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Creative Expression Through Contemporary Musical Language

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1. Introduction

“Sonic idylls are an illusion, a child’s dream. Decisions follow, which in life are often not our own, but which shape our lives... they play dice with us. There arises a confrontation with reality, which is normally not as we would wish...conflict. The unavoidable result is synthesis – a reconciliation, the modification of reality as it is, which is a good reason for optimism. The elements of the sonic idyll no longer belong to dreams, but to the equilibrium of awareness, thus to comprehension. “wrote composer Rojko (2009, p.18) in the commentary to his composition with the title “Dice song “.

In our lives, we are constantly faced with numerous challenges which require making decisions and choosing among several possibilities. “Facing the reality“ presupposes creative solutions which are conditional on the context - environment, personality traits, cultural and other factors, which theories (among them also pedagogical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, phenomenological and ethnological) shed light upon from different points of view.

According to Elliott (1995, p. 229) we understand the complex dimension of creating as “a desire to search out gaps in what is already known, to advance the way things are done in a practice, or to go beyond what is already understood or accepted.“ In this sense musical creativity refers “to achievements of musical composing, improvising, and arranging that are original and significant within the context of a particular musical practice, including instances of musicing that depart in highly original and important ways from existing traditions.“ (ibid., p. 219). The author's concept of musical creativity is based on a systemic model in which he emphasizes the interaction between an individual and the socio-historical environment which, at the level of music and the existing cultural context, conditions different modes and ways of creating. He points out that creating is never a consequence of an individual's endeavour alone, but is always connected “to a network of direct and indirect musical, social, and cultural achievements and relationships.“ (ibid., p. 217). Musical creativity is heterogeneous and in different contexts its elements influence each other in different ways.

Among various factors shedding light on musical creativity, according to Burnard (2007), the most important are the answers to the question how to realise it. The author says:

“Considerably more research is needed to establish not whether development in musical creativity is produced by personal, social or cultural forces, but how.” (ibid., p. 1209, 1210).

The question HOW is of utmost importance when it comes to encouraging creativity, particularly within the pedagogic context. Therefore, the following pages present the results of a research which focused on a creative workshop of contemporary music which provide some possible answers. But before that, we must ask ourselves WHY. In the language of the arts the first answer might lie in the competence of culture awareness and expression. As one of the eight key competences, it gives creative expression, perception and experiencing of artistic languages a central place. The competence of culture awareness and expression includes critical thinking, creativeness, self-initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, taking decisions and constructive control of feelings. In the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning it is defined as “appreciation of the importance of the creative expression of ideas, experiences and emotion in a range of media, including music, performing arts, literature, and visual arts.” (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2006, p. 18).

Music has a special place in this context, since, as a basic communication language, “it provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions and means even though their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible.” (Hargreaves et al., 2009, p.1).

2. Research

In the research we were interested in how creative expression through contemporary musical language can contribute to the development of lifelong competence of culture awareness and expression. In accordance with the research objective, we posed the following two research questions in the case study:

- Which advantages can we identify in the creative expression through contemporary musical language?
- How can creative musical expression contribute to the development of the competence of culture awareness and expression?

2.1 Research method

In researching the case study we used the descriptive method of pedagogical research.

The research sample included students of music schools (altogether 46 students, aged 5 to 19), 14 music-school mentors/teachers, 22 students from three University of Ljubljana's faculties (Academy of music - Department of Composition; Faculty of Arts - Department of Musicology; Faculty of Education - Department of Primary Education) and 50 pupils from two classes of a primary school from Ljubljana (8 years old) who participated in the contemporary music workshop. The project, which was carried out between January and March 2009, was organised by the Ljubljana Festival and led by composer Uroš Rojko. The concluding presentation of the project was held in the Knights' hall in Križanke, Ljubljana, on 12 March 2009, as part of the 24th Slovenian Musical Days. Participants of different ages and musical knowledge took part in a creative process of formation and performance of contemporary musical works. In the three-month period they independently, as well as with mentors' and the composer's support, explored the sounds of their instruments,

contemporary musical notations and possibilities of interpretations of contemporary scores, and learned about the parameters of contemporary musical language through individual and group improvisation. Thus they liberated themselves of the constraints of the traditional musical performance.

To collect data, we used a semi-structured interview. The interviews were carried out from April to June 2009 with the participating composer, a representative of the cultural institution The Ljubljana Festival, 4 music school pupils, 3 mentors from two music schools, 7 students from the three participating faculties, and a parent of one of the participating pupils. The interviews, which lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed for a subsequent analysis in which we used the parts of the text relevant in terms of the research objectives. The text was marked with a system of codes which were later combined into categories devised on the basis of criteria related to indicators for the development of lifelong competence of cultural awareness and expression, including factors of creative expression in connection with the social and personal competences.

2.2 Research results and Interpretation

Based on the research questions and with the help of the semi-structured interview we obtained opinions of the participants who were mainly directed by the following open-type questions:

- How did you experience the workshop?
- What advantages did you notice in the process of creative musical expression?

Below, we present the interviewees' answers according to categories of indicators for the development of the lifelong competence of cultural awareness and expression, particularly the creativeness factors in connection with the social and personal competences, which are also important transfer factors of all eight key competences (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2006).

2.2.1 Experiencing musical workshop and its advantages in connection with social competence factors

The social context of creating refers to the elements of the environment in which an individual internalises musical tradition, taste, values, special preferences, etc. of a reference group (predecessors, contemporaries, audience, critics, friends, etc.). So, creative achievements are not consequence of individual endeavours only, but also of a dialectic relationship between an individual and the social factors (Barrett, 2005; Burnard, 2007; Elliott, 1995; Sawyer, 1999). Sawyer (1997) defines the social dimensions of creating as "collaborative emergence", Elliott (1995) with a systemic model in interaction between an individual, area and domain, Wiggins (2002, as cited in Burnard, 2007) as "creative context" which includes interaction of an individual's activity with social and musical dimensions, and Glover (2000, as cited in Burnard, 2007) as "parallel composing" when an individual and a group act mutually.

In the creative workshop, participants created on their own but at the same time they received feedback, support and assistance of the group. In active and creative learning processes, through various learning strategies and continuous feedback, they exchanged

opinions, views and feelings. The feedback they received provided them with immediate information about their work and guidelines on how to continue. The formative function of feedback co-created musical competence of the participants (Pintrick & Schunk, 1996) and helped overcome the initial insecurity and fears in relation to expert and creative challenges, particularly with the primary education students.

“We shared opinions about what is good, what could be removed or added and we were quite unanimous about what was good and what was not. The constant composer's feedback was of great help. /.../ At first, there was some fear present - what if we do not really belong here. But after we received positive feedback and felt that we have become part of the composition, it got better and better. /.../ Even if you felt insecure, after you received positive feedback you had got courage and then it was easier to get involved in the process.” (students of the Faculty of Education)

Elliott (1995) talks about “reflection in action”, about which he explains: “monitoring the effectiveness of our musical thinking-in-action in the present movement - is a nonverbal form of critical thinking.” (ibid., p. 62). He emphasizes non-verbal expression of reflective thinking, i.e. through parameters of musical languages and distinguishes it from “reflection on action” which is about verbal expression (and interpretation) of musical thinking. “Reflection in action” presupposes the use of musical language in the process of musical communication, as the only possible way to direct musical thinking and creative expression.

The participants of the workshop were discovering the particularities and advantages of communication through musical language. They used musical communication to exchange opinions, accept new ideas and different solutions and they experienced satisfaction about the learning process itself. Learning focused on participants' personal objectives, motivation and feelings, which are important components of self-regulated learning (Boekaerts, 1999).

“You had to be aware of the entire room, every individual and their instruments. You could feel we were communicating on musical level. /.../ It was interesting, because our cooperation took place not so much on verbal, but more on musical level.” (students of the Faculty of Education)

The participants experienced optimum learning situations and an encouraging learning environment which stimulated creative expression (Burnard, 2007). In the social learning context (Brophy, 1999) the participants experienced the process of musical creating as a value, which stimulated their further learning growth (Harkema et al., 2008).

2.2.2 Experiencing musical workshop and its advantages in connection with personal competence factors

Afore mentioned social competence factors helped the participants to develop their personal notion of the sense of learning and to shape their own musical expression. They expressed their identity with music, thus communicating not only “who they want to be” but also “who they are” (Cook, 1998, as cited in Hargreaves et al., 2009). They used musical communication to express their personal identity, what Hargreaves et al. (ibid.) call “music in identities”.

“When you play, it is an expression of your personality. With music you communicate your life and way of thinking. Actually, it is an invisible connection. /.../ Every music carries a

message, it has something, a soul. /.../ Now I know how to look into myself. /.../ I became more outgoing and at the same time I learned how to communicate with myself. /.../ I started to contribute to the composition with more and more confidence. " (music school students and students of the Faculty of Education)

"The composition Name Piece is an example of searching one's own identity and it answers the question what do I do in this World. Each participant had to say his/her name in their own way, i.e. in a way no one else can. " (representative of the cultural institution)

The performers were also autonomous in searching their own musical expressions or musical identities, what the previously mentioned authors (ibid.) call "identities in music". In a complex interaction between cognitive, emotional and social reaction to music, the participants developed a feeling of personal and musical identity. In the composition by John Cage "Name piece" they could, as performers and co-creators of the composition, improvise and use their own names in the most various and creative ways possible. They only had to follow the composer's instructions about the use of five musical actions: long - loud, long - quiet, short - loud and short - quiet tone. They could use letters from their names which were at the same time names of the tones, they could imitate the pronunciation or the spelling of the name, thus interpreting their personality and identity with music. They explored and learned about parameters of contemporary musical language and enhanced their interest in and positive attitude towards contemporary music.

"Certain actions were given and we had to use them during the activity. You had to consider when to use one and how it would fit into the context that was going on around you. Or do something completely different, but you had to know why. And no one told you when or how to do it. " (student of Department of Musicology)

"When you explore yourself and work with your feelings, you are also more open to contemporary music. /.../ The point is, that you have to understand this language and when you do, you start to like it. /.../ With contemporary music it is not about whether you like it or not. You have to open up to it. /.../ When we repeated the whole thing several times, certain patterns started showing, and if they were good, we tried to incorporate them into the composition. /.../ Sometimes you noticed that something you had done did not belong there, so you changed it next time. " (music school students and students of the Faculty of Education)

Creative expression using contemporary musical language offered the participants much "open space" to develop, based on learning from mistakes, constructive control of feelings, taking initiatives and decisions, providing feedback and cooperative problem solving, which are all important components of the lifelong competence sense of initiative and entrepreneurship (Bresler, 2010). This competence refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2006).

Bresler (2010, p. 14) talks about "transformative practice zones" which are "spaces as well as a way of interacting and thinking, where the participants are touched and often transformed in the process" and which "provide spaces to share and listen to others' ideas, visions and commitments, and to build relationship in collaboration across disciplines and institutions."

3. Conclusion

The results of the research showed a complex presence of various factors of personal and social competences which determine the nature of creating (also) in contemporary musical language and indirectly influence the development of cultural awareness and expression as well as other life-long competences.

In creative musical expression, the participants

- developed sensitivity and positive attitude towards contemporary music;
- explored the parameters of contemporary musical language;
- developed a sense of community and of personal identity;
- interacted with each other and worked in a group which offered support to the activity of each individual, representing safe environment;
- shared feelings, viewpoints, opinions and experience;
- reflected on their own and the group's creative work by providing feedback;
- took initiatives and solved problems;
- developed self-confidence and took on creative challenges;
- self-regulated learning by planning, observing and reflecting upon their own work;
- were aware of the importance of the creative process itself, not just its results;
- they broadened their horizons and acquired new knowledge from the flow of artistic and pedagogical practices;
- developed tolerance and respect of different ideas and views;
- showed interest in communicating in contemporary musical language;
- were autonomous in the search of their own musical expression and musical interpretation of their personality and identity;
- developed mutual trust and understanding on the basis of cooperation between the educational and cultural institutions and the artist.

A creative process (including the one involving contemporary music language) is a value in itself, with an intrinsic worth. The process of creating, in which an individual develops their self-image, self-awareness, self-esteem and aesthetic sensitivity, is just as important as its results. In co-operative way of working individuals reflect upon their own creative practice and share ideas, feelings, experience and feedback with their "critical friends". This shows the importance of environmental factors for the creative process. The socio-cultural dimensions of creating require "that we acknowledge the complexity of these dimensions and the diversity of ways in which children participate in musical communities of practice within and without the school setting." (Barrett, 2005, p. 191).

We have also identified challenges which indicates the direction of future answers to the question HOW to encourage and achieve musical creativity. The challenges lie in lack of teaching experience in contemporary music, insufficient inclusion of contemporary music in school curricula and insufficient professional competence of music teachers in this area.

"When you return to music school you are totally shocked, because you have to play in tempo again and so on, while there you could be different. I think that we should play such compositions in music school as well, at least a little bit. /.../ It would be very useful for all professional musicians (there were very few present there) to step out of the traditional way of playing." (music school students and student of Department of Musicology)

“I would suggest to the composer to organize a seminar for teachers where we could learn these elements, so that we could be the moderators of such work at music schools.” (music school teacher)

We also identified the need for broader and better quality cooperation and partnerships between educational and cultural institutions and artists, which, according to the findings of other researches (Bamford, 2009), calls for implementation of the already existing national and international strategies of culture and art education. The interviewees pointed out a number of advantages brought about by cooperation among them, as well as by sharing and comparing expert opinions about education and art, applicability of knowledge, education of the audience, etc. They also emphasized the importance of suitable working conditions and financial support.

“All cultural institutions should be aware of the fact that they educate the audience, guiding them on their way of choosing concerts. They have the logistic means to carry out projects which schools can not. This should be part of their missions. Slovenian institutions are not yet aware of that. Also at the level of both competent ministries, there is a lack of connections and financial support for such projects.” (representative of the cultural institution)

“It is very important that we are not isolated in our own environments. Our contacts and exchanges are of great value. It is particularly valuable when it comes to disregarded segments of music.” (music school principal)

To sum up, the research shows that different modes of musical expression and creating involve complex reaction of an individual at the levels of knowledge, viewpoints, identities (Barrett, 2007) as well as socio-cultural environment. Based on our findings, we suggest that creative expression (especially through contemporary musical language) should be given its proper place and a broader support by the environment in terms of educational and cultural programmes as well as the performing practice, since these are the systemic social factors influencing the role and meaning of contemporary musical creativeness. Lorin Maazel (2009) said that art which is not personal and does not carry a human intimate stamp is not art at all. This thought sums up beautifully the importance and sense of art for an individual.

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