

COMPOSITION IN BRAZILIAN MUSIC EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Background. The problem of the fragmentation of the music curriculum in higher education is discussed. This curriculum usually emphasises on specific skills and technical aspects of music and do not attend the real necessities of the students. There is a need of a unifying element in music curriculum, which can link musical knowledge. The aural training element could assume this role of integrating the other elements of the curriculum. However, the way the aural training course has been carried out does not allow this integration.

Aims. The main aim of this work is to exam composition as a powerful means that unifies intuitive and analytical musical knowledge, thus contributing to a holistic approach in the music teaching/learning process in higher education in Brazil.

Main contribution. The activity of making arrangements is regarded as a compositional process and an example in the holistic approach, in which listening and performing are also integrated with composing. In making arrangements, popular music is used successfully as students are greatly familiar with it and, consequently, it promotes great motivation. The role of the teacher is crucial regarding the aforementioned approach. Accordingly, there is a need of a kind of teacher who is able to promote active and creative engagement in musical experience.

Implications. Teaching music defined solely on a rational intellectual basis no longer corresponds to reality. What is required now is a holistic view, not a fragmented one. Teaching music in a holistic way, in which intuition and analysis are present in a balanced way, ensure students to learn music deeply with more motivation and consciousness. Moreover it allows the development of more sensitive musicians, more fully aware, and ready to lead more creative tasks contributing for changes in their world.

1. THE PROBLEM OF FRAGMENTATION

For the past eighteen years I have been involved in the teaching of music in Brazil in a variety of ways. This experience has included teaching piano, working with choirs and mainly working with children, adolescents and adults in “Musicalisation” and “Musical Perception” classes, which means the same as “Aural Training” classes. In recent years I have been involved with the “Aural Training” course, which is compulsory for all the students, at Federal University of Minas Gerais.

My involvement with teaching aural training enabled me to question the approach in music teaching, which has been used for many years in Music Courses in Brazilian Higher Education. Traditionally, those courses tend to emphasize in technical aspects

of the music, concentrating on historical and analytical studies as well as training students potential as performers, conductors and composers. Students are required to learn information about the technique of an instrument, rules of conducting, harmony and counterpoint, different methods of analysis and facts and dates of the history of music. In addition to the above, they are asked to practice numerous exercises of aural training in order to succeed in various aural tests. The teacher’s role is to “feed” each element into separate drawers in the student’s mind. As a result the skills and elements do not interact producing fragmented knowledge. Consequently the music curriculum has also built fragmented.

It would be interesting and profitable to have a place in the curriculum in which the students could develop different types of musical experience connecting elements from different courses such as: harmony, counterpoint, history of music, analysis and so on. It seems to me that the ‘musical perception’ course could carry out this role of integration. Nevertheless, this is the main area of complaints by many students, although its fundamental role is acknowledged.

In the last decades many music educators such as Paynter, Swanwick, Schafer among others have advocated in favour of creativity in music learning process. However their ideas are still far from the reality in Brazilian higher education level. It is common to find a large proportion of musicians been educated through traditional methods where aural training is related to boredom. It is not surprising to meet students complaining about that process and saying that the study of music is separated from the music itself. Usually the classes become monotonous and tiring with repetitive exercises, which cause dissatisfaction and give no motivation to the students.

Many musicians questioned about their own experiences of aural training, ‘admit that they disliked it, thought they were bad at it, and have found it largely irrelevant to their subsequent engagement in music’. This is something to be questioned. ‘Aural perception is self-evidently indispensable in musical activity, in creating through composing, re-creating in performance, responding as a critical listener’ (Pratt, 1998: 1).

Aural perception courses are based most frequently on “dictations” and sight-singing. Students have to identify names and values of notes, individually or in motivic groups; they are asked to clap rhythms; to write music down at various levels of complexity, from individual intervals, through single-line melodies, two-part counterpoint and four-part harmony; to name cadences, modulations and harmonic progressions; to practice sight-singing (Pratt, 1998). Basically the classes consist of a variety of exercises in order to develop the students’ ability to perceive and identify pitch and duration. Many musical abilities are regarded innate rather than learned (Mursell, 1937: 49-98).

While identifying and discriminating between sounds in terms of their pitch component is an important consideration for musical ability, it is not so exclusive as is often supposed. Responsiveness to pitch rather than being a fixed innate ability may be susceptible to improvement through aural training.

Pitch and duration are important. In most music of the western tonal tradition and of other cultures, the accuracy of pitched notes and their duration in metre and rhythm are central elements of musical expression. Nevertheless, in aural training classes other musical elements that are also important have been neglected. Emphasis is not given to elements such as timbre, texture, dynamics, tempo and structure. The aim of aural training course should be to expand musical awareness rather than training the ears.

Therefore, it is essential to think about an approach for aural training courses in which the musical experience will be treated in a global view instead of a fragmented one, where the students will be able to link with other elements. Music teachers should promote a kind of experience in which students can be involved intellectually, emotionally, and kinaesthetically, at one and the same time. In so doing students will be able to develop a level of musical understanding in which intuitive and analytical knowledge will be interacted.

2. MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE

Let us observe the following situation, which concerns the diversity of musical backgrounds among students in a Brazilian context of higher education.

All students who wish to read for a music degree course in a Brazilian University should take an entrance examination. The examination is twofold: a practical test on the candidate's instrument and an aural test that includes knowledge of musical theory. All the students should score high marks in the tests in order to pass, so it is expected that they possess a good level of musical knowledge. However it is very difficult to have homogeneity among students as far as their musical background is concerned.

On one hand there are some students with a background in popular music having experienced many activities such as playing in ensembles, recording, and generally with experiences in improvisation and composition. Most often this kind of experience is "practical." They come to university searching for information about music theory in order to enhance their awareness about musical elements and their interrelations.

On the other hand there are students with "classical" background with more theoretical basis. In this case they have more knowledge about music theory and normally their musical experience is confined to perform on their instrument from a score. If they are asked to do other kinds of activities such as improvisation, playing by ear, harmonisation of certain melodies and so on, they often feel incapable, though they have studied harmony, they have received aural training and have attained a good level in instrumental performance.

How can we explain these differences? It can be assumed that the differences between the first and second case lie in different types

of musical knowledge. In the first case students with the emphasis on practical experience have a sort of intuition, an unconscious knowledge. Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1992: 99) elucidate that

Musical intuitions are not a conscious grasp of musical structures, but rather the largely unconscious knowledge that the listener brings to his hearing – a knowledge that enables him to organise and make coherent the surface patterns of pitch, attack, duration, intensity, timbre, and so forth.

In the second case the work of the students is based on intellectual knowledge. The emphasis of their studies is on the apprehension of technical and historical information, and general rules about musical theory. Obviously in both cases they have both types of knowledge though not very well balanced. Music education has a role to promote the interaction of different types of musical knowledge.

2.1. Composition: interaction of intuitive and analytical musical knowledge

Musical understanding involves intuitive as well as conceptual understanding. It also involves sensitivity, awareness, concentration, capacity to enjoy music and intellectual grasping of ideas. It depends to some extent, on various kinds of skill and information, but this goes beyond these aspects. Intuition and imagination have to be in balance with logic and intellect (Swanwick, 1982: 9; Gamble, 1984: 11).

The perception of music involves the intellect: when we experience music we are thinking in sound. On the other hand intellect plays a large part in imagination, which means 'the ability to hear musical images as interrelated, or the ability to create new images and new relationships between musical images' (Gamble, 1984: 11). In this sense 'intuitive knowledge is the bridge of imagination between sensation and analysis. It is pre-analytical' (Swanwick, 1994: 42). It depends on our experience of sensory impressions, on the interface between the human organism and the world "outside". 'Intuitive knowledge is essentially the exercise of imagination, the creative forming of images.' (Swanwick 1994: 29)

Intuition and analysis are reciprocally interactive. Although we can reflect analytically on musical experience, it is essential to bear in mind that encounters with music begin and end with listening to music as a whole where there is an interaction between both types of knowledge (Swanwick, 1994).

In this process of interaction, 'analysis feeds the imaginative workings of intuition with data, informing intuitive knowledge though never replacing it.' The role of analysis is to help the acquisition of musical awareness, sharpening the perception of detail and alerting us to aspects of the music so far unnoticed. 'Analysis is part of the quality of musical experience and nourishes intuitive insights' (Swanwick, 1994: 40).

Usually the musical activities inside classroom reinforce the logical side with the emphasis in analytical knowledge. "Dictations" are examples in which the technical aspects of music emphasized become a kind of puzzle, a game of guessing. The interrelation between the cognitive and the affective is unbalanced.

Composition understood as ‘the act of making a musical object by assembling sound materials in an expressive way’ is an activity that permits more broadness combining intuitive and analytical knowledge in a dynamic relationship (Swanwick, 1979: 43). Composition ‘helps to develop an insight into the very nature of music by involving students in a very intimate way with music and directly confronting them with the problems of making’ (Gamble, 1984: 15).

From this point of view it is crucial to demystify the idea that a composition is a product of special human beings. The view that a composer is an intellectually gifted person and composing is a cerebral exercise should be changed. The potential to compose is intrinsic to any individual. The importance and value of composition does not lie in the production of composers, but to the insight into music’s characteristics.

2.2. Making arrangements

I have been working with my students in aural training classes through some compositional activities. In doing so I include improvisation and arrangements as forms of composition since they are activities, which demand that students make musical decisions.

Making arrangement of Popular Music has been one of the most exciting activities in Aural Training course. Students have been extremely motivated and they can put in to practice knowledge acquired in harmony, counterpoint, analysis, and other music branches, as well as their knowledge acquired through informal situations of their musical life. Making an arrangement is primarily a compositional activity, but the activities of listening and performance are also involved. It does not take place without the integration of the two other modes of musical experience. In making arrangements students interact listening, composition (including improvisation) and performance.

From my teaching experience arrangement as a form of composition, first involves a process of deconstruction by aural analysis in which students have to understand all the musical elements of the piece chosen. Each student chooses a song or a piece of music and arranges for small ensembles. After having listened to the music and having created the arrangements the students perform them.

The role of perception is essential in order to allow knowledge grow. Students have to perceive music first so that they are actively engaged in it. Once music is perceived, they can be able to analyze and identify the elements within it. ‘Breaking down the total experience, *analysis*, becomes constructive only when followed by building up again, by *synthesis*. Then, the original listening experience can become greatly heightened.’ (Pratt, 1998: 12)

In making the arrangement one side of the musical experience consists of the intuitive or aesthetic enjoyment of sound. The other side concerns the perception of the musical elements and how they are structured and organized. The role of music teachers is to promote the development of these two sides.

The above can be achieved in group activities. In fact the group work has many advantages. For instance, if the intention is to listen to a certain piece of music and to analyze it in group, the possibility of sharing perceptions and ideas is a great opportunity to enlarge musical understanding. One can learn from each other once each student has his own world with individual and unique experiences. These experiences brought from the world outside enrich the classroom environment.

Other aspect concerning the aural training classes is that there is a diversity of performers: pianists, violinists, flutists, singers, percussionists, and so on. So the instruments used in the classroom cover a very wide range of timbre and type. The possibilities of combination of different orchestral instruments offer much variety for the arranger.

Making arrangement is an activity in which occurs integration promoting a holistic approach. The idea of integration was suggested by Charles Leonhard and Robert House (1959: 313): ‘all phases of the music education program would profit from real creative work in which composing, performing, and listening are combined into an integrated experience.’ And later by Swanwick (1979: 90) who points out that ‘the integration only takes place when one activity directly influences and helps to shape the form of another.’

It must be stressed that the three activities are closely related. Each musical activity can integrate with the other two, that is, ‘one activity can enhance and promote another.’ (Swanwick, 1994: 162). Thus this interaction plays a vital role in the development of each activity. The outcome of this holistic approach to music education should be that more students will be involved in making music more deeply (Wright, 1998: 75).

Music teachers can adopt many characteristics of the popular music world and they can attempt to put them in practice in music classes. Traits such as playing by ear, other ways of notation or playing without notation, which is good for the development of the ear, the natural way of playing in a group, the creative attitude and the improvisatory abilities. All of them are useful in the process of composing and therefore learning music.

3. CONCLUSION

Making arrangements comprises a fine example of a holistic approach in classroom in which the integration of the analytical and intuitive knowledge occurs in focusing on composition as a central activity with the interaction of listening and performance. Composing allows more freedom in the process of decision-making. When involved in this process, students have to make choices and develop a control about the ideas and ways of structuring these ideas. As a result, the students broaden their musical experience, increasing the level of their musical understanding, thus having more chances to link all the musical knowledge from other elements of the curriculum as harmony, counterpoint and others mentioned earlier.

It is an effective teaching strategy and provokes great enthusiasm in students. Also the motivation of the students generally increases since they deal with a kind of music that they are familiar with.

The teacher's role in a holistic approach should be considered. It is essential that music teachers are open to constant changes. It is not possible to teach music in the same way as in the past, though we find teachers merely reproducing models that they have received and accepting some rules as the supreme truth without questioning or being critical. It is crucial for music educators to keep being up-to-date with recent developments and to explore new ways of thinking about music.

4. REFERENCES

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