

From the Onomatopoeias to Musical Form: Resources of Circularity of Listening and Performance

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Abstract

The paper describes a project developed in my teaching activities in Degree Courses for Nursery and Primary School Teachers in Italian Universities. It aims to introduce children of the first years of Italian Primary School to music, both in terms of listening and performance; thus it is founded on the continuity and the circularity of listening and performance. Listening and musical production are the two necessary components of music education, and must be seen in their relationship, not as independent factors.

During 20th Century, music education emphasized primarily musical performance. More recently, many scholars have rediscovered the value of listening in music education and its aspect of activity.

This article aims to show the importance of a kind of music education which develops harmoniously both listening and performance.

The work starts with activities based on onomatopoeias and develops through the listening of music by classical authors and experiences of music production, arriving to the comprehension of musical form and of the relationship between musical structures and meaning both in listening and production.

Music listening provides important means and models for communicating with music. Production helps to strengthen these means and models and offers the possibility for a more careful listening, while a more careful listening allows a more careful production in a relationship of virtuous circularity.

1. Introduction

Music education in the school does not aim at forming concert artists, composers, or musicologists. Quite simply, it serves to guide young citizens to know and discover an artistic language of extraordinary richness – that is, to know how to use it, at least at a basic level, but also how to understand it through listening. In other words, scholastic music education has to include both performance and listening.¹

Listening deserves particular attention. Recent music education tendencies such as Edwin Gordon's Music Learning Theory (2003) have placed listening as the foundation of music education itself.

The pedagogists Franco Frabboni and Franca Pinto Minerva (2003, p. 55) have confirmed the importance of listening education from a different perspective. They define the school as “the first institution invested with the role of facilitating the transition from the passive fruition of the work of art to critical and rational experiences of aesthetic decoding”.

For this reason, when I speak of listening, I refer to what Maurizio della Casa (2002, p. 51) defines as “a psychological action involving both sensory organs and intelligence” – a complex activity, that involves the individual at the cognitive, emotional, and physical levels and through which one can attain musical comprehension, that is, the ability of mastering a composition, grasping its functions, understanding its sense (La Face Bianconi, 2003, p. 121). The kind of listening to which I refer is objective and rational listening. This has great educational potential: it guarantees an understanding of the musical piece as such; it can make it possible to explain and appreciate at the highest level, through the comparison with an external object (the music), our feelings and thoughts and to discover new ones (see, also, Sintoni, & Somigli, 2002); it allows one to sharpen one's own production (or “doing”) through comparison. But in its turn

¹ Della Casa, M. (1985); Della Casa, M. (2002); La Face Bianconi, G. (2003); La Face Bianconi, G. (2004a); La Face Bianconi, G. (2004b); La Face Bianconi, G. (2006a); Ministero Pubblica Istruzione (2007, pp. 64-66); *La musica tra conoscere e fare*(2008). For a contextualization of the discipline within a general didactic framework, see Frabboni, F. (2005).

“doing” can also be useful for listening. This is why I speak of the circularity between listening and doing.

In this essay I will outline, by means of several examples that synthesize the main passages, a path in which listening and performance strengthen one another and – together – help to promote and develop musical knowledge in the students, with particular attention to the ability of listening to and understanding music. Our project is best suited to the first years of primary school, not to a music school. Therefore, performance here must be understood as the ability to consciously use and manipulate the essential elements of musical discourse, not as a manifestation of talent or technical ability.²

2. The Project

The point of departure consists of a simple activity, ideally borrowed from the Orff-Schulwerk practice and based on the use of onomatopoeias.³

Onomatopoeias are the linguistic formations that imitate sounds from the environment or nature: for example “tic toc” (clock), “ron zzz” (snore), “meow” (cat). In musical teaching, these can be used in rhythmic structures and sequences – as documented among others by the various examples presented in the Orff-Schulwerk volumes – but they can also be used on their own to provide a basic musical literacy that can be the foundation for an articulate itinerary.

Let us begin with the sound parameters (pitch, intensity, timbre, duration) and with some basic elements of musical construction (rhythm, melody, formal structure).

Sound (together with silence) is the leading and essential musical element. An education to sound and to its criteria is therefore a fundamental passage for music education *tout court*.⁴ In this phase of work, the reference to

² See, also, Cuomo (2005) and Cuomo (2008), which refer to musical execution.

³ The first volume of *Musik für Kinder* by Carl Orff and Gunilde Keetman (1950, p. 3), opens with the word “cuckoo”; examples for Italian readers in Piazza, G. (1979: ex. p. 18-19, 77-84).

⁴ The sound parameters included among the Obiettivi Specifici di Apprendimento (OSA) of the Indicazioni Nazionali of 2004 for the first two years are implicit in the *Indicazioni per il curricolo* (Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, 2007). For the third year, two

onomatopoeias can be valuable. Let us take the parameter of duration. In the Italian onomatopoeic tradition⁵ there are animals that “make” long sounds (cow, sheep, wolf, and so forth) and animal that “make” short sounds (mouse, chick, crow). Other animal sounds are rendered with more complex onomatopoeias, constituted by many syllables: for example, the rooster and the hen.

The characterization, production, and comparison of different onomatopoeias can therefore help to understand and introject the concept of duration and of the relation between durations. And a succession of different onomatopoeias can introduce the concept and the experience of rhythm: in an Italian context one can consider, for example, a sequence like “bau bau – miao miao – coccodè - chicchirichì” performed on a constant beat.⁶

The activity just described belongs to the domain of production; nevertheless, it also provides useful elements for a listening comprehension of specific aspects of musical language (rhythm and duration). And, in a perspective of growth and circularity, listening will in turn lead to further new competences and knowledge.

Let us consider the activity of listening to a passage from Camille Saint-Saëns's *Le Carnaval des Animaux* – for example *Le coucou au fond des bois*. In it, the employment of an onomatopoeic effect is evident: the “cuckoo”, precisely. Listening to this passage therefore connects in a natural manner to the previous activities and makes it possible to continue the journey by introducing the element of pitch, at least in general terms: onomatopoeia is composed of two short sounds,

objectives are: “To perform simple vocal and instrumental pieces in a group, focusing on expressiveness and accuracy in execution, in relation to the different *sound parameters*. To recognize and distinguish the *fundamental elements in a musical piece*” ((Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, 2007, p. 65) .

⁵ Onomatopoeias are not universal but cultural. We all know that for instance Italian dogs “say” “bau”, English dogs “woof”, and German dogs “wuf”. Games with onomatopoeias therefore have interesting pedagogical implications in the multicultural context of today's classrooms. In my example I refer to Italian forms.

⁶ Experiences such as the one proposed here can be done also with word games and nonsense (in the second section of the first volume of *Musik für Kinder*, Orff and Keetman suggest exercises based on word composition in order to work on duration and rhythm: for instance, “Birnbäum-Apfelbaum”, “Tasso-Rasso” etc.: cf. Orff, & Keetman, (1950, p. 68). The Italian edition offers similar examples, such as “pesca-ananas”, “acqua e vino” etc. (Piazza, G., 1979, p. 115).

of which the first is higher than the second.⁷ The comparison between our onomatopoeias and that of Saint-Saëns will therefore help us to introduce the parameter of timbre: our onomatopoeias were vocal, Saint-Saëns's is instrumental (Saint-Saëns uses the clarinet here). But all of this does not exhaust the potential of the piece. The effect of the cuckoo stands out against piano sounds. Through the comparison between the sounds produced by the pianos (there are two pianos in this work by Saint-Saëns) and those produced by the clarinet, it will be possible to observe that the sounds of the pianos are longer than those of clarinet, and that they are softer (*pp*, against the *f* for the clarinet in the most of the piece): by these means we can strengthen, by the listening, the comprehension of duration and introduce the aspect of intensity. We can now observe that these musical means contribute to evoke a static, silent, and isolated environment in which only the animal is heard: with his structural choices Saint-Saëns does not simply describe an animal, but rather evokes it locating it in a context.⁸ This kind of listening activity thus shows the coherence of the communicative project and its component elements.

At this point, we can go back to an experience of production and, to be specific, of improvisation. From both a musical and a pedagogical perspective, improvisation has nothing to do with mere spontaneity (doing or letting others do whatever they want). Indeed, it presupposes the presence of specific models of reference and of precise objectives. From a pedagogical point of view, improvisation thus understood is founded on a notion of creativity like that which Frabboni and Pinto Minerva (2003, p. 50) define as “the capacity of holding together and relating to each other conflictual or antinomic elements; to reconcile *convergence* and *divergence*, *logical* and *fantastic thought*, *continuity* and *rupture*, *ordinary* and *extraordinary*, *conscious* and *unconscious*”. In it,

⁷ From the point of view of theory of perception (Deliège, 2008) and listening pedagogy (La Face Bianconi, 2006b), the cuckoo effect can be considered a “cue”. A “cue” is an element that stands out in the piece and allows us to construct a mental map of the piece itself. Thus, it makes it possible to understand its structure and, eventually, its meaning.

⁸ Camille Saint-Saëns was a passionate observer of the animal world and of nature as a whole. On this aspect of his personality and its relation to the *Carnaval des Animaux*, see Studd, S. (1999: 149-151).

“intuition and imagination are joined by logical rigour, fantasy by serious study”.

In our case, one can think of the evocation of a new animal, of which, through the onomatopoeic effect, we can attempt to suggest something more than the mere call. For example, in representing a cat one can suggest, by means of a manipulation of sound, some characteristic traits such as agility or laziness. In the first case the onomatopoeic verse will be quick, light, and repeated; in the second case it will have a singsong character. We can imagine a small scene, with a cat that runs, stops to think, and begins to run again. The use of the same means to portray the two moments of running and the use of different means for the stop will allow us to introduce a musical form known as ABA, very frequently used in the western musical tradition.

Saint-Saëns himself uses it several times in his *Carnaval*: our activity will therefore lead us back to a new listening experience, which in turn will show how, in repeating A, Saint-Saëns makes some modifications (for example, in *L'Éléphant*); this will lead us to the discovery of a variant of ABA: ABA'.

The whole work proposed up until now is based, therefore, on the interrelation of performance and listening. The experiences of sound made with the onomatopoeias prepare the way for listening, in our case to an excerpt of Saint-Saëns, and allow us to learn a few fundamental aspects of musical literacy (duration, in particular). Listening makes it possible to become aware of further aspects of musical discourse (pitch, intensity, timbre) and leads to an “objective” reading of the piece. However, this kind of listening affects production: it suggests new stimuli and new resources for the production of a communicative project with sounds, finally leading us to the discovery of the form and of the formal typologies most common in the tradition of western music.⁹

Starting with the ABA form, one will in fact be able to proceed to the acquisition of other forms, for example, the rondo, both through improvisation (on

⁹ The comprehension of form is implicit in the learning objectives at the end of third grade in the curriculum recommendations: “Understanding, upon listening, of the expressive and structural elements of a musical piece [...]” (Ministero Pubblica Istruzione 2007, p. 65).

this, the suggestions proposed by Orff-Schulwerk are particularly useful; see Piazza, 1979, p. 172-173) and through listening.

Formal comprehension is a fundamental aspect of listening: it is precisely through the overall form and the reference to formal schemata that the composer vehicles his message. In the case of the rondo, through practice one can build a solid mental scheme that will allow the students to appreciate the specificities and peculiarities of the written rondo from composers of the western tradition.

Consider, for example, the rondo in the C major Piano Sonata for four hands K19d that Mozart wrote in London when he was nine years old (may 1765): in this, the penultimate repetition of the refrain suddenly breaks off and the following slower episode seems to expand excessively, to the point that the listener wishes for it to end and the refrain to return. Experience, then, can make one understand in a more precise way how form can be varied and manipulated and suggests new ideas for production

3. Conclusion

I will stop my discussion here. Performance and listening are not two realities each impervious of the other. They are the inseparable components of that extraordinary experience that is music. Music education in the schools needs to move on this double ground and to introduce students both to conscious expression through music and to the ability of listening to and understanding music. Listening, in particular, requires specific care from the very first years of study. The ability to listen makes us understand the messages that a musical work brings to us, and makes us discover meanings that are otherwise elusive. And if for children in their first years of elementary school practical activities are important to acquire knowledge, it will be useful to employ them as means for an intellectual activity like listening. In its turn, listening will broaden the expressive and creative capacities of the young students, in a virtuous circle of growth and improvement.

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