

CHILDREN'S CONCEPTUALISATION OF MUSIC

Tânia Lisboa

Royal College of Music, London, UK

Background

Music performance requires a variety of cognitive mechanisms and motor skills. However, research on children's musical development has not yet determined how they "picture" (represent) aspects of their pieces and performances in their minds, and how mental representations can guide interpretation and technical achievement.

Aims

This paper relates to issues of mental rehearsal and representation, exploring practising strategies away from the instrument and their consequences in sight-reading and informal performances. It aims at showing how planning, monitoring, and evaluation of learning can be effective at early stages of instrumental development. The paper outlines the processes involved in conceptualisations of music particularly focusing on the variability of practising and teaching strategies.

Method

Over a period of 20 weeks, three young cellists were filmed and interviewed in lessons, practice sessions and informal performances. They learned three different pieces of music, each through a different strategy: 1) by approaching a piece in their usual manner (i.e. mainly playing through); 2) by being involved in a simple analysis of the piece before starting to practise it and by exploring drawings which reflected their "picture" of the piece; and 3) by singing it before playing. They were also involved in a series of practical activities - colouring the score, watching performances and talking about music. The interviews and their playing were analysed in detail. Sight-reading and

performances were also evaluated by three external examiners and by the children, five years into the research, when they were interviewed again. The method relied on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data.

Results

The results show that children's conceptualisation of music is a complex mixture of explicit knowledge articulated through language, and implicit understanding conveyed through their playing (i.e. declarative and procedural knowledge). This paper shows that mental representation as a form of "musical knowledge" enabled students to assess different performance and practising tasks, to identify task difficulties, to recognise errors and to monitor progress. This study recognises that technical limitations can obscure children's capacity to reflect their musical knowledge in playing and that singing could be seen as a concrete form of musical thinking and as a means of connecting the children's thought with their action in cello playing.

Conclusions

The paper will review a multi-modal approach to practising, highlighting the need for greater resourcefulness when teaching children. The findings have implications for musical education, showing that what children normally do in other areas of their lives could also contribute to forming a schema in music making (i.e. drawing, painting, singing). By nurturing their individuality and stimulating their natural creativity, children's musicality can fulfil its proper role as a vehicle for artistic expression.