

Verbal Language, Music and Didactics of Listening

NICOLA BADOLATO

Department of Music and Performing Arts

Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna

nicola.badolato@unibo.it

One of the ultimate goals of musical education is the ability to listen to and understand a piece of music including its structure, functions, the context in which it was created and heard, its meaning. The didactics of listening represents one of the principle means of accessing musical understanding. The primary objective for the teacher is to guide pupils in following the development of a piece in its entirety, and help them analyse it, and identify similarities and differences, and to enter into the structural mechanisms, focusing on the key features needed to create a “mental map” of the text using strategies which activate the processes of memory and attention.¹ The piece itself will give out clues regarding its historical context and its semantic meaning. A complex piece can be adapted to the learning-teaching process through a process of segmentation (based on the laws of perception and musical syntax)² and the student is guided towards a pertinent *verbalisation* or rather, a description of the piece with appropriate language using a rich and articulated lexicon.

Language is an essential tool for the building, consolidation and command of knowledge. As with all other types of knowledge, even the communication of musical knowledge takes place through language. One of the targets of the

¹ This view is based on the model of Didactics for listening developed by Giuseppina La Face Bianconi (2003a), (2006a), (2007). See also La Face Bianconi (2003b, pp. 27-29) for the theory of Didactics of listening, Techniques for repetition, temporality and listening. For the concept of 'mental map' see Delègue (1996) and (2008).

² Based on Giuseppina La Face Bianconi's thoughts, by “segmentation” I refer to the mental operation that a competent listener uses to understand the organisation of musical discourse: «Every musical construct, even if brief, needs to be broken down into its constituent parts: unavoidably or deliberately we distinguish discourse in sections, periods [...] in a teaching situation whoever does not want to renounce the use of large scale works will have to apply a careful selection process of episodes which are suitable for partial listening and in a way can represent the whole.» Cfr. La Face Bianconi (2006a, p. 514).

didactics of listening is the adequate verbalisation of the music that is heard.³ This is far from simple when dealing with a temporal art such as music, which lacks denotation, and does not refer to an external reality in referential terms.⁴

Therefore a type of verbalisation should be encouraged that helps pupils to take in a musical work of art gradually, in “objective” terms, by which I mean to describe it with critical detachment which leads to understanding and awareness. It must use a lexis which is more than a mere expression of fleeting impressions. It is the fruit of a “projective” listening where music is seen as «an open field of stimuli which cause emotions, personal experiences, scenes, and fantasies to take shape».⁵ It requires lexis that explains every definition, image or appellation, giving the reasons for the links between structural elements and the interpretation of meaning. It is the expression of a critical, competent, detached hearing that makes a distinction between the subject who is listening and the musical object that is under examination.

Our goal is the acquisition of language that describes the features of music with great precision. It must constantly link the understanding of structure to connotative features and semantic discourse (regarding meaning). This technical lexis of music will be converted into concepts, the use of adjectives and paraphrases that refer to areas outside the field of music: for example rhetorical-literary, psychological, scientific etc. The lexis to be used as a resource will be technical and connotative at the same time. It will refer to musical terms (e.g. quaver, cadenza, aria, trill) and the sensorial, affective and emotive experience (e.g. sweet, clear, sombre, lively, melancholic). Thus a language will be created which manages to take in the overall atmosphere because it is able to “impart” the work through the use of adjectives, deixis, metaphor relevant to the segments and salient details, and the structure.⁶

Starting from these methodological premises, this paper describes a workshop in listening that was held with a group of young children in the first section of a primary school (7-8 years old) as part of a course about *Listening Education and*

³ See La Face Bianconi, (2006a, pp. 528 ss.); See also La Face Bianconi (2005), (2006b). See also Cuomo (2006).

⁴ Regarding this problem and its consequences for teaching see Eggebrecht (1987) and (1997).

⁵ Della Casa, (1985, p. 65) as cited in La Face Bianconi (2006a).

⁶ See again La Face Bianconi (2006a).

Musical Instruments run by an association: “Le Muse e il Tempo”, Centro di formazione, ricerca e didattica della musica (a training and research centre) based in Bologna. The course examined a recitative and a duet from the famous intermezzo *La serva padrona* (*The Maid as Mistress*) by Giovan Battista Pergolesi (with libretto by Gennaro Antonio Federico). The choice of this work was prompted by the fact that it would introduce the children to one of the foremost genres of eighteenth-century musical theatre: the Intermezzo. This term defines a musical comic drama that is subdivided into two parts and was performed between acts of a serious opera. It consists of a succession of recitatives, arias and duets. The didactic work was aided by the fact that there are only two singing parts with clearly differentiated physical and psychological features.

The workshop began by playing the recitative «Questa è per me disgrazia» and the duet «Lo conosco a quegli occhietti» (which come at the beginning and end of the first act respectively). The characteristics of the recitative and aria, and their role as two typical structures of musical theatre, were discussed. Particular attention was paid to the different singing techniques employed, the timbre of the voices in relation to the instruments employed in the orchestra, and the role and characterisation of the characters.

The workshop set out to develop adequate descriptive strategies for listening to a piece of music in order to bring out the essential understanding of structures and their syntactic function. The activities used were extremely effective in concretising the experience of conscious and critical listening in the children which in turn guided them towards the verbalisation of music. Identifying musical qualities, describing them to oneself and to the group allowed the children to activate processes for building knowledge and an adequate lexis, working at the same time on the use of adjectives and on enriching their vocabulary thereby contributing to both their musical and linguistic education. The work described here can be seen as the first stage in a wider educational project on the Didactics of melodrama. We have taken up the methodology developed by Giorgio Pagannone, which propounds the study of Opera in primary schools taking the music as the starting point to arrive subsequently at the study of the text. This educational pathway, passing from music to the text, aims to educate pupils to

reflect on the relationship between musical passages, vocal qualities, the narrative context with the corresponding roles and characterisation of the protagonists. Since the music is the key element in the explication of the drama and emotions, any hypothesis and interpretations will be justified on the basis of one or more musical motivations. The reading of the text clarifies and strengthens the interpretations provided.⁷

After a brief introduction to the music which explained some of the basic concepts of the drama (the contrasting and comical relationship between the old and celibate Uberto and his lively and impertinent young servant Serpina who has been in his service for a number of years) pupils listened to the first recitative «Questa è per me disgrazia» (which lasts for roughly two minutes).

Figure 1a

Que - stè per me di - sgra - zia, son tre o - re che aspet - to e la mia ser - va por - tar - miil cioc - co - lat - te non fa gra - zia ed i - o - d'u - scire ho fret - ta

Figure 1B

Dun - que per - ché son ser - va ho da es - ser so - praf - fat - ta, ho da es - ser mal - trat - ta - tal No, si - gno - re, voglio es - ser ri - spet - tata vo - glio es - ser - ri - ve - ri - ta co - me fos - si pa - dro - na, ar - ci pa - dro - na pa - dro - nis - si - ma.

The children were asked to identify the way the parts are sung through a description of the principle features of vocal timbre. The group were asked to give their impressions of the character and personality of the two protagonists based on the particular timbre of the voices. Guided by questions such as “How do the two characters express themselves?”, “Are they talking alone or to one another?” “What are they thinking?” “What is the relationship between them?” the ideas that

⁷ Pagannone (2006). Cfr. See also methodological proposals discussed in *Per una didattica del melodramma. Idee e percorsi*, which can be consulted *online* <http://www.saggiatoremusicale.it/saggem/documenti/III_commissione/pagannone.php>. This approach of *from music to text* does not aim to denigrate the importance of the libretto in the study of Opera (or the poetic text in music for voice, in general). The libretto has a fundamental role for the complete understanding of Opera, but in some cases it requires a preliminary analysis (for example in Seventeenth-century Opera and in ‘recitar cantando’). See Bianconi (2005).

emerged were discussed and the most appropriate written down. Explanations and reasons were given for every adjective used. The voice of Uberto was described as *gloomy* and *deep* because it moves in a *deeper* or *lower* register, while Serpina's was *shrill* and lively in a *higher* or *upper* register.⁸ Uberto sings in a faster troubled, breathless manner with an agitated excited rhythm. Serpina already shows her decisive resolute manner.⁹

What came out clearly from the very first notes is the net contrast and marked opposition in the dialogue between the two characters. This opposition, passing from the vocal timbre to the characterisation of the protagonists, is also present in the way the two interact on stage. Uberto is shown as an old, churlish, clumsy, comical and rather simple mind. Serpina on the other hand is cunning, shrewd and vain. After listening to the piece the analysis was taken a stage further through a reading of a selection of the more significant parts of the libretto.¹⁰

UBERTO Questa è per me disgrazia!
 Son tre ore ch'aspetto, e la mia serva
 portarmi il cioccolato non fa grazia;
 ed io d'uscire ho fretta.
 O flemma benedetta! Or sì che vedo
 che, per esser sì buono con costei
 la causa son di tutti i mali miei. (vv.5-11)

SERPINA Adunque
 perché io son serva, ho da esser sopraffatta?
 ho da esser maltrattata?
 No, signore. Voglio esser rispettata,
 voglio esser riverita come fossi
 padrona, arcipadrona, padronissima. (vv. 37-42)

The analysis and paraphrasing of the poetic text corroborated and strengthened the initial interpretations given by the students.

⁸ The pairs of adjectives high/upper and deep/lower refer to the female and male vocal register respectively. The first of each pair is the more general, imprecise definition provided by the children whereas the second is the more technically correct term provided by the teacher. To start with the teacher accepts the more common imprecise term of each pair produced by the children and then provides the more technically correct term.

⁹ Even in this case the choice of adjectives has not been left to chance: *quick*, *agitated*, *troubled*, *decided*, *resolute* can refer at the same time to the character of the protagonist as well as the singing style.

¹⁰ Throughout this paper I refer to the edition of the libretto from *Libretti d'opera italiani dal Seicento al Novecento*, ed. by P. Fabbri e G. Gronda, Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1997, pp. 599-617.

In a second phase the students listened to the piece a second time, with the aim of getting the group to define what a recitative is. At this point the teacher could have explained the meaning of the term and the characteristics of the piece in the context of the work; but it was seen as far more productive if the students picked out some of the particularities themselves through an attentive listening, looking out for the singing techniques employed. Then students were asked to describe what they heard by asking questions such as “Is the character *really* singing?” Once again the reflections of the group have been geared towards producing adjectives and paraphrases which denote singing styles: *fast, nearly recited, similar to speech, fluid, flowing*. Statements that, with the help of the teacher, finally arrive at the precise definition of *declaimed*. The students were then led towards the more technically correct definition: “recitative”, making use of the definition “nearly recited” they had produced earlier.

Since the more complete description of a recitative must also involve the role of the accompanying instruments, the students were asked to pay attention to the contribution of the orchestra. As is typical in an operatic recitative they are infrequent and concentrated in the final part of the musical phrases (*cadenze*) and given to one single instrument: the harpsichord.

We then moved on to the work on the duet «Lo conosco a quegli occhietti». The piece concludes the first part of the intermezzo and marks the culmination of the quarrels between Uberto and Serpina, giving a hint of the final outcome of the affair (Serpina manages to marry her master through cunning). Initially I played the first half of the piece (which lasts roughly two minutes) asking the group to look out for differences with what they had heard before, and to pay attention to the way the characters sing and the role of the orchestra. This time the orchestra is complete. Both strings and harpsichord introduce the entry of Serpina (who sings first). It was pointed out that the orchestra plays uninterruptedly and the students were asked if they saw anything in common between the phrase sung by Serpina and Uberto's reply. It emerged that Uberto sings the same melody but in a lower register.

Figure 2a

Lo co-no-sco lo co - no - scoa que - glioc - chiet - ta - quegli oc - chiet - ti fur - bi,
 la - dri la - dri ma - li - gnet - ti che se - ben voi di - te no, no, no pur m'ac -
 cen - na - no di si, si, si, si, si, pur m'ac - cen - na - no - di si

Figure 2b

Si - gno - ri - na, si - gno - ri - na, v'in - gan - na - te, v'in - gan - na - te,
 trop po, trop po, trop po, trop po in al - to voi vo - la - te. Gli occhi
 ed io vi dicon no, no, no, ed è un so - gno - que - sto sì, sì,
 sì, sì, sì, ed è un so - gno que - sto sì.

Encouraging the students to think about the role of the orchestra the teacher was able to help them realise that Serpina's part is underlined by an accompaniment in a high register played by the violin, which confers a major emphasis on her characterisation. On the other hand, when Uberto sings, instruments of the lower register predominate (violas, cellos and double basses).

Next the singing style was analysed. Comparing the two extracts they have listened to, the children noted that in the duet the singing is more fluid, more rhythmic, and heavily charged, (*with more impetus, lyrical, in full voice*, the teacher concluded.) The singing is more clearly delineated, repetitive at times and the formal organisation is strophic.

In a final analysis the teacher asked if the first impressions students had about the characters had been confirmed or not. Even in this case the difference between the two protagonists was clearly understood. They confirmed that Serpina is astute, high spirited and decisive in obtaining what she wants while Uberto clearly shows himself to be of a clumsy disposition and *subordinate*. The subsequent reading and paraphrasing of the of the libretto showed this to be true.

SERPINA	Lo conosco a quegl'occhietti furbi, ladri, malignetti, che, se ben voi dite no, pur m'accennano di sì.
UBERTO	Signorina, v'ingannate, troppo in alto voi volate: gl'occhi ed io vi dicon no, ed è un sogno questo sì.
SERPINA	Ma perché? Non son graziosa?

Non son bella e spiritosa?
 Su mirate leggiadria
 vè che brio, che maestà.
 UBERTO (Eh, costei mi va tentando,
 quanto dà che me la fa?)
 SERPINA (Ei mi par che va calando).
 Via, signore...
 UBERTO Eh vanne via.
 SERPINA Risolvete.
 UBERTO Eh matta sei.
 SERPINA Son per voi gl'affetti miei
 e dovrete sposar me.
 UBERTO (O ch'imbroglia egli è per me!) (vv. 155-174)

Having analysed the first part of the duet we proceeded to in the same way with the second part, which expands and enriches the variations that we have already seen.

The didactic pathway proposed here is focused on listening, analysis, interpretation and verbalisation of music. It allowed the students to understand how a lyric opera is constructed and how it functions, above all regarding the architectural structure and mechanisms. The students were gradually provided with the analytical and critical tools that once mastered and retrieved will help them to listen to music with awareness.

References

- Bianconi, L. (2005). *Parola, azione, musica: Don Alonso vs Don Bartolo*, «Il Saggiatore musicale», XII, pp. 35-76.
- Cuomo, C. (2006). *Il linguaggio della musica. Didattica dell'ascolto su un "Minuetto" di J. S. Bach*, «Innovazione educativa», n. 3-4, pp. 49-59.
- Deliège, I. (1996). *Cue Abstraction as a component of Categorisation Processes in Music Listening*, «Psychology of Music», XXIV, pp. 131-156.
- Deliège, I. (2008). *Analoga, un supporto creativo nell'educazione all'ascolto musicale*, in La Face Bianconi, G., Frabboni, F. *Educazione musicale e formazione*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, pp. 253-264.
- Della Casa, M. (2002). *Educazione musicale e curricolo*, Bologna, Zanichelli.
- Eggebrecht, H. H. (1987). *Per la metodologia dell'analisi musicale*, in *Il senso della musica. Saggi di estetica e analisi musicale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, pp. 151-179.
- Eggebrecht, H. H. (1997). *Comprendere attraverso l'analisi*, «Il Saggiatore musicale», IV, pp. 373-384.
- La Face Bianconi, G. (2003a). *Musica e cultura a scuola*, «Il Saggiatore musicale», pp. 119-123.
- La Face Bianconi, G. (2003b). *La casa del mugnaio. Ascolto e interpretazione della "Schöne Müllerin"*, Firenze, Olschki.
- La Face Bianconi, G. (2005). *Le Pedate di Pierrot. Comprensione musicale e didattica dell'ascolto*, in *Musikerziehung. Erfahrungen und Reflexionen*, editor F. Comploi, Bressanone/Brixen, Weger, pp. 40-60.
- La Face Bianconi, G. (2006a). *La didattica dell'ascolto*, «Musica e Storia», XIV, 3, pp. 511.
- La Face Bianconi, G. (2006b). *L'educazione musicale*, «Riforma e Didattica tra Formazione e Ricerca», X, n. 4, pp. 35-37.

- La Face Bianconi, G. (2007). *Formazione musicale*, in Frabboni, F., Wallnöfer, G., Belardi, N., Wiater, W. (2007). *Le parole della pedagogia. Teorie italiane e tedesche a confronto*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, pp. 149-151.
- Pagannone, G., (2006). "Carmen" spiegata ai piccoli (scuola primaria), «Musica e Storia», XIV, 3, pp. 663-675.