A Study on the Application of Orff-Schulwerk in Vocal Music Enlightenment Education

Leyao Qian

School of Music Education and Art Management, Tianjin Conservatory of Music, Tianjin 300171, China

Abstract. This paper addresses common issues in current vocal music enlightenment education, such as a lack of interest, insufficient emotional expression, and outdated teaching methods. It explores how the Orff-Schulwerk can be applied to vocal music enlightenment teaching. This teaching approach emphasizes "elemental music," "comprehensiveness," and "improvisation," transforming the learning process into a game of autonomous exploration and creative expression by integrating diverse activities such as body percussion, instrumental play, and dance. Using the teaching of "Where Is Spring?" as an example, this paper demonstrates how rhythm training, breathing games, and Curwen hand signs effectively stimulate children's enthusiasm for learning, promote the comprehensive development of their musical perception, collaboration skills, and emotional expression, and innovatively provides a practical pathway for vocal music enlightenment education.

Keywords: Vocal Music Enlightenment Education; Orff-Schulwerk; Music Education; Vocal Music Education.

1. Introduction

Kodály once said, "Vocal singing is the cornerstone of music education" [1]. In contemporary society, the number of people learning vocal music is continuously surging. According to 2024 data, the number of candidates for music-related college entrance exams reached 240,000, with vocal music accounting for 17% of that figure. Similarly, on platforms like Xingqudao (an interest-based education platform), the completion rate for vocal music courses is as high as 83% [2]. However, in reality, vocal music enlightenment pedagogy faces significant challenges. For instance, traditional teaching methods often conflict with children's natural inclinations, making lessons seem tedious and causing difficulty in maintaining focus. At the same time, teachers tend to overemphasize vocal techniques in their instruction while neglecting the emotional and cultural context behind the songs. This can result in mechanical performances that lose the most captivating essence of music. Furthermore, teachers may cling to outdated teaching approaches, stifling children's interest in learning vocal singing and making it difficult to foster a lasting passion for musical performance in students. The core issue has become how to help students sustain a long-term love for musical performance rather than merely acquiring skills temporarily. The Orff-Schulwerk is precisely the key to solving this difficult problem. Orff consistently believed that the ultimate goal of music education is not merely the complete mastery of musical skills, nor is it simply the enhancement of one's musical literacy. Instead, it should fully realize the unique role of music in nurturing a sense of structure, balance, independent personality, spatial awareness, creativity, imagination, and collaborative coordination. The Orff-Schulwerk, characterized by its "comprehensiveness" and "improvisational" nature, effectively addresses issues of waning interest and lack of focus. Orff envisioned the music classroom as a synthesis of singing, movement, instrumental performance, and theatrical expression. This "music theater" teaching method transforms vocal training from monotonous repetitive drills into an engaging game of exploration and self-expression, fundamentally reigniting students' enthusiasm for learning. It shifts their role from "passive recipients" to "active participants" [3], encouraging bold creativity and expression through autonomous exploration. Furthermore, with its "elemental" and "humanistic" qualities, the Orff-Schulwerk helps correct the tendency to prioritize technique over emotional depth. He advocated that in vocal teaching; the starting point should not be abstract concepts of vocal placement or breathing methods. Instead, it should begin with the child's

most authentic voice, natural emotional expression, and familiar cultural contexts (such as nursery rhymes and folk songs), inspiring spontaneous, situation-based emotional expression.

Therefore, this paper employs the Orff-Schulwerk as its theoretical foundation to investigate its application in vocal music enlightenment education. By addressing challenges such as low student interest, emotional detachment, and outdated teaching methods in vocal instruction, it aims to revitalize vocal music education, infusing it with vibrancy, emotional depth, and creativity.

2. Introduction to the Orff-Schulwerk

2.1 Principles of the Orff-Schulwerk

The Orff-Schulwerk is a music education system and teaching methodology established by the German composer and music educator Carl Orff, which has gained widespread acclaim worldwide. The Orff-Schulwerk advocates for principles such as "elemental music," "universality," "comprehensiveness" "Improvisation," and "Creativity" [4]. The term "elemental music" originates from the German words "Elementare Musik" or "Elementarisierung." It refers to the most primitive, simple, and essential state of human expression. Orff believed that this state is inherent in every individual, particularly evident in children. The role of music lies in enabling individuals to become active participants rather than merely passive listeners. When music begins, one can express emotions, rhythm through body movements, and even hum along. The pedagogy does not view music as a skill mastered by a select few but rather as an instinct possessed by everyone—one that can be awakened and expressed in the most natural way. Its focus is not on cultivating musical prodigies but on nurturing the musical spirit of every child, protecting their creativity and desire for expression, and helping them gain joy, confidence, and holistic development through collective musical activities. This also highlights the universality of music. Furthermore, the Orff-Schulwerk emphasizes that it is not a rigid, fixed "standard curriculum" but rather an open-ended framework and a set of core principles. It respects and encourages integration with local cultures, enabling children worldwide to use it to learn music and express their unique cultural identities. It is precisely because of this that the Orff music pedagogy possesses great vitality and has spread extensively across the globe. In "The Effects of the Orff Approach to Music Education Programs on Young Children's Musical Expressiveness" (2012), Oh Sun Kwon and Ock Joo Lee noted that the Orff-Schulwerk can effectively enhance the singing skills, instrumental performance abilities, physical expressiveness, musical improvisation skills, and overall musical expression of five-year-old children [5]. Additionally, in the works*Orff Music Therapy: Active Furthering of the Development of the Child* (1974)[6],*Key Concepts in Orff Music Therapy* (1989) [7], and *The Clinical and Educational Uses of Orff Schulwerk* (2000) [8], the application of Orff music education and therapy in special education for children is discussed, demonstrating that every child has the opportunity to enjoy and express music. Learning music is not only an educational process but also a journey of self-healing. In *An Analysis of the Applicability of Kodaly and Orff Music Pedagogies in Preschool Children's Music Teaching* (2022), Zhou Mingyue highlighted the suitability of the Orff-Schulwerk for preschool children. By incorporating teaching activities centered around singing, it enhances young children's musical abilities. Integrating recitation, gestures, physical movements, and vocal performances into singing instruction improves their overall musical literacy [9]. Moreover, scholars have also combined the Orff-Schulwerk with instrumental learning such as violin, piano, and guzheng to increase the fun and engagement of the learning process. This illustrates that the Orff-Schulwerk is not a rote-teaching method but rather an inquiry-based and discovery-oriented approach. The "comprehensiveness," nature of the Orff-Schulwerk views music learning not as an isolated subject but as a learning activity that naturally and organically integrates with other art forms such as language, movement, dance, drama, and even visual arts (e.g., drawing, crafts). These elements coexist as a unified whole, forming a "holistic art." The "creativity" in the Orff-Schulwerk refers to the ultimate goal of music education, which is to stimulate and cultivate learners' musical creativity and expressiveness, unlocking every child's innate potential for musical creation. Ultimately, it

enables children to experience the idea that "I can speak through music, and creating music is a joyful and natural process." The creative confidence built through music will positively transfer to other areas of a child's life and learning, which is the most profound significance of the "creativity" in the Orff-Schulwerk.

2.2 Content of the Orff-Schulwerk

From Orff's perspective, rhythm is the primary element of music—the skeleton and lifeblood of musical expression. It is also the most abstract element, yet one most readily perceived and expressed through the child's body. Natural rhythms are inherent in the human body, such as heartbeat, breathing, and walking. All melody and harmony must also be built upon rhythm. However, children can directly feel and express rhythm through their bodies without needing to understand complex theories, making rhythmic training the consistent thread throughout the learning process. Nursery rhymes and children's poems are thus the most ideal vehicles for rhythmic learning. First, language itself carries innate musicality. When children practice abstract rhythms, such as quarter notes or eighth notes, language can make these rhythms tangible. Body percussion serves as the bridge and tool for externalizing internal rhythmic sense through physical movements. Everyone can express rhythm through body actions, such as clapping, stamping, and so on. Therefore, integrating rhythm, poetry, and body percussion is highly beneficial for children's music learning. Additionally, instruments can be utilized in music education. Orff created unpitched percussion instruments, such as shakers, crotales, triangles, tambourines, and woodblocks, as well as pitched percussion instruments, like timpani and xylophones. These instruments are simple and easy to handle, allowing students to focus on the expression of rhythm, dynamics, and melodic patterns. In the process of music teaching, instrument instruction can be combined with elements such as rapping, dance, and drama. Within this framework, teachers design specific, guided scenarios to inspire students to use the musical "vocabulary" they have acquired—such as rhythm, movement, pitch, and timbre—for autonomous, creative musical expression and exploration. This transforms the music classroom into a small-scale music workshop, enabling children to become participants, explorers, and creators of music through carefully designed "musical games."

3. Research on the Application of Orff-Schulwerk in Vocal Music Enlightenment Education

This paper uses the song "Where Is Spring" to specifically discuss the research on the application of the Orff-Schulwerk in vocal music enlightenment education. In terms of rhythm, "Where Is Spring" primarily features eighth notes and a dotted sixteenth-eighth note pattern (as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 1. features eighth notes



Figure 2. a dotted sixteenth-eighth note pattern

Under the teacher's guidance, children can clap their hands to perceive the speed of the rhythm. The eighth notes represent even raindrops, so clapping should be evenly paced. The dotted sixteenth-eighth note pattern is irregular, as two sixteenth notes equal one eighth note. This means we need to clap twice within one beat, with the raindrops sounding like "da-da/da." For example, the chorus of the song, "Di li li," follows a dotted eighth-sixteenth note pattern (X XX), resembling the crisp chirping of a bird. The teacher can lead students to express this rhythm through body movements, such as clapping (X) + patting the legs (XX) or stomping (X) + snapping fingers (XX). Once the children have fully understood and roughly mastered these rhythms, the teacher can guide them into deeper learning. We can create a music exploration workshop called "Secrets of Spring." The teacher can clap out the "action rhythm" of the expedition team: XX XX XX XX X (corresponding to "We-are-off-to-find-spring-now!"). Students can imitate and respond using body percussion (such as stomping or patting their legs), establishing a steady sense of beat and rhythm imitation skills. Additionally, the teacher can guide students to practice the dotted sixteenth-eighth note pattern XX X XX XX X ("Di li/li/Di li/Di li/li"). At the same time, the children can be divided into three groups to perform this rhythm using a three-part body percussion combination: clapping, patting the legs, and snapping fingers. Through this method, children break away from the monotonous lessons of the past, allowing every child to participate actively. The teacher can also incorporate shakers for rhythm practice. Once the children are familiar with the song's rhythm, the teacher can have them add the lyrics of "Where Is Spring" and recite them rhythmically. One group of students can clap their hands while loudly reciting the lyrics, while the other group uses shakers to accompany them with rhythmic training. Then, the roles can be swapped to ensure that every child has the opportunity to practice rhythmic recitation and shaker playing.

The strength of the breath is also an important difficulty. Breath is rather abstract and hard for children to understand. Therefore, teachers need to help children understand breathing through audio-visual materials, actions and games. The teacher used audio to let the children hear the chirping of birds in the valley and the gentle breeze of nature, making them feel as if they were right there, as if they were in the midst of nature. The teacher guides the students to imagine different winds in nature, such as gentle breezes and strong winds. And you can play the gentle breeze and strong wind through audio and ask about the difference between the two. When expressing the gentle breeze, ask the student to stretch out the palm and exhale gently and evenly into the palm "sih ~~~~", as if to let a feather flutter gently. When expressing the strong wind, the student exhaled forcefully and quickly, "Ha!" It feels like a tree is about to be blown down. This enables students to directly experience the different effects brought about by the variations in breath flow and speed. When listening to "Where is Spring", let the students freely express the "wind" with their bodies and breathing according to the intensity of the music they hear. When it comes to singing lyrics, for instance, when singing "Dilili Dili", the teacher can remind the students that the birds' chirping on the branches is fast and clear, and guide them to use a light and elastic breath to sing with a sense of leaping. When saying "There are red flowers here", ask the child how the flowers bloom. Is it because the flowers bloom quietly and quietly? Therefore, the scent should be gentle. Singing "Where is spring?" At that time, the teacher led the students to do the valley echo exercise. First, the teacher took a deep breath and shouted loudly, "Where is spring?" As if in search of spring, the child mimics an echo, controls his breath and whispers, "Where is spring?" The teacher shouted and sang: "Dililidili Dilili ", and the students echoed (lightly, slowly) and sang "Dililidili lili". Enable students to master refined breath control skills, be able to consciously, gently and moderately convey their breath, and enhance their rhythm stability and body coordination. Let students "replicate" the rhythm with their entire bodies and feel the breath. After enabling students to understand breath control, the teacher can allow those who have grasped it more quickly to express by themselves how to use breath control for different musical phrases. For instance, "And the little yellow oriole that can sing" can allow students to express their own thoughts. Students might think that if we imagine a little bird flying towards us from afar and hear its chirping become increasingly pleasant and bright, then our singing should also become brighter and our breath stronger. Some children think that although the voice of the little oriole is

clear and melodious, it is very faint in nature and requires us to listen quietly. Therefore, its breath is getting weaker and weaker, especially as the little oriole flies further and further away from us. At this time, teachers should encourage students and not deny their exploration of music. In addition, the melody of the lyrics "Here are red flowers, there are green grass" has great ups and downs and is also material for practicing the continuity of breath and the lines of the melody. Teachers can encourage children to create dances. Students hold red and green scarves and improvise according to the ups and downs of the melody (the melody of "There is red - flower -" goes up, and "There is green grass -" goes down), expressing the ups and downs of the music with their bodies. Teachers can also encourage children to use Musical Instruments based on their different timbres: for instance, the sound of ringing a bell is produced by the collision of two small bells, making a crisp sound, which is particularly suitable for imitating the moment when flowers bloom (X), while the sound of a triangle is relatively long and is most appropriate for depicting the swaying of flowers and plants (X -), creating a sharp contrast in timbres.



Figure 3. Musical example

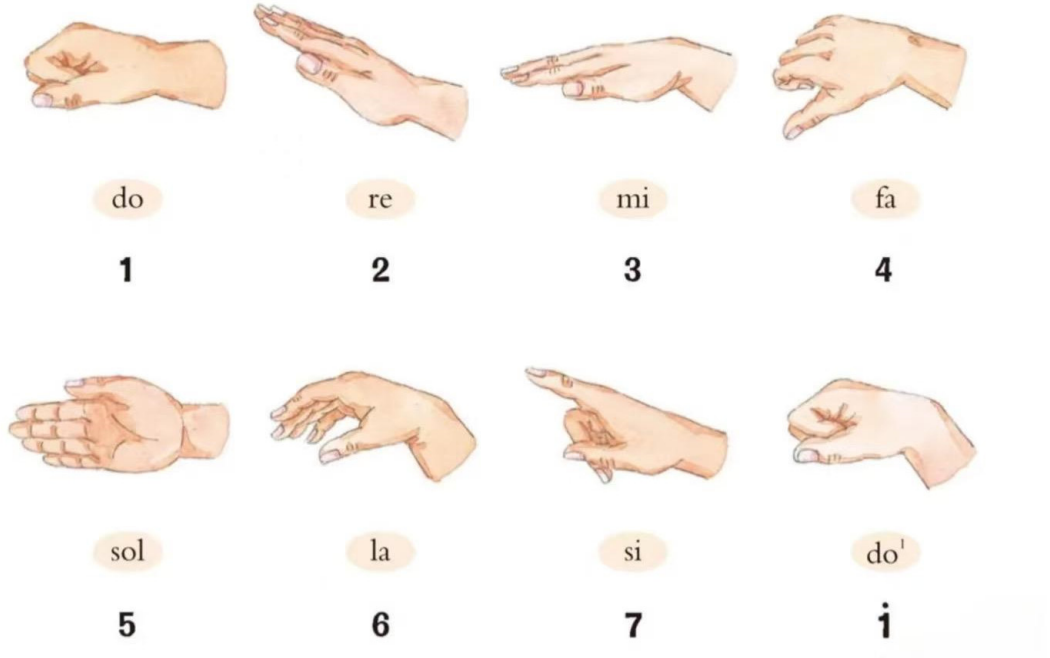


Figure 4. Curwen hand signs

In the song "Where is Spring?", the middle c do and the sol in the small letter group are in a pure fourth relationship. Children may not sing accurately due to the slightly large span. Therefore, the Curwen Hand Signs can be introduced, which is a powerful tool for "visualizing" and "gestural" the pitch. By using different hand positions and postures, different pitches can be represented, which can effectively unify pitch accuracy in group practice. In addition, practice can also be carried out through the middle pitch. For instance, it is rather difficult to practice from the middle c do to the sol in the first group of small notes. Teachers can first train children in do si la sol to build a bridge between notes. Then, let the children try singing two notes with a larger span. They should also learn to sing in reverse. For instance, the singing from the first group "sol" in the small characters to the middle c

do is also a perfect fourth. For instance, the teacher combines the melody of fafa/fasol/lala/la (dili/dili/dili/li) (as shown in Figure 3) to learn the corresponding Curwen Hand Signs (as shown in Figure 4), ensuring the accuracy of the pitch.

After completing the basic vocal instruction, the teacher can establish a "Spring Symphony" workshop. The workshop includes three sections: instrumental music, singing, and performance.In the instrumental section, students can choose their own instruments. For example, in the steady beat group, students can use shakers and tambourines to play on the first beat of each measure (such as on the words "spring," "here," "there," and "still"). Some students can use claves, wooden fish, or chopsticks to play core rhythms like "di li li." Others can use triangles or finger cymbals to imitate the imagery of blooming flowers, expressing the joy of discovering "red flowers here" and "green grass there."In the singing section, the teacher guides students in practicing vocal harmonies. In the performance section, students can choose to role-play elements such as green mountains, red flowers, or little yellow orioles, collectively forming a complete musical landscape of "Where Is Spring." Afterward, the teacher can ask the students: Where else is spring? What sights make you feel that spring has arrived? The teacher can guide students to answer these questions through singing and ask them which instruments could be used to express spring as seen through children's eyes. For example, shakers could represent the sound of melting snow and flowing streams. Through such extended questioning, the teacher not only encourages students to observe life and recognize that music originates from lived experiences but, more importantly, empowers them to create lyrics and rhythms based on their own life experiences or observed scenes. This approach helps children develop their potential for independent exploration and creative expression.

4. Conclusion

Using the song "Where Is Spring?" as an example, this paper explores the application of the f Orff-Schulwerk in vocal music teaching. First, the Orff-Schulwerk is employed to address challenges related to rhythm, breath control, dynamics, and pitch accuracy. In practice, the focus is placed on fostering children's improvisational creativity through diverse methods such as body percussion, dance, multimedia resources, games, and workshops. During the process of learning vocal music, collaboration and attentive listening among peers can help children adopt diverse perspectives and approach problems from multiple angles, thereby facilitating their "decentralization. “By identifying problems independently, engaging in peer communication, and making self-adjustments, students enhance their initiative and learning capabilities. Thus, applying the Orff-Schulwerk to vocal instruction transcends mere technical training; it serves as an effective pathway for cultivating children's comprehensive artistic literacy, creative thinking, and collaborative spirit. The Orff approach transforms vocal training into a dynamic, creative, and socially enriched aesthetic experience.

References

[1] Yang, L. M. The Musical Educational Philosophy of Kodály and Music Education in Hungary. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2000.

[2] https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1784314204155805233&wfr=spider&for=pc.

[3] Yucesan, E. Analyzing Metaphorical Perceptions and Views of Pre-Service Pre-SchoolTeachers Related to OrffApproach-Based InstructionJl. Cukurovauni, 2022.

[4] Gunild K. Introduction to Orff Schulwerk (Carl Orff's Music for Children). Translated by Liao Naixiong. Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, September 1987.

[5] Kwon O S, Lee O J. The Effects of the Orff Approach to Music Education Programs on Young Children's Musical Expressiveness. Korean Journal of Child Studies, 2012, 33(1). DOI:10.5723/ KJCS. 2012. 33. 1. 165.

[6] Orff, G. Orff music therapy: Active fostering of the development of the child. Ernst Reinhardt Verlag. 1974.

[7] Orff, G. (1989). Key concepts in Orff music therapy. Schott Music GmbH.

[8] Colwell, C. M., & Eyre, L. (Eds.). (2000). The clinical and educational use of Orff-Schulwerk. Barcelona Publishers.

[9] Zhou M. An Analysis of the Applicability of Kodaly and Orff Music Pedagogies in Preschool Children's Music Teaching.Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 2022:2349-2357.