

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORICAL LESSONS: TEACHING MUSIC IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

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ABSTRACT

A research project is presented that tried to reconstruct music lessons in higher education schools between the World Wars in the German state of Brunswick. The period in question is interesting because it represents era of basic reforms with effects well into the 1960s in West Germany. This was attempted by interviewing former students in in-depth-interviews; a corpus of about 120.000 words was coded and analysed on the basis of the *Grounded Theory*. New insight into everyday school life was gained correcting some of the stereotypes that have been given on in German music education. In closing the question is reflected on what premises and under which conditions music education can generally reconstruct historical lessons.

new state curricula were introduced, until 1938, when the Nazi ministry of education called for nationwide curricula in all subjects. In spite of the dramatic change in society and in schools it was assumed that the formal curriculum was more compulsory upon classroom education than today. The focus was restricted to higher education schools as the professional standard of the teachers as well as the quality of buildings and equipment were better than in primary schools or lower secondary school. This was considered to be a condition favorable to professional improvement as well as innovations. The results of the research project were accepted as a doctoral thesis in summer 2002 at the University of Music and Drama in Hannover (Lehmann-Wermser 2003). Transcripts of all interviews are accessible there on CD-Rom für secondary analyses.

1. BACKGROUND

German music education between the World Wars has been subject of numerous research projects. Both the effects of the “Kestenberg-Reform” and the influence of the “Jugendmusikbewegung” (“musical youth movement”) have been studied concerning their programmatic and personal history. However, a triple restriction in this research can be stated. First, other driving forces behind the reform such as authentic social democratic goals of educating the people in order to improve the cultural life of the “masses” or the tradition of a modern pedagogy with an emphasis on working in projects have been neglected, although they were strongly advocated in their times and have been acknowledged by historical educational sciences. Secondly, sources were restricted to printed publications leaving aside others such as tax lists, association membership etc. In doing so, German historical music education has fallen back behind the scientific standards set by other historical disciplines. Thirdly and last, analysis has been made by hermeneutical methods in the sense of the word dating back to the 19th century, while more recent methods have hardly been noted. By taking printed sources for “reality” misinterpretations may happen such as the pretended failure of the Kestenberg-Reform due to poor professional teachers trained in the “Kaiserreich”, who were said not to be good enough for the new and high professional standard (cf. Braun 1957, Günther 1986, Gruhn 1993); this seems bold on the fact that there is very little information on actual classroom teaching and music teachers’ professional standard (Hörmann 1995).

2. AIMS

Taking this into account it appeared to be promising to study historical music lessons by interviewing former high school students from the state of Brunswick, a small and rather homogenous state. Various social and demographic indicators make it likely that Brunswick represents developments important to the understanding of educational sector in the Weimar Republic. The period under question ranged from 1928, when

3. METHOD

A review of prominent monographies, important periodicals and programs of the national music educator’s conventions was conducted in order to see what theoretically might have occurred in the class room. Also school documents such as fiscal plans, teacher’s files or records of events were examined in order to reconstruct some constraints of classroom teaching. Although these documents were not complete due to war damages these added to the credibility of the reports by those interviewed.

Interview partners were searched by radio, newspapers and the Alumni associations of High Schools. A total number of 14 people were interviewed ranging from a few minutes up to 90, the sessions took place at home with tape recordings being made. In three cases there was a second interview to get additional information or clear doubtful passages. The persons interviewed were between 72 and 90 years of age at the time of the contact. The recordings were transcribed. The corpus consisted of about 120.000 words. It was analyzed on the basis of the *Grounded Theory* (Glaser / Strauss 1967) with ATLAS/-ti, a software fit for this method. Since the *Grounded Theory* was developed as a method to generate hypotheses and theories rather than prove them it seemed apt for this topic of which so far very little empirically tested knowledge existed. A questionnaire had to be filled in by the participants to obtain more biographic information concerning the family, social status, musical activities and preferences.

4. RESULTS

On this basis a refined view on the quality of teaching was possible. The professional level of the singing and piano playing were generally acknowledged by the interviewed whereas the pedagogical attitude was criticized. This is in line with the findings in the archives. Various music teachers were criticized by principals or school administration officials for poor teachingquality. In contrary, various documents show them

as skilled composers or arrangers with routine especially as choir directors. Some of them had done additional studies in the nation's most advanced teachers training institution in Berlin-Charlottenburg, where the leading "modern" music educators such as Jöde or Muennich taught. Therefore the hypothesis about the failure of the Kestenberg-Reform due to poor professional quality does not hold, at least for the state of Brunswick.

4.1. Everyday Music Education

However, there is little evidence for any "modern" teaching. Topics being taught were very limited and restricted basically to three matters: *music theory* like for instance scales and chords, *singing* and *music history*, each field being in line with late 19th century music education in higher secondary schools. Introduction into music history was confined to the Lied, especially ballads, and operas. Having listened to the former is usually remembered as "beautiful" or "pleasant". It seems that the teachers were able to give convincing performances to the youths concerning their playing as well as their singing. Considering this it may seem very logical that the Lied was frequently covered in class. However, according to the interviews more detailed information about the composer or the composition took place only rarely. With the latter it is striking that Wagner had a prominent role long before 1933 when Nazi propaganda made use of his antisemitic attitude. It should be noted, that Wagner was part of the youth's musical experience, as the interviewees remembered listening to Wagner records in the late 1920s, their parent's participation in Wagner associations or even watching his works in the opera. I shall return to this point later.

Singing was also frequently done. The interviewees remembered many songs, often including the melody and more than one verse; this phenomenon falls in line with the findings of Niessen (1999). Apparently singing provided a very intense experience. Even decades later the former students started singing or humming during the interview as an analysis of the type of presentation during a late stage of the research process showed. This was interpreted as an especially vivid memory. The situations they referred to included school – both classroom and more formal events – and other occasions in the national-socialist youth organisations HJ and BDM alike.

Interviewees today can define three types of songs: the "*Volkslied*", i.e. the sentimental 19th century traditional folk song, *patriotic songs* in the tradition of the chauvinistic and nationalistic texts of the "Kaiserreich" and hymns. Surprisingly the "old", i.e. the pre-baroque popular or polyphonic song is totally missing in the recalled classes. One would expect that music teachers who were well trained and apparently familiar with the contemporary influences would eagerly broaden their repertoire of songs – in contrast to new methods of creative working which are more difficult to obtain. This holds even more true, as the new repertoire was offensively distributed in publications, new song books, in training seminars or even in the developing educational broadcast in Weimar Germany.

Little was remembered about methods used. This is not surprising as the recalled situations reflect the perspective of 10- to 18-year-old students. Some of them remembered without any request by the interviewer that signs and syllables were used to train songs.

They pointed without exception to the solmisation developed in Germany by Agnes Hundoegeger (1858 – 1927). Other, competing systems that were distributed with school material, publications and teacher's training such as the "Tonwort-Methode" by Eitz (1848 – 1924) or the "Jale-Methode" by Muennich could not be remembered. This one-sided distribution seems surprising as the description in historical studies often hints something different (cf. Phleps 2001), but local traditions may have determined the dissemination of methods.

All these findings show a conservative nature of classroom music education. On one hand, this nature is in conformity with the conservative if not reactionary nature of higher education in Weimar higher education in general (cf. Tenorth 2000). One may, however, wonder if this is a consequence of the persisting character of teachers generally: „The external socio-political milieu may change (...) but the teachers remain the same. (...) values are deeply held and beliefs evolve slowly. (...) Only when a teacher is personally involved with the change and passionate about attaining the educational goals can fundamental improvements be expected" (Colwell 1993, 24f.). On the other hand, the reform of the 1920s initiated by Kestenberg cannot be understood without the effort to lift status and wages of the primary school teachers to whom the music teachers legally belonged. This strive was backed mainly by the Social Democrats, then a (politically and culturally) progressive force in Weimar Germany. Even if it is taken into account that schools throughout the time in question had financial problems and could hardly invest into buying instruments or records it is striking that no strive was made to make use of new media and new forms of teaching. Why didn't music teachers orientate on progressive stands? The answer to that question may lie in an inquiry of the surrounding of classroom music education.

4.2. Music education as Introduction into Bourgeois Musical Culture

Despite the shortcomings of the music classes as stated above it apparently was effective. Left alone the fact that all participants remembered well incidents and contents of classroom situations, the questionnaire filled in revealed that they all had led a life of active participation in musical culture. They had sung with their children or in choirs, they had gone to concerts either in their home town or (in two cases) while travelling all over the world or had large collections of CDs. The supposition arose that this might be consequence of the sampling strategy: Only those with strong interest in music would support a research project of a University of Music. However, in a late stage of the research process in the process of *theoretical sampling* (Glaser / Strauss) a person was found who was described by his classmates as always having done his homework during music class and who was not active in classical music in any way. But even he had compiled an archive with over 1.000 recordings of popular music of the 1920s – 1940s and was well familiar with the musical development of that time. This was the most surprising result, as one may ask why classroom music education can be so effective.

One clue seems to be that the curriculum fit well into musical socialisation in general. The musical surrounding appears very homogeneous in the transcriptions. 11 out of 13 persons

interviewed had private instrumental lessons. This holds true for boys and girls alike and – even more surprising – not only for upper middle class children but also for those of the lower middle class. Girls contributed a great deal to the expansion of German higher education in the 1920s, but also children of craftsmen and clerks for the first time in German history had a chance to attend high school. Their parents apparently adopted cultural behaviour of the traditional bourgeois family and arranged instrumental training for their children. Thus the music taught in school was familiar to the students – and the teachers paid respect to that: It seems to have been common practice that grades at the end of the term were given on the basis of a privately rehearsed piece that had to be played (or sung) in class. More than once it is reported that teachers and students met in concerts or exchanged views on these afterwards in school. So beyond the professional level of teaching music in school there existed a personal level of student-teacher-relationship that most likely served as an orientation in cultural behaviour to the young people.

Moreover, participants often report that they took part in the bourgeois public cultural life: some inherited subscriptions to the opera or concerts, some decided spontaneously to visit events together with their peer group, travels to relatives in large cities were more than once highlighted by visits to the opera.

Mass media spread out during that time – and fascinated teenagers as it does today. Situations with radios or record players are frequently and vividly remembered. However, it was not the youth that decided what was to be listened. As their parents determined that, this channel, too, was dominated by traditional, “classical” music. It seems likely that the success of music education is partly due to the convergence between school subject and cultural life.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The material gathered gives us a rather precise picture of a historical period. The reported facts proved to be valid because in many instances additional material from archives or publications confirms what has been remembered by the former students. We now have a more detailed or corrected picture of actual teaching at that time which is indeed a very interesting one for its bold programmatic ideas and its development of new teaching elements. Based on the information given a few statements about music education in schools have to be revised as it shows that the impression gained by carefully studying publications may not be taken for “reality”. Besides, it could be shown that a perspective limited to categories of music education is not apt to understand the complexity of classroom action.

Beyond that - and maybe more important - it seems likely that biographic in-depth-interviews even after decades can give insight into music education on the level of reconstructing facts; this holds even more true if the interviewees are no professionals. Their “naïve” remembering and talking is not blurred by theoretical considerations or terminological correctness.

Again on a new and higher level the gathered material gives insight into the musical socialisation of young people. If music lessons are not just the summed up acts of the teacher (plus a certain and possibly large number of conditions and restraints)

but rather a complex process of “making sense” such studies based on interviews can reveal, what the participants think *today* about what the sense was *then*. A constructivist understanding of teaching – and note that this is *not* a constructivist research project altogether – may thus get new impact in the question of what exactly the effectiveness of teaching consists of.

However, doing historical research this way is highly complex. It calls for a careful and thorough review of theoretical and practical issues of school and teaching, for an examination of the local conditions in school concerning teachers and equipment, for a theoretically reflected sampling, well defined interviews and unbiased coding process of the transcripts. In other words, it calls for *groups of researchers* engaging into reconstructing historical lessons.

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