

9 | Bringing music to all social classes

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Abstract

In this conference (which deliberately steals the title of an interview I gave to Catarina Dias (Dias, 2014) for the online academic journal “Nós” of Minho University I present a summary of a teacher training project I have been developing at Minho University with the purpose of improving generalist teachers (kindergarten and elementary school teachers) music literacy. This project, which has been adjusted over the past eighteen years and also expanded to the classes of other Minho University teacher trainers working with me, aims at achieving a permanent and autonomous development of the future teachers listening and performing skills through the promotion of concert attendance, report writing and music instrument group learning. Although the project is developed at a late age of the teachers in training (and despite the evidence that its benefits would increase immensely in case it could be developed at an earlier period of their education), the results are very clear and solid. Some of these 18-23 year olds actually decide to continue their music education by enrolling in a music academy, private music school or private lessons when they finish the generalist teacher training degree. Their music education and humanist development is promoted, and they also will one day better promote the music education and humanist development of the children in their own kindergarten and elementary school classes.

Keywords: Generalist Teachers, Music Literacy, Music Instrument Learning, Humanist Development

Why some things happen to some people

Early in my career I realised that, sometimes, our life takes certain unpredictable paths because something very simple and innocent happened to us and we casually followed that lead. This idea is the motto for this text and, in fact, maybe I could say that, somehow, it has been a motto in my life, as well. For instance, up to now, I have never written anything remotely autobiographical, but because Anabela Moura read the interview I gave to Catarina Dias for the online academic journal “Nós” of Minho University in October 2014, and asked me to talk about the pedagogical project I have been developing at the University of Minho with the future kindergarten and elementary school teachers, I felt like I should establish a connection between my own life and, as a result, the good things I have been hoping to bring to the lives of my students at the university. Although it is not very easy for me to write “I” or “me” so many times, maybe this time it is justifiable and useful to prove a point.

My career in music started with a Christmas gift. A wonderful little Bontempi upright piano toy, with two octaves, that my parents gave me when I was 4 years old became the undivided source of my attention for the months to come – and the end of silence at home.



Fig. 1 – Upright piano toy

With no music training whatsoever, I began playing numerous songs by ear, trying to figure them out, in a patient game that filled me with delight. In fact that came as a surprise for the family, because I would normally not like to sing with them or be sung to (I tried to explain that the reason was probably that they were singing poorly and out of tune, but I am not sure they agreed with me). My inclination to play, the obvious pleasure I derived from figuring out familiar tunes (and the fact that the family could actually recognize those tunes), as well as my relentless insistence for them to find me a music teacher, convinced my parents that I should have music lessons. And so, at the age of four, I started music lessons at the kindergarten I was going to, where a little group of about ten 4 and 5 year-olds would meet weekly for a class. In this class, activities ranged from singing songs to clapping rhythms (alone or together) and dancing; all these while the teacher (a very kind older lady that the nuns at Colégio D. Pedro V were trying to help to make a living) was playing on the piano. Thus piano became part of my life in kindergarten

Two years later, witnessing my growing love for music, my parents enrolled me in the local Conservatory, Conservatório de Música Calouste Gulbenkian de Braga (an official conservatory where children can take all classes of the curriculum in an integrated regime of attendance and where classes were and are still free); there, at the age of six, I finally found specialized teachers and started a path that later became my professional life choice. I remember that there some entrance tests (as there are still today), maybe because there were then already more candidates than vacancies, and I was asked to sing a few songs and clap some rhythms, but with a two year long experience I had no problem doing that, and I was selected. Other children who might have not received a piano toy two years before might not have been that lucky.

While doing the music tests, the school suggested I would also try the dance tests, if I would like to take ballet classes. My parents agreed, I was terribly ashamed, but I took my shoes off, as demanded, danced my way through the test and started ballet in the conservatory, too. In fact, I took ballet from 6 until 16 years old, and actually doubted between following a career in ballet or in music. These facts speak volumes about what opportunity at an early age can mean in someone's life, and raise serious questions about the theme of music

ability (or dance ability for that matter), about the nature *versus* nurture dilemma, about talent, about music aptitude(s) and about the democratization of access to art education and music education.

Why some things should happen to all people

In a chapter I wrote in 2013 (Vieira, 2013, 85-101) I tried to explain why I believe music literacy is important for citizenship, and why public schools are the best place to promote music literacy and citizenship. The main idea is that music is not just one activity, but a group of activities that require group training and and effort of synchronicity with others: aural skills, performance skills, creative skills, memory skills, technical skills. The problem is that many societies have been divided into two groups: those who are educated to listen and merely contemplate art (and preferably appreciate it and buy it), and those, more privileged, who happen to have access to education for creativity and performance (and might become eager to sell it for a living).

This dichotomy has led both groups to what I have called the “cult of the repertoire” (Vieira, 2014, 64-69): there is a group who learns to perform the standard or accepted repertoire as an external “object”, and a group who learns to admire it and respect it, without fully understanding it. This social fracture does not favor participation or cooperation (64-49) nor a real artistic development, a development of the music language, because both groups are engaged in a sort of “museum perspective of music”, with the “guardians” and the “visitors”, instead of in a living communal experience. One group plays and the other group listens, as I also called attention in the same text (69-71).

My first experience in music classes for future kindergarten and elementary school teachers (generalist teachers of music) at the university was subconsciously shaped by this divided perspective. In fact, as a beginning university teacher, and after a few years of teaching at Porto and Braga Conservatory, I felt that the most urgent need was to “educate the educators” for music culture, for respect for the “great music”, for the capacity of identifying the main characteristics of medieval, renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, 20th century and contemporary music. Yes, they needed to learn songs to sing with children, but how could they one day become teachers and not be able to tell the difference between Bach and Mahler? As they should be able to tell the difference between Camões and Jorge de Sena’s styles. Well, no matter which pedagogy we choose at the university, looking at their elementary and highschool music background, they won’t be able to tell the difference between Bach and Mahler, unless they would have studied music for many years and played, sung and heard Bach and Mahler. And I doubt it that, despite the long years of Portuguese classes in their elementary school and highschool, many of them really can tell the difference between a Renaissance and a Romantic sonnet. Therefore, I soon realised that I would never be able to skip the music learning phases, despite the age of these university students (which ranges from 18 to 23 and older). Bruner’s idea (1998) that everything can be taught to anyone, anytime, as long as age adjustments are made, and the idea that *structure* is fundamental for the learning process (by giving the student a perspective of where the facts

being learned at a given moment can be situated) became fundamental and led me to the humbling understanding that my university students had to be given the opportunity of comprehending the beginnings of music language, by actually playing instruments consistently and handling complex concepts in simple ways, adjusted to their age.

This perspective is anchored in the ideas of *conceptual learning*, stemming from the 60's, but still so valid today. In fact, the question "*What are we teaching: Concepts or details?*" raised by group piano pedagogue Guy Duckworth (1964) has remained a seminal focus in my pedagogical concerns over the years. Therefore, all my suggestions to my students are rooted in the belief that, no matter how fast we would like them to learn, they still will need to experience every concept they learn, if they are to learn it at all (that is to say, if they are to become capable of transferring it to a new situation autonomously). In fact, Duckworth underlines how the principles of education really do not change much from level to level, and even the materials sometimes have to be the same, because of the concepts we want the students to learn (p. 54). Much in the same way one learns a language, never expecting an adult beginner of English to jump right into T. S. Eliot, a beginner of music very often has to start with familiar children's tunes that he might be able to play by ear: in this way, the inner hearing will be developed and technical problems will also be diminished by the familiarity of the tune, which functions as a great (actually *sounding*) motivation for learning. In this way, children will actually learn music as a sort of "language", instead of memorizing a collection of movements or notes in a mechanical way. This principle opposes traditional beginnings with music scores, often referring to music that the students do not know, and which put aside the power of sound and cultural memory (a paradox never enough underlined in music education). Other well known pedagogues have alerted to the importance of sound and oral tradition in the beginnings of music learning and in music instrument learning. Green (2002, 2008), a London Institute of Education Professor, has been a vibrant promotor of these informal modes of learning in school, both for their learning results, but also for the increased motivation they bring to the students.

So, having in mind the development of music practice for my university students, future generalist teachers, I started introducing keyboards in classes in 1998. At the beginning there were only four keyboards for a class of 20 to 22 students. Students rotated in order to understand and experiment the concepts and they would then practice during the week in a study room or at home, in a keyboard they would have bought. There were years when I had around 100 students (four classes) and they all would bring their keyboard to class to the university on the same day, in what seemed a national convention of keyboard musicians in town. Over the years, and despite the lack of available funds, I tried to introduce more keyboards in class, so that the students wouldn't have to bring one from home, and now, almost 20 years later, the classroom is fully equipped with one keyboard for each student.



Fig. 2 – Music Education Class of 2013-14 at the Institute of Education of Minho University. Students in the 1st year of Licenciatura em Educação Básica.

I have absolutely no concern with the massification of this process and, in fact, I wish this massification would occur in all kindergarten classrooms and in all elementary schools. No government so far has made it possible for all children to have a specialized music teacher in their early years of education, in kindergarten and elementary school, one who could provide real music experiences with music instrument practice. Massification is really not a concern; lack of access to a “praxial” music education (according to Elliot’s definition - Elliot, 1995) should really be the concern.

The results of this pedagogical choice have not been less than magnificent. By comparison with other types of music pedagogy experimented, I and the assistants who have worked with me have realized, every single year, that the students are highly motivated, understand the weekly tasks and fulfill them successfully. There is a higher percentage of students who do very well in the final evaluation with this pedagogy, and fewer who don’t do so well. In fact, negative grades practically disappear. Another aspect worth mentioning is the fact that students get a very precise idea of the class goals and often request to be evaluated in order to show they have achieved those goals. In no other pedagogical practices I have developed did students request, eagerly, to be evaluated at the beginning of a class. This shows how involved they are and how they want to participate.

The practical nature of the class makes all students’ performance an almost daily requirement; performing becomes less threatening and playing an instrument loses that aura of unattainability. All students become more motivated to solve a problem when they see a colleague has solved it and the students who have more difficulties try harder when they realise everyone else is being successful. In fact, this type of pedagogy also

promotes cooperation and respect, because when a student shows more evident difficulties in a certain aspect (rhythm, coordination, tuning) there are always students volunteering to help, and they make appointments in the study room to make that help really come true.



Fig. 3 - Institute of Education – Minho University (2013-14). Two Music Education students of the 1st year of Licenciatura de Educação Básica in one of the practice rooms

In order to complement the performance and creativity part of the students's training, I have also developed another project centered on concert attendance. Each semester the students should attend three concerts and write a short report about each one of them, according to a set of formal rules. The idea is to bring the students closer to the cultural activity of the region and to foster the broader music culture knowlede that had been the main concern of my first teaching years. Students should try to attend different types of concerts (choir, orchestra, chamber, soloists, school auditions) in order to have a broader range of experiences. They should identify the composers and situate them in time, identifiy the music style, the instruments, specific aspects of the pieces and performers heard, make comments about the room and concert conditions, what they liked and disliked in the music and why. These concerts reports show a tremendous impact of these experiences in the students lives, not only for the presente, but for the future. Some students had never gone to the local theatre before; some had never heard a live orchestra and thought

it was “elite” music; some were surprised to hear children in a music school audition playing piano much better than they themselves can (the keyboard experience at the university gives them a more precise idea of what is easy or difficult, of how long it takes to learn a certain piece, of how important it is to start learning music at an early age, a.s.o.).

The fact that this project goes on during the 3 years of the degree results in 9 concerts during the period, and an opportunity to enrich their music experience. Some students decide to enroll in a music school after they finish the degree in order to continue their music studies. Other students assure that when they have children they will enroll them in a music school. Some others say that they will make concert going a regular experience for the children they will teach in the future. Some students who have their own children right now say that they have started to study music together with their kids at home. I have not made a formal inquiry or a survey about these revelations or intentions of my students. I see what happens with them in class every year, their progress and enthusiasm, and I read their reports. “My eyes were tearful when I heard this orchestra at Casa da Música. I don’t know what I felt, but I felt like crying, I was overwhelmed!”, a student wrote. “I went home and played our tune in the piano”, she continued. I tend to believe that their answers in a formal inquiry would not be more truthful than they are right now (although they could be more statistically precise). But who wants to measure passion and aesthetic emotion with precision?

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