

To sceptics, Colourstrings may seem like a crazy cult, but could the system turn children into great players?

It all starts innocently enough — what, in fact could be more innocent than a baby clapping hands in a music class? But before you know it, you are singing songs about suicidal gnats. You are making your hands into the shape of a whole cast of naked sock puppets. And your life has been taken over by a bizarre Hungarian-Finnish version of Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.

Congratulations, you have joined the cult of Colourstrings, a radical new approach to music teaching from Scandinavia. Colourstrings arrived in the UK only a few years ago but is now rapidly gathering momentum. Nicolas Chisholm, the former headmaster of the Yehudi Menuhin School, has said that “the part that Colourstrings will play in the future is of vital importance to the cultural life of this country”. Derek Aviss, of Trinity College of Music, has stated: “I have yet to experience a more successful approach to developing musicianship, aural awareness and solid musical principles in the very young.” David Miliband and his concert violinist wife have been spotted at their children’s end of year shows. Its potential has caught the eye of educationalists: some of the most ambitious academies and specialist state schools have introduced Colourstrings on a daily basis in an attempt to transform the lives of poorer children. But, like a cult, it starts them young, becomes all-consuming, and is to outsiders just a little odd.

Let me add a disclaimer at this point. I am profoundly unmusical. Sure, I laboured through a few grades of instruments at school before I jacked it in, a national rite of passage that I as a parent intended to visit upon my children. This screeching and scraping, after all, gives British youth valuable lessons in the art of failure.

So I signed up my two children to Colourstrings because the class happened to be around the corner — little did I know then that other parents were making 100-mile round trips to get there as centres are so few. With its jaunty name it seemed to be another kind of mindless baby clapfest that achieves little more than passing the slobber on the rattle.

But then odd things started to happen. The songs, for instance, were so achingly sad. In no other singing group had my toddler been asked to rhyme “melancholy” with “far from jolly”. Why was my three-year-old, draped in ribbons, prancing like a horse? Why had she suddenly started to obsess about singing to her “precious box” of objects? Why was a sizable chunk of class time spent pretending to sleep on a rug while listening to a difficult Bach concerto?

I mentioned these concerns to a neighbour. She sighed deeply. “Uh-oh” she said. “You’re doing Colourstrings. Goodbye to your life.” With two older children in the programme, much of her past decade had been spent going to three classes a week for each of them — instrument tuition, musicianship and orchestra, as well as summer camps and tours. She made me nervous. I didn’t think I was up to Colourstrings. And then her eight-year-old boy sat down at the piano and hammered out tune after tune off the top of his head, with the glee of a midget Fats Domino.

For most British children, the choice of musical education is between the traditional method — slogging it out with sheet music — or the more hardcore Suzuki, the Japanese system of starting an instrument at around 3, and learning through rigorous copying and repetition. Colourstrings is neither.

It was created by Géza Szilvay, a Hungarian who emigrated to Finland (this mixture of Finnish and Hungarian heritage I think accounts for the “far from jolly” tone of the songs). It starts even younger than Suzuki — teaching children from 18 months to 18 years. But its principles are unique, the most basic being it teaches singing first and foremost, and children initially learn to play only what they can already sing.

Deborah Harris was one of the first Colourstrings practitioners in the UK — she now has 1,000 children at the UK’s largest Colourstrings centre, in North London. “I heard the name and thought it sounded like a gimmick. That is until I went to meet Géza Szilvay at his East Helsinki Music Institute. I saw what the children were doing and realised it was anything but.”

Szilvay based his method on the Kodály Method, a practice of singing teaching widespread in Hungarian schools, and, according to many, the reason why a staggering number of the best musicians of the 20th century are Hungarian. In Kodály, the child learns pitch and rhythm through his or her voice, referred to as “the most democratic instrument”. The first songs are in descending minor thirds, the same two notes all children naturally use for calling out “Mummy!”

By 4 or 5, a child — unwittingly through games and dance — is learning the “do-re-mi” scale both in voice and in special hand signs for each note. It is not until children have had a good few years of these musicianship classes that instrument tuition begins as well. Singing is never given up, says Harris, it is the building block of everything.

“Even as a teenager, at a very high level, a Colourstrings student will be different. When they come to play a difficult piece of a Mozart concerto, they may stop and translate it into do-re-mi to sing it before they play again. They have the tools to decode music. Children who are trained conventionally perhaps see musical notes in isolation.”

Singing is meant to inspire musical confidence and autonomy: it is the child, never the parent, who chooses the instrument aged around 6 or 7. This clearly delineates it from the early drilling of the Suzuki method. Colourstrings devotees instead mirror the Scandinavian belief in learning through play in the early years rather than forcing literacy. Hand signs are used instead of written music at first.

“You can teach a younger child to play an instrument, but many don’t have the attention span,” Harris says.

“Our approach is to teach what is easy to teach — music — in a fun way first. Once you have that toolkit, then you can wrestle with the technical side of an instrument rather than trying to learn everything all at once.”

Whether it is the very best approach, there is no way of knowing. To my untrained eye, it seems like more crazy fun than I had alone with my sheet music. It’s interesting to note that although the emphasis on training the voice through learning the do-re-mi scales seems new, this was common in school singing lessons in the UK in the 1950s. It is, as Julie Andrews said in the *Sound of Music*’s *Do-Re-Mi* song, going back to the very beginning. It’s quite a good place to start.

Helen Rumbelow - The Times – January 27 2011