Singing, saying, dancing, playing—hardly unusual activities in elementary music education. Along with improvisation and creation of new forms in each of the areas, these constitute the means for learning in the active approach to music education known as Orff-Schulwerk. They are considered central because they are part of the child’s natural behavior—play.

A precise definition of this approach is difficult to formulate. Carl Orff described it as an “idea” for integrating the performing arts—music and movement specifically, but also speech and drama. He also described it as a “wild flower,” poetically conveying the message that it flourishes best in a natural setting without much cultivation. This image is meaningful to experienced Schulwerk teachers who realize how one facet can lead naturally and organically to another and become something much more exciting than ever could be attained through careful planning. But it is misleading to think that the Schulwerk has no specific content and requires no tending; we need to differentiate between wild flowers and weeds.

Orff-Schulwerk can be described as a model for the design of learning experiences; its main thrust is musical learning, but it has strong implications for cultural and social learning as well. The teacher employs the central activities described to nurture student development in musical skills and in understandings. The goal is development of individuals who are comfortable with active music making—they can sing, move, play instruments, use speech in rhythmic and dramatic contexts, improvise simply in all of these areas, and combine materials into original forms. The learning activities take place in a group context; ideally, each individual learns to cooperate in group activity as well as contribute to it, with confidence in his or her own abilities as well as appreciation for those of others.

Orff-Schulwerk is often called “elemental” music making, meaning that...
the materials used in all areas should be simple, basic, natural, and close to the child’s world of thought and fantasy. Though considered most applicable at the elementary school level, the approach has been adapted widely for use with mentally and physically handicapped children. It carries the potential for effectiveness with any age group or population that can benefit from a basic but creative music experience—preschoolers, college students, senior citizens. In each instance, the capabilities and interests of the group must be taken into careful consideration.

The Guntherschule
The “idea” began in the 1920s when the German composer Carl Orff (1895–1982), together with colleague Dorothee Gunther, opened the Guntherschule in Munich to provide a setting for musicians and dancers to integrate their arts. Students worked through the day and into the night experimenting, creating, and reshaping their creations. Those specializing in dance also learned to sing and play to understand the totality more completely; in like manner, the musicians had to develop a certain facility in movement. The instruments used were early versions of what we presently know as Orff instruments—barred percussion modeled after a type of African xylophone and built to Orff’s specifications. This intensely creative group of dancers and musicians became well known, touring throughout Europe; a high point was the planning and execution of the music/movement performance that opened the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Hundreds of school children were involved in the on-field performance—it was a triumphant moment. In subsequent years, the political climate and wartime conditions severely curtailed Guntherschule activities, although it continued to function. It was bombed several times and finally destroyed completely in 1945.

The ideal of integrating music and movement in a creative context did not die, however. In 1948, Orff and his colleagues were invited by the Bavarian Radio System to present a series of broadcasts using the idea with children. Gunild Keetman, a young musician who had been particularly significant in Guntherschule activity, was especially important in preparing these broadcasts, which became a resounding success. Teachers in Germany requested taped copies so they could begin such music making themselves. The continuation of this work with children, and especially the efforts of Keetman, led to the publication of the five volumes known as Orff-Schulwerk: Musik für Kinder (Schott, Mainz, 1950–54). A later volume (Paralipomena, 1977) contains items considered essential to the original set but not included at that time.

A successful adaptation of the Schulwerk idea requires great musical and cultural sensitivity.

The Starting Point
Rhythm is considered the starting point for these materials, with speech patterns the basis for rhythmic development. Simple word series lead to later examples in challenging mixed meters. The melodic material begins with three tones (sol-mi-la), completes the major pentatonic, then diatonic major, and proceeds with examples in the various church modes. Harmony begins with simple drone and ostinato patterns, proceeding to repetitive chord shifts and simple chord changes: I–V, I–IV–V, and the chaconne pattern.

A cursory look at the original published volumes is more confusing than enlightening. There is almost no explanatory material; instead, they are filled with songs, instrumental accompaniments, little pieces for instruments alone, short melodies, sample rhythm patterns, and accompaniment figures. The songs and pieces can be taught to children as written, but this is not the primary intent. The books are resources to which teachers can refer for rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas for developing comparable exercises and materials with their own students. Some discrepancies need to be recognized; for instance, in Book I, the simple three-note songs have accompaniments far beyond the level of children who would be interested in singing such songs. But the songs themselves and the types of accompaniment remain valid models for consideration in developing similar materials.

Orff and his colleagues felt strongly that this idea for active, creative music making could be relevant for music education throughout the world; each country or culture has only to adapt it according to its own musical heritage and cultural traditions. Later editions or adaptations of the original German volumes have been prepared and published in many countries, including Canada (1956), Sweden (1957), Flemish Belgium (1958), England (1958), Argentina (1961), Portugal (1961), Japan (1963), Spain (1965 and 1969), France (1967), Wales (1968), Czechoslovakia (1969), Taiwan (1972), Denmark (1977), Korea, and the United States (1977–1982).

The process of translation from one culture to another is far from simple. One of the basic premises of the Schulwerk is that each culture should begin with its own speech and song heritage—rhymes and proverbs, children’s chants, games, and songs. In some cultures, these may be based on rhythm and melody patterns quite different from the original German models. A successful adaptation of the Schulwerk idea requires great musical and cultural sensitivity; teachers must have the ability to look objectively at their own heritage and needs. The seeds of Orff-Schulwerk have indeed been transplanted to areas of the world far broader than indicated by the listing of publications. In some instances they have died out completely, in some they are surviving minimally, and in some they are flour-
ishing as well as actively seeking new directions for growth. As evidence of this, a number of countries now have active associations devoted to the support and promotion of Orff-Schulwerk. Our own American Orff-Schulwerk Association (OSA), with some 5,000 members, is by far the largest.

What Is “Orff-Schulwerk”? As used in the United States and in much of the world, the term "Orff-Schulwerk" in a restricted sense can refer to the repertoire contained in the original or adapted volumes, plus the many supplements included in this series. A great many other books have appeared in recent years, primarily in English-speaking countries, which are also considered part of the original Schulwerk repertoire.

The term “Schulwerk,” or simply “Orff,” is used more significantly to identify a pedagogy, a general procedure for guiding children through several phases of musical development: (1) exploration—discovery of the possibilities available in both sound and movement; (2) imitation—developing basic skills in rhythmic speech and body percussion (clapping, finger-snapping, thigh slapping or patschen, foot stamping, and others), in rhythmic and free movement through space, in singing, and in playing instruments—nonpitched percussion, the special Orff pitched percussion (xylophones, glockenspiels, metallophones), and the recorder as melody instrument; (3) improvisation—extending the skill with these components to the point where each individual can initiate new patterns and combinations as well as contribute to group activity based on this ability; (4) creation—combining material from any or all of the previous phases into original small forms such as rondos, theme and variations, and mini-suites; and of special significance, transforming literary material (fables, stories, and poems) into miniature “theater pieces” through whatever components seem appropriate—natural or rhythmic speech, movement, singing, and playing instruments. At this point, the essence of the pedagogy merges with Orff’s extensive production as a composer of stage works. These also extend the term “musical” to mean an integration of all the performing arts. Therefore the Schulwerk represents in microcosm the totality of Orff’s work.

The teacher must always be prepared to assume a leadership role.

The phases just described may be used in whatever order needed to accomplish the goals of a particular lesson and of a more long-term plan. Certainly experience in the first two phases is a prerequisite to work in the third and fourth. The Schulwerk itself establishes no set sequence of materials; this must be determined by each teacher according to the needs of the particular program. The development of musical literacy is also flexible; Orff felt it should definitely be part of Schulwerk learning, but gave no directives on how it should be accomplished. Many Orff teachers in the United States use movable do solfege along with the hand signals and rhythmic syllables associated with the Kodály method. Literacy is to be considered a means rather than a goal in the approach.

The term “process” is often used to describe the series of steps through which the teacher guides the students to reach short- or long-term goals. In a larger perspective, the Schulwerk is considered a process rather than a product-oriented methodology. The interactive activity of a particular lesson may result in something quite significant for that group that day, but rarely in material to be used with other classes in the same way. The same basic elements and format may be used repeatedly, but the essence of the pedagogy is that each group of participants must go through the “discovery learning” process of experimenting, selecting, evaluating, discarding, and finally combining materials in a way that satisfies that particular group. If the “product” of a given lesson or set of lessons is particularly worthy, the group may want to share it with other children or with parents. Ideally, any performances given as part of an Orff-oriented curriculum should come directly from the classroom process.

If truly committed to the Orff pedagogical ideal, a teacher will strive to become a facilitator rather than a director. As the children gain in skills and understanding, they should take increasing responsibility for working out musical and movement tasks and in contributing to the total lesson process. The teacher must always be prepared to assume a leadership role when needed in helping the children bring their ideas to fruition; as in all other ventures, nothing succeeds like success, and if the students can be guided toward a satisfying result they will be all the more willing to continue and extend such efforts.

“Set” Music
An Orff program can all too easily become oriented toward performance of set pieces; when this happens, the class or ensemble is just another elementary level performance organization. A teacher can teach song melodies and set instrumental parts to children, using many of the imitative techniques that are also employed in the “process” type lesson—clapping, patschen, echo singing, and so on. Notation can also be used. Songs and pieces learned in this way can be performed with much skill and musicality, in the same sense that a school band or chorus can perform set music with sensitivity and precision. Most Orff teachers do teach their groups this way from time to time to introduce new ideas and provide them with aural models. Often a lesson will be built around a piece from the original repertoire or some other source. It must be made clear, however, that the
ensemble type of musical learning and performance cannot be considered Orff pedagogy in any complete sense.

And what about “real” music—Beethoven, Bach, Stravinsky, the Beatles, the Who? There is no prescribed plan, but this music relates on two levels. First, the understanding of musical elements gained through experience on a limited scale, with Orff materials and procedures, can be considered a basis for expansion into material from any style or period. Second, Orff teachers are more and more frequently integrating recorded music into their lessons—as a motivation, as comparison, and often with the direct purpose of developing an understanding of a particular piece through specially structured activities in sound or movement (this is often termed “active listening”).

The development of highly skilled musical performers is beyond the scope of the Schulwerk. An Orff background should contribute to a well-rounded musicianship for those who study particular instruments, either concurrently or after the Orff experience. The basic vocabulary of musical skills will provide a foundation upon which more specialized training can build. Experience in a number of school systems in the United States has supported this premise—children coming into band and orchestra programs with an Orff background have adapted much more easily to the new mode of music making than those without one.

The Orff pedagogical design appeals to teachers who like the challenge of finding different routes to the same goals and the flexibility of being able to select and develop materials according to the needs of particular classes and situations. Many become attracted to the pedagogy because for the first time they as individuals find an outlet for musicality in a total context; they may be fine performers but have never known the satisfaction of moving, ensemble playing, or especially of improvising and creating. The Orff teacher must have a sense of adventure and enjoy the challenge of striking out in new directions with the students. To truly implement the pedagogy, a teacher must be willing to take risks; the improvisation implicit in the process at all levels must be truly that, and the result is not always satisfying or exemplary. But the same teacher is willing to evaluate and try again, perhaps with a slightly different approach to the same task. In order to carry out the Schulwerk idea to its fullest, a teacher needs background and skills in both music and movement, but in practice all degrees of both can be found. Classroom teachers can do a great deal, especially with the speech and rhythmic materials. The Orff approach is especially well suited to integration with the classroom curriculum, as topics relevant to current studies and interests can be selected for music/movement extension.

The primary mode of Orff teacher training in the United States at present is the summer course; such courses are held at a number of colleges and universities throughout the country and are two or three weeks in length. Training includes classes in basic Orff techniques and procedures (application with speech, singing, body percussion, movement, recorder, pitched and unpitched percussion, and sometimes supplementary topics as well). Each of the approximately seventy chapters of the AOSA has a yearly calendar of workshops that provide good introductory Schulwerk experiences. Every year, a number of American teachers study at the Orff Institute in Salzburg, Austria, which offers an intensive training in Schulwerk music making and especially in movement. At present, a special course is offered every two years for English-speaking students (acceptance through application only).

Experienced teachers often find that the Orff-Schulwerk framework puts into perspective many of the techniques they have used and found effective for years. Others find it the door to a new-found, exciting, fulfilling approach to music education. It need never be dull, never routine, for either students or teacher. Together they can explore, discover, and develop as they sing, say, dance, and play.

Notes


3. For information on membership and workshops, write to American Orff-Schulwerk Association, PO Box 391089, Cleveland, OH 44139-1089.