

# ORFF SCHULWERK in the CHILDREN'S CHOIR SETTING

BY DARLA MEEK

*Darla Meek offers a thumbnail explanation of the nuts and bolts of the Orff process and how that might work in the children's choir at your church!*

## **WHO WAS ORFF...AND WHAT'S A SCHULWERK?**

Orff Schulwerk is an approach to music teaching and learning that is based on musical things children do naturally in their play, such as sing, chant rhymes, dance, and clap. These natural behaviors are guided into more structured opportunities for expressing and making music. The philosophy was developed by German composer Carl Orff and his collaborator, composer and educator Gunild Keetman, in the late 1940s and is now utilized by musical educators all over the world.

The distinctive feature of Orff Schulwerk is the role of the child as an *active contributor* to a *collaborative musical effort*. Children are invited to contribute their own ideas through exploring, improvising, and composing music, as well as choreographing movement and drama.

What about reading music? In Orff Schulwerk, as with other holistic approaches (such as the Kodály Method, Suzuki, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, and Music Learning Theory), children are provided a substantial foundation of music skill by imitating the instructor and exploring soundmaking *before* they are taught standard Western notation. In short: SOUND BEFORE SYMBOL. This process parallels the way children learn to speak and read, and has become accepted as the *best practice* for teaching music.

## ORFF IN THE CHILDREN'S CHOIR SETTING

The Orff Schulwerk approach allows the children to discover and develop their God-given creativity to express personal worship. It is also a vehicle for learning the truths of God's word and sharing them with the congregation.

Some of the benefits of the approach are:

- Orff Schulwerk provides many outlets for beautiful music making (singing, barred and unpitched instrument playing, drama, speech, recorder, etc.) so that all children can participate using a mode in which they feel competent.
- Music experiences are conducted in a non-competitive atmosphere. Each child contributes according to his or her ability.
- All children are constantly involved in actively making music while in choir.
- The language and customs of non-English children are embraced.
- Relationships are enhanced through the collaborative, creative atmosphere inherent in an Orff inspired classroom. Children learn to listen with sensitivity to others and to respond with encouraging, thoughtful words. The role of the teacher changes to that of a facilitator, cheerleader, and guide.
- Orff Schulwerk is based on the philosophy that *children make music their own by making music themselves.* (Brigitte Warner)

### THE INSTRUMENTS

Rhythmic and melodic ideas can be transferred to instruments, including specially designed melodic percussion called *Orff instruments* (xylophones, metallophones, and glockenspiels). It is important to emphasize that the instruments serve only as accompaniment. It is not necessary to have all the instruments to apply the Orff principles— they simply extend the sounds that can be produced by the body.

To begin, purchase a variety of high-quality unpitched percussion instruments and hand drums. Just as orchestral instruments can be divided into families, we can divide unpitched



*Removing unneeded bars helps children focus only on the bars they are using.*

percussion instruments into families according to how they are played or made. Purchase several of the same instrument from each family:

- **SHAKERS** (such as maracas)
- **SCRAPERS** (such as guiros)
- **WOODS** (such as claves or temple blocks)
- **METALS** (such as triangles or cow bells)
- **MEMBRANES** (drums)
- **SPECIAL EFFECTS** (such as flexatone, windchime, or stir xylophone)

The barred instruments were developed in the 1920's by Carl Orff's friend, piano maker Karl Maendler. They were designed with removable bars so that children will be able to play them with ease.

**Xylophones** have bars that are made of wood (Greek: "wood" "sound"). Because of their almost immediate sound decay, and are ideal for more complicated melodic parts. Xylophones are modeled after their African counterparts.

**Metallophones** are voiced as the xylophones are, but the bars are made of metal. The sound is similar to that of the Indonesian gamelan (Greek: "metal" "sound"). Metallophones are used for sustained, bell-like patterns because of their long resonance time.

**Glockenspiels** are the smallest members of the Orff ensemble (German: "bell" "play") and they feature the highest pitches. They are useful for "color" parts because of their ringing sound.

If you do not have instruments, substitute with what you do have. Resonator bells, Melodee bells, hand chimes, or keyboards would work just fine.

If you have only a few barred instruments, here is one idea: have the children count off in twos (or threes) so that there are two (or three) children in a line behind each instrument. After the children have learned an ostinato on their bodies, instruct the "ones" to play it on their instruments, with the "twos" and "threes" watching. The "twos" play it next (after the "ones" rotate to the back of the line), and finally the "threes."

## HOW TO PLAY THE BARRED (ORFF) INSTRUMENTS

Teach the mallet work **FIRST**, separately from the instruments. Model for them how to hold the mallets (and how **NOT** to hold them):

- Pinch the mallet stick about 4 inches from the bottom between index fingers and thumbs.
- Wrap the remaining fingers lightly around the bottom few inches of the mallet stick. Do not grip the mallet with these fingers.
- Roll elbows outward. The sensation should simulate riding a bicycle. Backs should be straight and elbows up off the knees.
- "Pinch, wrap, and roll" works well as a reminder.
- For "rest position," have choristers place their mallets on their shoulders.



*Children take turns playing a new instrument part.*

- For "ready position," the mallet heads should *hover* over the first two bars to be played.
- Instruct the children to "bounce their basketballs" (the mallet heads) lightly on the floor or table. It is important that the mallet heads bounce off the bars so that the bars can vibrate.
- Guide the children to practice various patterns while playing a steady beat: hands moving simultaneously, alternating, moving inward and outward, one hand moving in and out while the other stays in place, etc.
- Turn the instrument so that it is standing on its end with the high end up. Discuss the high and low ends of the instruments: the bars are shorter on high end and longer on the low end.
- Consider comparing the shape of the instrument to a hill--the low part is where the ground is, and the high part is where the sun is.
- Place the instrument on the floor and review the high and low ends.
- Have the children practice "walking" upward and downward on the instrument with their mallets.
- Remind the children to strike the instrument in the center of the bar with a light bounce (as if giving it a light kiss, or as if touching a hot stove). Pull the sound out of the bar.
- Always play using both hands, alternating notes, unless otherwise instructed.
- To remove bars, grip the bar on both sides (using two hands) and lift straight up. To avoid breaking the delicate pegs, do not remove bars at an angle.

### **CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

Play is the work of children. And with play comes a certain amount of joyful freedom and flexibility. This may be a bit unsettling if a teach is used to strict control and quiet children sitting in chairs. My advice is to start slowly. Demonstrate how to perform a certain task for the large group. Then, choose a child to demonstrate. Finally, allow the children to perform the task and a time limit in which to do it. For example, "You have 30 seconds to create a four-beat body percussion pattern using pats and claps." As they show they are able to handle this small amount of freedom with maturity, gradually increase the complexity of the task. For example, "You have 60 seconds to compose an eight-beat, stepwise melody using C, D, E, G, and A and be ready to share it with the group."

Rest assured that an Orff Schulwerk teacher employing a lighthearted, hands-off approach can, with careful teaching and consistent expectations, still maintain full control over the classroom setting. My classroom is very orderly: the children have set routines, they raise their hands to offer ideas or ask questions, and all are expected to stay on task.

Rules for group music making must be clearly defined and consistently enforced. I am very strict with instruments. A lesson can completely fall apart if children are allowed to play their instruments out of turn. In my choir room, if a child plays an instrument without being directly instructed to play, he or she loses the mallets and plays with the fingertips only for one turn. Usually this solves the problem. If not, the child loses the privilege of playing the instrument. The key is to select activities that are so enticing the children will be eager to participate appropriately!

### **INSTRUMENT RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Buy **ONLY** the best quality. If the instrument has poor tone quality and is out of tune when you pull it out of the box, you have wasted your money. It is better to buy fewer instruments of good quality than more bad sounding instruments. Look for the highest-quality of the Sonor or Studio 49 brands. My favorites are the Palisano fiberglass instruments.
- The order of importance for barred instruments is: unpitched percussion and hand drums, bass xylophone, soprano glockenspiels, tenor/alto xylophones, contrabass bars, metallophones. If you do not have good unpitched percussion and at least one hand drum per two children, purchase those first.

- The number of instruments you purchase depends on the number of children in the largest choir, and the amount of space in the classroom for movement. I personally would not sacrifice movement space so that every child could have an instrument. Much learning happens when two students share a barred instrument!

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the American Orff Schulwerk Association (AOSA) website to find workshops in your area ([www.aosa.org](http://www.aosa.org)). There are currently 197 chapters throughout the United States, and each chapter usually hosts three workshops per year. The workshops are delightful gatherings of elementary music educators who are led through active music making experiences with a well-known clinician. Though the materials used are typically for elementary music teachers in a school setting, the ideas can be easily adapted for use in the church.

In addition to professional development opportunities, the website provides links to research articles, a video library, and other classroom resources that may be helpful to you. It is my hope that you will enhance your choristers' worship experience by delving into the wonders of the Orff Schulwerk approach!

## RESOURCES

- *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (Meek): Choristers Guild
- *Joy Full Noise! Let the Little Ones Come, and Rejoice with Drum and Voice* (Nichols): Beatin' Path Publications
- *5 Spirituals for Chorus with Orff Accompaniment* (Calantropio): Goodreads
- *Celebrate* (McRae): J.W. Pepper
- *Chatter with the Angels* (McRae): Amazon
- *Glow Ree Bee* (McRae): West Music
- *Holidays and Holy Days* (Ladendecker): St. John's Music
- *Let Us Praise God* (McRae): West Music
- *Round the Seasons!* (Gilpatrick): Alfred Publishing
- *Sing Out! Rejoice!* (Olson): Plank Road Publishing
- *Sing We Noel* (Goetze): West Music
- *Singing in the Season* (Frazee): Amazon
- *Children, Sing Praise! Sing Out, Children, and Three Bible Stories* (Nichols): Beatin' Path Publications



### CGBK74 ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

by Darla Meek | an exciting collection containing nine foundational Bible verses set to music with Orff and other percussion instruments.



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