

# Explaining the DaCapo approach



Papers from a series of seminars  
given in 2011

by Jane Cutler

Edited by Michelle Groves

## **Explaining the DaCapo approach**

Why, when there are so many music organisations that produce excellent standards of musical performance, do we do things the way that we do? This paper explains the background to DaCapo's work. Firstly, let's look back and put things into a context. I will start with my own experience; move onto our ethos and then the methodology.

### **Background and context - ethos:**

When I started out as a teacher, my aim was to teach my pupils in a better way than I had been taught and to help children to read music notation in a way that I could not.

When I left college I could play the cello to the required standard and give theoretical answers to all of the questions needed to pass a music degree but although my qualifications were satisfactory I found I did not have skills that I really valued.

My own level of musicianship and understanding were poor – I wanted to be able to hear the music inside my head and analyse it as I read it and I couldn't (i.e. have true inner hearing).

I was also very concerned with the number of people who gave up music, falling away as I continued; I couldn't help wondering why they gave up, wondering what they did with their music after they had given up and what they felt about music and their musical experiences.

### **There were many conventions in music that I questioned:**

- the need to audition before we allow a child to play in a group - putting the music before the child
- presuming that everyone who learns an instrument wants to perform
- assuming that we are all striving for the same excellence
- the idea that, if you aren't striving to get better, taking more exams, being the best, you should give up.

Even in an orchestra you can't be just another cellist – the seating positions give away just how good/bad you are. And there is always a sense of shame as you are placed at the back of the section. Why does it matter where we sit? Indeed why do we only have one flute/clarinet/bassoon per part in an orchestra. Why isn't it good enough simply to enjoy a weekly session of music making?

I am sure that some of these things explain the high dropout rate and are culturally specific. In many countries music is a social activity and all participate and have a place in the music making. Young learners play with and learn from those who are more able. Most western educators would say that music is for all but are still allowing many children to give up because they feel that they don't belong, are not good enough, it is not 'their world' and that it is not worth the strife.

I am constantly grateful that I was given a cello to learn (the 70s were like that), free lessons and no pressure from my parents or teachers and this has clearly influenced the way that I think about access to music for all children.

My mission to be a good teacher led me to explore many approaches and I then started to improve as a musician in ways that all the hours and hours of practice had not achieved.

As a teacher I also found that, even with all of the best methods at my disposal, the starting point should actually be the pupil and their needs. It was important to ensure that my pupils enjoyed the process of learning and felt good about music making and about themselves in the context of that learning and that they were making music! This is something that is often missing in music teaching, even with all of the changes that have come about over the past twenty years, such as the increasing popularity of Kodaly, Dalcroze and other pedagogically sound approaches. The focus on making the individual feel good about himself or herself and their music-making is often still lacking and many music teachers prefer to put the music and the quest for improvement in a pupil's playing ahead of the feelings of the pupil.

The traditional approach from an instrumental teacher is to demand progression and they measure their success as a teacher by that of their pupils. Comparisons are made with other pupils and siblings and expectations of progress dominate the lesson. A child can, even unintentionally, be made to feel very uncomfortable or inadequate.

In order to achieve all of the goals that I was setting myself for my pupil's progress, I found I had to make strong relationships with them, understand how they responded to playing the instrument and gain their trust. In working in this non-judgmental way I found that they were open to anything that I had to teach them and progress was more secure and great fun for both of us.

The DaCapo Music Foundation grew out of a small team who believed that looking after people in the school environment, in communications and in listening to the children, parents, school teachers, orchestra members and others, was as important as the content of the programme that we teach.

I have alluded to my own inadequacies as a musician; most of us know what is lacking in ourselves, but it is hard to admit our failings and to have the humility to avoid reproducing the same problems in others. I speak as both a musician and a parent here!

Musicians are the best bluffers and the worst at admitting weakness and because we have been trained in a certain way we have been taught to think that the solution to any problem is to try harder, to practice more. We are taught to perform and that's what many of us do all the way through life. There are other problems given to musicians, we are taught to believe that we are talented. Talent is a natural gift or aptitude for something – something we have innately and it is therefore un-teachable. I had no real talent for music, just the interest and the will to put in a huge amount of hard work and this took me a certain distance.

Since I started teaching, I have worked with methods that have enabled me to reach much higher standards than all of the hard work that I put in ever did! Often, when children are doing well, parents and teachers say that the pupil is talented. I believe that in most of these situations it simply means that the teaching is working and what the child is showing is the evidence. We all have tremendous potential to succeed and to fail. I think it's a matter of choice; interest and good teaching that can see a child reach their potential.

### **It is preferable to deliver a solid educational programme to all children than to be looking for talent?**

It has been known for a long time that people learn best when they are relaxed and having fun. We know that constant pressure blocks the brain and disables the learning. I would suggest

**John Holt's 'How Children Fail' (published 1964)** as a starting point for reading about this, as his observations of what stop children learning are still relevant to learners today.

- Ability relates to the teaching given and the child's interest (which can change at any time).
- A relationship of trust allows the teacher to be totally flexible.
- An environment that is relaxed and non-competitive gives children the opportunity to enjoy the process of learning and to retain more.

### **Teaching and learning**

At every stage of a child's development, there is the 'right time' to learn and develop a certain skill. So, at the age of 9 months we are developmentally suited to sitting up – we need to do this before we can stand and we need to stand before we can walk – we need to walk before we can run and we need to be able to run before we can gallop - I think you get the picture. I call these 'learning windows'.

**Physical skills and developments are easy to see; emotional and mental stages less so.**

### **Starting Point**

We start with the **DaCapo Toddler and Early Years programmes** and are always working on the edge of these 'windows' and laying the foundations for all of the learning that will follow. We also see that at a particular stage (somewhere between five and six) it is beneficial for a child to start an instrument alongside the musicianship of the Early Years programmes. By working with multi-level activities we are ensuring that many pathways in the brain are used and reinforced. We do not wait for a child to have a particular skill - we catch them at the right moment and develop it. If we have to start these processes later, there is more 'learning' needed and it is a far less easy or natural process.

Being a good teacher means that you can recognise those stages of development and provide the right activities and stimulus to catch the opportunity and facilitate the learning. Our syllabus and teacher training programme ensures that DaCapo teachers are resourced and able to do this.

We know that in order to achieve progress as an inevitable part of the teaching you need to:

- start where the pupils are secure
- introduce new challenges regularly
- revisit and consolidate all learning
- make the learning practical: do it, name it, identify it, apply it in another context

Music teaching is still often verbally based and children are expected to take on board complex theory and then apply it in a practical context – much of this in their own time in the form of practice (paper two in this series) at home. DaCapo's methodology is based on practical activities and extremely active lessons with little verbal direction, analysis or theorising.

The ability to name something without the practical learning and repetition is often taken as evidence that it has been understood - if a pupil tells you that they have learned about pulse, does it mean that they can hold a steady pulse or can suggest a different or appropriate pulse for a piece of music? Does it matter that a child who can demonstrate a secure sense of pulse and suggest an alternative pulse is unable to describe what they are doing? My favourite example of this is comes from the game FORBIDDEN RHYTHMS; in this music game the teacher

claps rhythmic patterns where one pattern is a FORBIDDEN RHYTHM, which the children are not allowed to clap back – hence the name. One pupil, aged five and experienced and very good at this game, did not connect the title with the game and asked to play FOUR BIBS AND RIBBONS. Being able to DO comes before being able to NAME.

A teacher needs to explore music and how it is constructed with their pupils and to put things into the path of the learner and see what they make of it. For example: a cello pupil learning lots of three note tunes is suddenly inspired by the number of different notes that she can use to start on. She realises that she can start on just the string, with no pressing down of fingers, or she can use her fourth or second finger – she is curious and asks about a first finger starting note. With this question the pupil has opened a window, which leads the teacher to a particular instrumental technique. The pupil has shown that she gets the tonality, the idea of changing the starting note and wants more information – this wasn't planned for this lesson but here we are doing it, and she can.

### **Putting the DaCapo approach in place**

Broadly speaking, the music learning that is on offer in the UK is divided between the state and the private sector; there is also the separation of classroom music and instrumental tuition, and then there are all of those orchestras and bands! In the private sector there is an expectation that pupils will learn to read music and have an understanding and experience of classical music and other genres, regardless of playing an instrument. In the state sector classroom music does not aspire to deliver such a thorough or classically based education in music, and there is no expectation that children will learn to read notation unless they play an instrument.

It is expected that children who play instruments work hard, take graded exams (paper three in this series) and read notation. Being good enough are the only ways of getting the experience of making music with others.

### **Curriculum**

The National Curriculum (paper four of this series) for music was introduced in 1986, as an attempt to give all children equal access to music, and to answer the criticism that music was an elitist subject. By making it a subject delivered by primary teachers and not music specialists there was an inevitable skills issue, and the lack of mention of reading and writing musical notation was deemed to be necessary, as non-specialists were delivering. DaCapo have found ways to make music both accessible to all, teachable by a non-specialist, while retaining rigor and depth. The National Curriculum stipulates that “teaching should ensure that listening, and applying knowledge and understanding, are developed through the interrelated skills of performing, composing and appraising”; it goes on to outline the content of the curriculum is not skills based but activity led, and therefore not constructed with musical progression in mind. I believe that it fails our children by having low aspirations until we reach GCSE; at this point it is only children who have had access to instrumental tuition that stand the chance of a good grade, proving that the elite tag is still there.

We presume that schemes such as Sing Up and the Wider Opportunities instrumental scheme, brought in at Key Stage 2 and giving extra money and enthusiasm, have been put in place to build on the knowledge gained from the National Curriculum; however because this is so lacking in substance the teaching is building on sand.

**It would be better to put money and resources in at nursery stage and have firm foundations on which to build.**

We have been excited by recent interest and pilot projects based on the fantastic orchestral project 'El Sistema' from Venezuela, a politically led teaching scheme that has evolved over time but developed by those participating and delivering the programme, not by the political advisors. It is a ground-breaking social programme that has produced 30 symphony orchestras and given 250,000 children the opportunity to take part in music making to a very high standard, 90% of them from poor socioeconomic backgrounds.

Within the UK state school system, it is the government who dictate how music should be delivered, not the teachers themselves; however this does not mean that we have a joined up or long term view of music education. And we still fail to attract the poorest children into the classical music world in any significant way. We see that the aims of the National Curriculum are good but the content is not. We would love to see an integrated 'in schools' music programme for every child from Early Years to Higher Education.

So what is the DaCapo approach?

It is one where the methodology and the ethos are equal (expanded in paper 5 in the series). DaCapo use a Kodaly and Dalcroze inspired programme. Kodaly was a musician who came to England in the '30s and found that our choirs sang well; they were using relative solfa and hand signs to get exceptionally in tune singing. Kodaly took these ideas back to Hungary and, with a team of educators, put together a programme for learning to read music; this was adopted as a nationwide approach and all children in Hungary up until the fall of communism were educated in this way. Kodaly's idea of a well-trained musician was one who had a 'well tuned ear, eye, hand and heart!' He also believed that it was everyone's right to be musically literate - we agree!

Dalcroze was working at the same time as Kodaly, but in Switzerland. He developed a structured method based on movement and found that if he worked with his students using musical movements, concepts and rhythms, and away from their instruments, their playing improved.

The DaCapo approach incorporates these ideas in a child-friendly way - working methodically, planning active and varied lessons, taking a longer-term view of progression and trusting inevitable progression, whilst always recognising the individual's or group's needs.

Ideally the approach would be open to all - truly accessible - but for reasons of cost it is only DaCapo school classroom music that can be truly inclusive. Until we find a way to finance instrumental programmes, the expectation that every child will have the opportunity to learn an instrument remains with the private sector.

**The nuts and bolts of the DaCapo approach have been put together in a structured, tried and tested programme, published in our sets of six ToolBoxes.**

These ToolBoxes are the backbone of the work, allowing teachers to construct carefully graded, progressive sessions with an appropriate mixture of activities and the repertoire (much of it written especially for DaCapo) to enable sessions to be hugely enjoyable. Used properly, they ensure that pupils progress. The ToolBoxes exist from toddler to secondary level; there are also programmes such as the 'Rusties' for adult returners and 'Reading for Rock Stars' for teenagers who are excellent instrumentalists but haven't been taught to read music.

The ethos is clear in the construction of all of these courses - that serious music learning and participation is for everyone. We believe that we are the only organisation that has such a clearly structured syllabus and well-defined ethos - used by all of its teachers. They are trained to work (as a team wherever possible) with the ToolBoxes and they are assessed both on the content and the delivery, ensuring that the DaCapo ethos is maintained alongside the programme of learning.

We also make sure that socialising, sharing, listening, contributing, laughing, making mistakes, correcting, repeating and sharing new ideas, are all a part of the teaching and learning experience.

**We argue that:**

- \* **if you start with a programme of skills building and participation as young as possible**
- \* **continue through schooling, with an integrated approach encompassing classroom music, instrumental skills and opportunities to play in ensembles (without having to audition or prove ability through the grade exams system),**

**..... the results would be as striking as those seen in Venezuela!**

**©Jane Cutler, The DaCapo Music Foundation. November 2010  
www.dacapo.co.uk**