

Klara Kokas – Overview

Klara Kokas (1929 – 2010) was a music educator and psychologist. She showed a great connection with children even from her early days as an elementary classroom teacher. She received her PhD in child psychology. In 1973 she became the first director of the Kodály School in Boston, Massachusetts. It was in Boston, working with children from many different demographics that she first realized her own teaching philosophy.

The Kokas approach to teaching is rooted in music listening and movement. The class follows an outline of games. We begin by greeting one-another, improvising, singing children's songs, moving to classical music examples, and expression of the music through art. The course will explore a variety of music with the aim of helping children harness their natural imagination and instincts towards the music.

Experiential-learning is at the heart of Kokas pedagogy. Kokas first noticed that children are very attentive and engaged in activities they enjoy. She believed that if you could instill joy in the act of learning, children will engage and focus on the education task. She believed that children will like something with enough repetition but the repetition must be associated with happiness. With music listening, the child is able to come to an understanding of what emotion the music evokes within themselves.

Movement is the vehicle for which the children will gain this knowledge. This is because movement, like music, has an ebb and flow. It moves up and down which allows the children to explore the tonal space of even the most difficult compositions. The exploration takes the form of play but it has a tremendous impact on the speed to which children begin to understand within their own bodies, complex concepts of intervallic relationships, articulation, speed, and musical form.

When children are open to expressing their own ideas about music they become masters of their knowledge. This attitude helps children gain confidence. These classes are designed to foster a positive environment where self-expression is embraced. The child, working as an interpreter of the music is no longer passive in the act of listening but a creator of the music itself. Allowing children to participate in the act of creation of beautiful art gives them a sense of purpose within the music.

Kokas believed that if we as teachers, allow our students to develop an inner imagination towards the music, it will not be such a hardship for young children to sit still, listen and enjoy what they hear performed in the concert hall. Kokas did not want to stifle the child's own creativity, so the lessons are designed for the child to interact within the music. Music is the frame for all of the lessons. The child moves with or against the music to unlock its secret meaning where the movement becomes a dramatization, or personal story.

Ultimately, the goal is to be inclusive of all children, not merely the most talented. For those children who may be shy or with learning disabilities, there is no judgement. She approached her teaching from a place of acceptance and love for all children. Always, we must return to the music, for this will unlock the child's creativity.