

INTERVIEW to SUZANNE KONINGS by Joana Riera

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-Joana

[...] I am trying to get to the essence of the thing. **How do you imagine exercises and the strategies for the teacher in order to develop the ability of playing by ear in piano lessons?** I mean, with your master classes, I think you already brought to me the answers: preparing the pieces with exercises, embodiment... All of these strategies are the points. But regarding the model of "Theory in practice", what are your expectations of developing this model?

-Suzanne

Yeah. I think the model helps me. It starts with a piece of music, and then I analyze the piece. I come from a background of music theory, but I think that what I learned with this model is to **find the connections between what we usually do with analysis is putting names to things, connecting them to the other elements, in the model of the sound and what the symbol actually means from the sound perspective.** So I try to go back, if my starting point is the notation as a teacher, it doesn't necessarily have to be the starting point for the student. And I think that is what your research is about, exactly, that you can actually **start from the sound** experience of the students, **but as a teacher, you can use the symbol notation to understand it in a way that the student can understand it from the sound.** And therefore I need analysis, and that is the name part of things, I think, yeah.

-Joana

Do you mean helping with the symbol or with the name first? Because, for example, in an adult that is just a starting, probably it's more useful to start with the name, yes. And the symbol is not necessary in the very start.

-Suzanne

What I saw with the Kodaly classes, **that the sound**, main connection, **can be developed in a very strong way**, and then you can go many other ways, but as long as that is not really safe, you cannot really rely on it to use it in new situations (name-sound), and then name can become sound, and from there, I feel you can go to notation or to concept, or to them, but that is sometimes that I find, **I also see people working with choirs that they too easily think, if we understand the system, then the name will give the sound. But I think that is usually too fast. So, I think it needs a lot of time for the sound to be understood with names.**

-Joana

Yes, I totally agree it takes time. Yeah, even the article of Chanette, he studied how we internalize harmonics in music theory. Sometimes we have a lot of names and a lot of labeling exactly, but we forget the sounds. Yeah. In fact, I have the feeling as a pianist that I have this, that I have in my head a lot of labels, yes, but sometimes it's not connected enough with the sound.

-Suzanne

Yeah, yeah. And then we can present the labels, but if it doesn't resonate in sound, it is empty. But the other way around, it can be done, I think. So the analysis in a way, that's the part of the teacher. And then you use your labels that you have been able to study. But the perspective **you have to**

think from the perspective of the student who thinks in sounds, hopefully. I must agree that also in my piano classes, that was not how it was done.

-Joana

No, that's the thing that for us, I think it's easier just to put the score and great we have an instrument that uses the sounds for you.

-Suzanne

So the way of working is, indeed, finding the repertoire that is really interesting, that you think is suitable for the students, and then try to understand the piece. How you can understand it from the sound yourself, what exercises can you think of so that the student has an image of the sound of the piece. And the pity is that there's not really a recipe that goes for all pieces. Usually you find something with pulse and rhythm. And even with the easiest pieces, I think you can do this.

-Joana

Yeah, yeah. Nice. Another question about just the ability of playing by ear, because now I'm one year and a half after choosing this as my focus of my research. I didn't know how to play by ear because I don't know I haven't learned. But now I have noticed that probably the playing by ear just connects the sound with the instrument exactly, directly. And how can I include more names? Because it's meaningful to say it between the sound and the name, isn't it?

-Suzanne

Yeah. And I do think that also these very direct sounds to instruments can be useful. So just copy playing variations, yeah, but it needs your question to understand more. Sometimes the step in between can be, you hear it. Somebody plays it to you. You have to sing it back with sofa names and then play it. But it's a slow, slower thing. So I think I would do both, both the fast thing, so instrument to instrument, and the slow version, with a lot more understanding probably would be to play, sing back so far and play back in different keys, of course, transposing.

-Joana

Another question that I experienced the other day in a lesson was that one kid had a lot of references and probably his names were just the visual keys of the keyboard. Are these a kind of name, too? Just copying my hand or copying the keys, you know, visualizing, because nowadays we have (I'm not a defense or at all) but you have the YouTube videos of this. So he's a fan of these things, okay, but it's another way of learning, you know. He visualized the keyboard a lot, and he's super fast visualizing.

-Suzanne

So it is a symbol. Most that he sees. It's like a visual thing that works for him, not a name, but not in music notation, like for guitar, you have the tab, tabulator, yeah, just where to put your fingers. I think it's not the main thing. I think it's something that works for him, that he can see and he knows, yeah. And I think that's direct instruction on what to do on the instrument, yeah. How fast do they move? How fast do they move again? Probably not too bad. But if it's the only thing, it could be a bit limited, maybe, yeah, so maybe that's it. All those connections are, I think, important in the model, but too fast. The balance. It's always nice. I haven't heard of that strategy yet.

-Joana

Yes, well, more things about the exercises. For example, I have tried to do a lot of **ecco patterns**, okay? instrument to instrument. Any more ideas?

-Suzanne

Yeah. **So the step in between that we have is singing.** Another thing so you **play the student pattern**, but also what you could sometimes ask, if the student plays a short melody, if he can repeat. How does the **memory work?** **How aware is the student of what he is playing?** So student **improvises** a short melody, and you could structure maybe that process by giving rhythm elements and certain if you really want to train, for example, the name sound connection say you have to do it with the tone **set of those three (sol, mi, la)**, that you kind of frame the improvisation and give rhythm elements. But it can also be free and maybe try to find out how far the student already is with this, yes, but sometimes it's not easy to play a thing, no, and play the same thing again, exactly. **And transpose.**

-Joana

Yes. What I have tried to do is just learn a song, sing it, and then they have to recall it, but not with solfa, just with the instruments and singing the lyrics through humming. Also, in adults, a problem that I have found a lot is that they are not able to pitch match. So if they are not able to pitch a match, wow, playing is really hard, and for us, probably it's really basic. Are for children because they are more used to singing.

-Suzanne

Do you see the same problem if they don't look after you play something, and they have to kind of find a place on the piano? You don't say the starting pitch will be here and let them try to find.

-Joana

Yeah. They are better with the ear. I think, yes, instrument, instrument. I think it's easier than singing. To play.

-Suzanne

It can be about different things, the tone, color of the piano, that they maybe recognize, or they can just try a little bit, and singing is a different skill. And if they're not used to singing, and **the piano does indeed not need the singing names, the relative solfa names**, because yeah, much faster is the piano name.

-Joana

In fact, this is another question, because I have been trained all my life with the "do fixed". So sometimes it's really hard for me. Then I start listening to the harmonies and the relative meaning of what I say so I think it's really enriching. But then how can I translate to my students in a clear way? Because, of course, if we sing in solfa, then they have to press the absolute pitch...

-Suzanne

yeah, yeah. It is a problem I think cannot be solved with using the same name for two different things, yeah.

-Joana

Do you always make a difference?

-Suzanne

Yeah, yeah. And we don't have the problem because we don't have the fixed names for the kids. We have the ABC, we can say, and also have two names, singing name and a playing name. And I was just discussing with another teacher that already in 18th century France, they applied the number system as a kind of a crutch, yeah, so they didn't read, for example, F major notation. Yeah. And would be sung on do, yeah, so kind of three steps, but yeah, not ideal.

-Joana

I like this system in order to understand the relation with the base, the tension release. But for singing, it's not super musical.

-Suzanne

No. And they would, for example, the minor they would analyze starting at six, and then sing la. So it makes sense, but it's still another translating step. So yeah, it's not fast. Yeah. The other way that I've seen systems where people had other syllables for the movable do, many people have tried so that you would have the fixed syllables story, and then you would have other syllables. But then again, you have two similar kinds of systems, I don't know. And then from China, I know that they then try to move to the ABC names and then go back to them. So it's a problem everywhere. But originally, of course, the system was movable.

The problem with the relative solfa and the piano names totally being the same with staff notation reading sometimes, if we have that, is also a conflict, because you have learned that the note on the second line is sol but then having to name it, though, we usually apply a system where we do for a long time exercises with only one do position so to kind of redirect the reading, so G major and G flat major, because the visual is all the same? Interesting? Yeah, yeah.

-Joana

In fact, I have one question about my experience. I think it depends on each subject, when you give us in the Kodaly course exercises to practice, and while I'm practicing, of course, I'm trained in the do fixed. Yeah, but I have noticed that in my head I'm listening the 12345, in numeral Romans. Sometimes, for example, if I'm in G major, suddenly, if I read that the G is my new do, I know that the re is my new do. But in my head, this new song is listening to the five in numerals. And for me, it's really writing because, oh, now I listen more to the harmony, basically. But I think it's because of my background as a young, years of training, but as a child, how does he understand it?

-Suzanne

It's such a pity, those systems cannot, really could not interfere, because that's what we see with the Kodaly. They start with the relative and the meaning of harmonies is implied in the relative system itself. And then later we can simply apply the numerals to kind of analyze it, yeah. It's after Yeah. So the sound is first because the harmonic meaning of the intonation is implied in the relative system. So that is already trained. I think next week we will see nice examples of that in the study tour. So the sound system is already functioning where the names have a stable relation to that sound

system, yeah. And that system is applied either to the instrument or to analysis or to... and that is, I think, also, what ABC names don't do, yeah? But even more problematic, if it's the same. So I don't know. I thought, I don't know. Changing the world is probably not a problem. But I think the essence is that the naming system should have a stable relation to the meaningful sound.

-Joana

Like, yeah. I think, in fact, this is the point. No,

-Suzanne

Because the meaning is here, not using the sound, yeah, and they connect in a stable way to the names, the first names that you learn, and from there, you can apply other systems. But the other way around is tricky. Yeah, and I think for teachers, this is important to realize for sure what is actually being developed in the use of the students, and still with the absolute names, or with piano, sometimes it can develop a perfect pitch hearing. It's also a meaningful thing, but that still doesn't imply harmony, the relation, for sure.

-Joana

Yeah, in fact, I have discussed this with friends that have the fist, and they told me it's really confusing the do mobile because you already listened to some notes, but then you have to name it in another way, but the relations are still there or not.

-Suzanne

She was also a student, and she did research. And then she had to use the ABC system movable. So if I would read in the key of G major, yeah, I would have to sing it in C major, because to use sort of the same problems, I was, of course, totally confused. Yeah. So it means something that you learn that's just so important that we understand what we learn. And I'm always amazed also when we hear the children who have learned this, the sounds where the names include the relations, yeah, how their intonation is so nice, yeah. So this is something that is not easily solved,

-Joana

yeah. Do you think that it will be solved in the future?

-Suzanne

I don't know. I think it is kind of similar to the rhythm thing. So in the Kodaly, he just also took things that he saw around and their way of presenting rhythm is through the symbols. So you have to quarter note is always ta, eighth note is always titi. yeah, so it's not relation based, but it's so not function based, but notation based. And I always find it strange that he had such clever ideas about the melodic aspects. But for the rhythm, he just took a system that is very fixed, yeah, and the American World has already changed, but Hungary not yet. So it's a big thing to change, because you have to change all your school books because the teachers were trained. I don't dare to say if it's but, yeah, it's really interesting. Maybe, as a, I don't know if that's possible for teachers, just call it that way, to learn ABC names and from their work, yeah, at least with the students. Yeah, that's, I think, a challenge, that's maybe the only way I don't know, yes, if there are better ways.

-Joana

Yes, I'm trying to introduce the movable do. Well, I have two kids who are five years old, yeah, so we are just not yet. So we're just singing, transposing.

-Suzanne

I know that she's now back in Dominion, Republic, I think. And she published a book, but she invented those other syllables. But I think maybe, as a teacher, it is a shift kind of book.

-Joana

Do you think each system depends a little bit on each pupil, and how can they perhaps remain to music?

-Suzanne

Yeah, and I think that is why the model helps a bit, because probably you will see what connections go faster or slower. For certain students, you can choose to go for the things that already work fast, or maybe at some point we're going to develop a little bit more in this aspect that's not really working on. I think it's different for all musicians, what we take in, what we hear, what we're able to process, but maybe the model is also something to analyze.

-Joana

What do you think is happening in the lessons about the model? I really enjoyed these three steps, just writing the info, the action as a teacher, and then the result. I think it's really clear. In fact, another question, which actions do you think I can try as a teacher in order to develop the ability of playing by ear?

-Suzanne

The ones that we mentioned are:

Sometimes students have a piece of music or a melody that they find beautiful. They just find it on their instrument, playing by ear. And thinking also about jazz people. So you play together. And it could happen that you play together with your students (question-answer), and you play maybe three times the same. You change one note, yeah, variations. Does the student react? But then you should do it, I think, both ways in the game, so the student can also be the one leading, and then you have to follow for sure, so that he understands what it's actually about, yeah, that it's musical communication and not just an exercise. And maybe that is also something in the teaching that we sometimes miss, that if it's really about making music together, that that the student should also be able to have the role of the musical leader, and then also as a teacher, maybe you fail and play the wrong note, but that's also fine. You can hear a lot about, do the students have ideas? And that can be directly to the recording instrument. Yeah, playing by ear, what people without having music classes without a score or with music that's just orally fast. It has to be two ways. So the student is an active speaker as well, and not just a listener, of course, as a language exactly.

I always also like the Kodaly course, where everybody can participate as a teacher. So it's really fun. It's not just that I'm the teacher, that I want to tell you what to do.

-Joana

Yeah, it's really interesting. And regarding material, I love the approach of Kodaly for children, but this research is more about adults. I'm always hoping that they choose the music and that they just

bring some melodies, and we can try to play by ear. But of course, an adult has a more complex taste. Do you have any recommendation of what can I do when a song is already really complex and a beginner probably brings to me a melody that has even modulations or all the collection of notes we can not start

-Suzanne

Maybe, as a teacher, you know what the melody will be, maybe analyze parts which you think are doable, yeah, and then extract some parts and just have a lot more patience. But if they are motivated, they will do it anyway. But the problem is, maybe the same as with the copying movement, that it is a one off thing, so they cannot transfer the skills to another song, because the understanding is not there. So again, I would not avoid it because it can be a motivation for somebody wanting to play. But the problem is in the transferable skills.

Maybe you can extract things we've learned and try that in different keys to the elements, so that some skill building is going on. Skill Building. And structuring that is, I think, the task of the teacher, not just turning the pages, but at the same time, it's so nice because it's the music they want to play. It's really motivating for them. They're able to understand a bit faster, yeah. Probably they also don't want to sing, I don't know if you can try.

-Joana

Yeah. They told me, I'm not singing exactly. I don't want to sing. What can we do? We sing together. We try, in fact, with one pupil. We have been kind for six months in order to pitch match.

-Suzanne

So that's not easy. I also have one adult piano student, and for him, I can do a lot of rhythmic exercises. First, he's okay with that, yeah, clapping the beat, speaking the rhythm, then already the piano piece is structured. And then, we can sing more. I also cannot ask, because then it will be just much more stressful, but with others, yes, and I don't know also your question how to bring it to teachers, maybe last 10 years, what I've noticed, it doesn't really help to try to sit down and say or try to explain, but doing it and finding inspiring examples of model lessons is usually done. Yeah, discussions. I've not found it, okay. So usually having a workshop where you try out things. Sometimes I think of an exercise and I think it totally didn't work depending on the person. Usually students cannot do it. I first have to think, what was in my exercise, what did I already imagine that they could do? Was that a realistic thing? So that changed, I think for me, because I was a theory teacher and solfege teacher, also sometimes with colleagues, then they would just say that it's because they think the student defaulted, that they can't do it. But that's usually not.

As an example, Hester and Karen, they try these exercises with their choirs. They thought, well, we have done the pentatonic scale and warming up exercises with sofa, with the high LA. And then they assumed that the choir, could immediately sing from the name below LA. No, so again, we need to reassure everything. So we think it's easy.

-Joana

How do you usually design the exercises for a piece? Do you always go for the most difficult part or more the essence of the piece?

-Suzanne

Good question. What I only look for is tonality and tonality can mean the tone sets. So it doesn't have to be major or minor; it can be pentatonic or tone sets, collections of notes.

Understanding of a tone center or not, you also look for structures of phrases. So if I design an exercise, I try to relate it to a musical not phrase, but framework, that makes sense in the light of that piece, just the units, larger units. I always also look for essential rhythm elements, dynamic elements.

And that goes probably together with the development of the form of those things. Yeah.

And maybe also just things that catch my ear when I listen to it, that I think that's an interesting part. Yeah, there can be consonances between voices. Can be about dissonances between voices, representing a new element.

Yeah, but usually I'm not that structured. That's the difference between the American approach of the Kodaly and the Hungarian approach. They have the methodology so clear for what is the new element, and they find the piece with it. And I usually do the other way around. I like the piece, and then see what you can teach. But the other one is, of course, very clear and very predictable, but a bit boring. So it really depends. And then it's nice if you have a collection of pieces that you know well, and then you're able to decide, okay, I'm going to choose this piece because it fits in the line of what I want to but basically this year is analysis of the piece. And then you have all the tools that you've learned. You have the rhythm language, you have the solfa, the body percussion, free movement, and probably there's much more. And we didn't look much into Kurtag, but I have to mention that.

-Joana

Oh, yeah, but I have it into account. And I have tasted some lessons, it's interesting. Yes, even with one girl that I was struggling with because she was five years old, she was um, she lost the motivation at some point. And with Kurtag, she was kind. And she returned again. Because I think I introduced to her too soon the piano, and she got a little bit frustrated, yeah, and then with this, just as a game, she was super able to do it and free. So she was engaged again, yeah.

-Suzanne

Can you imagine? Because the piano, it is quite a thing that you ask with keys to press and huge. I really also like Kurtag. Sometimes we think it's the instrument that we need to teach. But probably not. It's everything that makes you able to play the instrument.

-Joana

And then still, you have to have the instrumental technique, yeah, but we have a lot of years to develop it. I feel we put the focus too soon in technique, against the music, yeah.

-Suzanne

And we kind of made the movements only directed to the instrument. It's necessary to do that well, so you need a good teacher.

-Joana

Technique, yeah. But I think even from the perspective of a student, you have to be aware that music is first. You know, sometimes when I am studying, I'm just correcting me, but this is not my

finger because some teacher has told me and they have internalized good. So I'm going to correct the finger and then say no, but sing. It doesn't matter exactly the note, but the singing.

-Suzanne

And still, if your fingerings are a mess, then you're not able to play. As an older beginner, I try to learn a new instrument, the cello, so I have to think through these processes all the time. It's very useful. It's another strategy. So I do need the instrumental technique, but I should not forget the other things, as the instrument can sometimes feel like a five-year-old—a bit of a struggle. You don't need frustration. We were teaching a lot of frustration, and enjoyment should be the focus. I think now solfege is really enjoyable. I think, and I see that with the youth choirs.

-Joana

I don't have any concrete questions, but it has been a pleasure, so inspiring. I think I have a lot of good insights and practical tools. Thank you very much.

-Suzanne

Okay, thank you. For me too. Yeah, basically, you just use all the tools, as long as you can relate it to the music that you kind of understand from them, and change the perspective of how the student might understand the piece. Yeah, and then try and make mistakes and do the same lesson four times and see what works best.