by group tuition
- › Chamber music



Csaba and Géza Szilvay with Christopher Bunting



VEIKKO JHINI

A young Colourstrings pupil learns sol-fa – musical notation is introduced later using images and colours

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## These children bring a new spirit of playing into all the new places they go

GÉZA SZILVAY

the future should lie elsewhere, too: 'This can be done in every European city.'

It has indeed spread to other parts of Europe, as well as to Australia. In Britain there are a number of centres around the country in both private and state sectors. Deborah Harris runs a Colourstrings school in north London that caters for around 600 children from about six months old up to 18. She too sees Colourstrings, with Kodály's principles underpinning it, as something that reaches far beyond the early stages of learning a string instrument. 'The young children all seem innately musical,' she says. 'A five-year-old will have a firm understanding of what he is doing and have good pitch. When you see the same child at twelve you see a whole, well-developed musician.'

The London school can't, however, match the resources available in Helsinki: 'We can give them only one lesson a week, plus one of musicianship and one of ensemble. The days of having lessons twice or even six times a week are a long way off. In state

schools the teaching is done mostly in groups, so progress is slower. But Colourstrings works by going from the known to the unknown and doesn't skip anything, so everybody gets there in the end.'

The method is becoming increasingly popular with both parents and teachers: 'Colourstrings is the place where a lot of people want to send their children now,' says Harris, 'and a lot of teachers want to do it. Someone called it the holy grail of instrumental teaching. It's very rewarding,

Preliminary Colourstrings books have melodies represented by pictures such as these



and there's a very low drop-out rate among the children. We get feedback from teachers who say it's changed their lives.'

With Colourstrings, says Szilvay, the child is always at the centre: 'There are different models around the world. In Russia and Asia the instrument is in the middle, and you bring the child to the instrument. In western Europe the music is in the middle, and you bring the child to the music. But with Colourstrings, the child is always in the middle.' ■

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