

Fugue for Four Voices: Building narratives through music behind bars

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Abstract

The project *On the Wings of a Piano . . . I Learn to Fly* was developed with four women in custody inside a Portuguese prison during 2013–2014 over a period of eight months. Weekly individual sessions focused on improvisation, composition, memorization, and learning repertoire. This one-to-one work with participants resulted in the presentation of three distinct public performances in different contexts and for different audiences. Community music principles of decentralization, accessibility and equal opportunity were the foundation of a strong triangular relationship between the participants, the music they played on the piano, and the facilitator. With the narrative of each participant at its core, this article explores different ways in which this project can be identified as community music, despite the emphasis on individual work with each of the participants. The importance of adapting to each participant's personal needs, requests and skills is highlighted, as well as the value of the affection developed between facilitator and participants. The subjectivity inherent in the involvement of the facilitator as a researcher is discussed, and the pedagogic outcomes of the project are also considered as an important contribution to research on music in prisons.

Keywords

Music in prisons, community music, women in prison, narrative, piano

Prelude

On the morning of 7 November 2013, an upright acoustic piano arrived at the Estabelecimento Prisional Especial de Santa Cruz do Bispo (EPESCB), the second largest prison for women in Portugal. I could feel the excitement among the prison guards, several of whom remembered the day a concert grand piano was brought to the prison for a recital to be given by a famous Portuguese musician. They were even more surprised when they realized that this piano would remain at the prison for several months, and that every week a piano teacher would come to the prison to teach a group of four women to play. This experience was at the core of my doctoral research, designed to answer one main question: how is individual piano practice inside prison

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connected to the philosophy of community music, opening doors to the (re)construction of the self of a person who has been detained?¹

Defined as a tapestry of diverse shades, hues, tones, and colors (Veblen, 2013), community music activities are most often associated with group work, with the music workshop as the space to “create relevant and accessible music-making experiences that integrate activities such as listening, improvising, inventing and performing” (Higgins, 2012, p. 174). Community music projects are acts of unconditional welcome and hospitality, grounded in the premise that every person has the right and ability to make, create and enjoy their own music (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Higgins, 2012). When community projects take place in prisons, this welcoming and hospitality enables music-making experiences to become a tool for individual self-expression and connection with a broader social community (Cohen & Henley, 2018). Considering the hypothesis that community music philosophy could be applied in a prison setting to underpin one-to-one relationships, a project was designed to: (1) expand the principles of community music to individual practice on a musical instrument; (2) identify the strategies most suitable for piano teaching and learning in prison; (3) assess the transformation and impact that continued instrumental practice has on people who are detained.

This one-to-one model resulted in a close relationship between each of the participants and me, the facilitator–researcher, whereby I gained a profound knowledge of each woman and came to understand her unique path and experience of taking part in the project. In this article, the participants are the leading actors, and I aim to ensure that their voices are heard clearly. It is structured according to the metaphor of the baroque fugue, inspired by the meaning of the word *fuga* in Portuguese: flight. The methods of enquiry used in the research are represented by techniques of counterpoint. The introduction to the article is the prelude to the fugue. It is followed by the subject (the project), four episodes (the lived experience of each participant), development (the discussion) and coda (the conclusion). The aim of the article is to contribute to research on music in prisons taking a novel approach focused on individual practice on a musical instrument, leading to a new understanding of community music activities in prisons.

The subject

The project *On the Wings of a Piano . . . I Learn to Fly* ran from November 2013 to July 2014. There were 91 individual sessions² lasting approximately 50 minutes, and 13 group sessions between one and three hours in length, during which three public performances were prepared:

- 1) *Stories of a Piano that Taught Us to Fly* (7 March 2014)—a presentation at the prison facilities for babies and children who were living with their mothers in EPESCB.

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1. Ethical clearance was granted by the Direção-Geral de Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais (163/DSOPRE/13), the Portuguese governmental entity responsible for the prison system. The participants signed consent forms allowing video and audio recordings to be made, and giving permission for all the data and written and audio/video material to be used for academic research purposes.
 2. Two of the participants had 22 individual sessions, one had 23, and one had 24. These differences are due to the fact that three of the women took jurisdictional leave during the project. According to the Portuguese Code on the Execution of Criminal Sanctions, when several conditions are met, people in custody can leave prison for one or more days as part of their preparation for release.

- 2) Project X (10 June 2014)—a joint performance with a group of six men from the prison of Aveiro and 14 students from the Master in Music of the University of Aveiro, presented at the University of Aveiro.
- 3) Fugue for 4 Voices (12 July 2014)—an introspective performance given by the four participants with the facilitator–researcher and a professional actor.

The weekly individual sessions addressed three aspects of music making: piano technique, creativity through improvisation and composition, and literacy, which went beyond reading and writing skills to include musical vocabulary and music history. The preparation of the three concerts also involved group work, which brought a new dimension to the one-to-one relationship that typically characterizes piano learning.

One of the defining features of the project was that it offered the opportunity to explore different musical languages and styles. For instance, time was allocated to improvising or composing on a rock or *bossa nova* pattern, studying a piece of classical piano repertoire, playing pop music, and learning a Portuguese popular song, sometimes all in a single session. The participant's personal needs, interests, requests, and skills were thus combined with a diversity of musical materials that included classical repertoire. This approach can be considered an act of cultural democracy, in that it allowed the four participants "to create culture rather than having culture made for them" (Higgins, 2012, p. 34).

In terms of written material, one of the major innovations resulting from the project was the creation of graphic music scores. These scores used a color code for hand identification and sometimes included the names of the music notes. Each of these scores was adapted to the needs of the participants and to the characteristics of the music itself. Conventional musical symbols, such as dynamics, repeat bars, or changes in tempo were also used.

Clearly it was necessary for the participants to have time to practise without the facilitator–researcher being present. This was discussed with the administrators of the EPESCB throughout the period in which the project was being developed. Gaining permission was a major achievement. It was agreed three weeks before the first performance that the participants would be allowed to practise for approximately one hour every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday until the project ended.

Method

Techniques of counterpoint

Data were collected in various forms including video recordings of individual and group sessions, field notes recorded in 32 logbooks kept by the facilitator–researcher, two semi-structured interviews undertaken with individual participants at the beginning and at the end of the project, which were transcribed in full, as well as written testimonies from the participants about their experiences in the project and about their life inside prison.

As video recordings were made of all the musical work that took place in individual sessions, the logbooks contain the facilitator–researcher's reflective notes, personal impressions, ideas for subsequent sessions, logistical constraints, and comments on each participant's progress and reactions to the musical materials presented in sessions. They also contain brief descriptions of encounters that were not recorded, such as those that took place before the beginning of a session or during breaks between sessions.

The initial interview was carried out before the first individual session with the aim of understanding each participant's personal motivations and expectations, and their willingness

to take part in the public performances that formed an important goal of the project, as conceived by the facilitator–researcher. The final interview, which took place three months after the project came to an end, was an opportunity for the facilitator–researcher to evaluate the project, considering: (1) the relationship between initial expectations and final outcomes; (2) the relative importance of different aspects of the project such as individual versus group work and individual practice, with and without supervision; (3) factors differentiating this project from others, the role of public performances, and potential changes in participants' personal and social relationships both with each other and with other women in custody; (4) participants' expectations for the near future, inside prison, and after release.

The written testimonies were made during the final stage of the project. Each participant was given a series of flexible guidelines to write about her life in prison, her relationship with music, and her personal experience of the project, with no restriction on length. Excerpts from the testimonies were read aloud by the professional actor who took part in the last public concert, between participants' performances on the piano. Although the testimonies differ greatly in content and style, and were inevitably influenced by the participants' relationships with the facilitator–researcher, which had become increasingly close over the course of the project, they nevertheless constitute important evidence of individual participants' personal experiences.

At the core of this article are the stories of each of the four women who participated in the project. They are told in the form of a narrative inquiry by a facilitator–researcher who “[lives] on the landscape” and is “complicit in the world” that is being studied (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). The four stories therefore have a personal and experiential character that stresses the uniqueness of each participant while showing how they shared the same experience of making music inside a prison, thus “render[ing] audible the voices of the disempowered and the marginal” (Bowman, 2009, p. 212). The article examines the participants' lived experiences in a way that challenges and disrupts the generic accounts that circulate through positions of power and authority (Bowman, 2009) and defies the popular “fascination, verging on the salacious, with punishment and suffering” (Brown & Barton, 2013, p. 3). In the next section, the four participants are presented as individuals who have travelled a path of discovery through music making with me, the facilitator–researcher. Through their stories they reveal themselves as human beings, exploring and expanding the boundaries of what music is, of who can make it, and of how we do it. Together, we sought and found the strategies that need to be developed if individuals are to communicate through music (Lamela & Rodrigues, 2017).

As I was the facilitator–researcher, I started constructing the narrative from my field notes, which constituted a source of data detailing both the participants' experiences and my experience of the project. First, the data were coded thematically so as to identify key events in the project for each participant and their attitudes and reactions to these events. Second, a clearer and broader understanding of the events was enabled by analysing video recordings of the sessions in which the events occurred. Third, the interview transcripts and participants' written testimonies were coded to support the process of constructing a narrative for each participant that reflected her own individual experience. According to Richardson's (1998) metaphor, these stories told in the first-person voice of the facilitator–researcher represent just one of the many facets of a crystal. This approach defies generalization and represents a concern, rather, “with *this* event, with *my* experience, and with *our* meanings, rather than with some abstract category of occurrences or things of which these are deemed illustrative” (Bowman, 2009, p. 213).

Results and discussion

The Fugue for Four Voices

The four narratives represent a baroque fugue, rich in symmetries, imitations, and inversions that reveal the personal journeys of the participants.³ Each narrative is told by the facilitator–researcher in the present tense. As the narrative unfolds, it is illustrated by quotations from each participant. Data from the interview transcripts and written testimonies, and excerpts from the facilitator–researcher’s field notes are used as a commentary on the narrative, as conceived by the facilitator–researcher.

First episode: Marta. A woman with a strong northern accent, Marta sits down at the piano for the first time and says: “I need this, at least to get my brain working. In here, people feel dull!” Marta sees her imprisonment as an interlude in her life, something that forced her to stop her projects, but does not erase the life she has outside, which centres on her family. As she tells me, *Anjos d’amor* (Angels of love), her first composition, are “the three angels of my life: my father, my husband and my son.”

Marta feels good about herself. Even when she is sad, she tells me that coming to the session helps her: “It makes me feel good!” Talented but a little impatient, Marta wants to play without listening to my suggestions. Sometimes it is difficult to get her to focus. “I am so clumsy,” she confesses. She has a job in the prison library that keeps her busy almost all day. In her free time, she gives wings to her poetic vein, which she discovered during this period of enforced seclusion. She shows me a little notebook full of her own poems and insists on reading some of them aloud. She is visibly proud and when I comment that I think the poems are beautiful, she does not hide her pleasure.

I think it was necessary to be in this situation to discover some talents, which I did not think I had.
(Marta, written testimony)

Marta’s musical talent is evident from the outset. In her first improvisations, I noticed that she has a good rhythm, always keeping the beat. “It sounded good!” she comments. She has a lot of technical ease and immediately starts to play with both hands simultaneously. She tells me that she likes “to feel” what she is playing. Jokingly, she says that maybe she was a pianist in a previous incarnation.

The repertoire that Marta plays is increasingly complex and I manage to work with her technically and musically with a considerable degree of attention to detail. She learns everything very easily, which makes her tired of studying the same pieces. “Playing the same thing . . . I’m done . . . I don’t even feel like coming here any more!” she confesses. But she does not get tired of her *Anjos d’amor*, and continues to show great pride in her composition until the end of the project. She dances, smiles, and makes wide gestures when she plays it.

I managed to make a song, I feel proud. When I play, I feel butterflies in my belly, and if the sound comes out as I want, I feel fulfilled. (Marta, written testimony)

3. Participants have been given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity, chosen not at random but to pay tribute to them by invoking four women famous in the history of music in Portugal and further afield: the world-famous pianists Marta Argerich and Maria João Pires, the Portuguese pianist and pedagogue Helena Sá e Costa, and Clara Schumann.

Marta has a very strong personality, showing great self-esteem and self-confidence; characteristics that seem out of place inside the prison, where the heavy weight of the stigma of being sentenced usually has the opposite effect on women. She tells me that she wants to play her own music, and not other people's compositions. Marta considers that her singing voice is not strong. As she commented one day: "Have you heard my voice? Horrible!" However, she was proud of her courage when singing a small solo in the Project X final performance. When playing in public, she feels and acts as though she were an experienced artist and she is not afraid of taking chances. She always wants to show herself at her best and, before the first performance, Marta creates a graphic score of *Anjos d'amor* on a piece of paper. "I don't want to look bad in my music!" she confesses to me.

My expectation is to be able to play a song that touches the heart . . . And that people hear and say "Hey, man! Marta managed to play a really cool song there!" (Marta, initial interview)

She wants to continue playing the piano when she is released, but she doesn't know if she will have the opportunity. She will have to start rebuilding her life when she leaves prison, and that scares her.

Music is already part of my life, it's a daily routine, and I can't go without it, it nurtures my dream . . . Play to forget where I am . . . play to occupy my time, it's a whirlwind of feelings. Without doubt, playing gave me wings to fly. (Marta, written testimony)

On one of the last days she came to practise she composed a song. She tells me that she feels free at such times and that they are very important in her life in prison, allowing space just for herself:

[The piano] was a toy for me, no doubt. And I was free there. (Marta, final interview)

Marta was released in December 2014. She was accepted at university and hoped to become an accountant.

Second episode: Maria João. Maria João defines herself as someone who "never stops," with a scheduled daily routine inside the prison. Her hands are very well cared for, but she cuts her long nails when I tell her it is best for playing the piano. She sees her participation in the project as the beginning of something she intends to continue "out there," after being released. Her family and life are waiting outside, and she sees imprisonment as an opportunity to acquire more training and enrich herself.

She does not feel part of the prison universe, but ends up being caught in the web of this "very particular environment," as she describes it. She is aware that her social status is different from that of most of the other women and she often shows a superiority that complicates the group dynamic in the joint sessions, which I interpret as a way of protecting herself. But when she drops her cloak of superiority, she shows all her sensitivity and allows herself to feel excited in the moment.

Maria João, in charge of interacting with the children around the piano, danced with an energy that, I dare say, was hardly appropriate. In the midst of this almost uncontrollable energy, I loved the enthusiasm with which they sang with me, all! (Field notes dated 31 January 2014)

Maria João takes part in the project knowing that she is about to be released. This brings a certain energy, joy, and willingness to work, together with high anxiety levels. However, she is sensitive, and takes herself to task afterwards if she has not shown a positive attitude. She always speaks on behalf of the group when referring to the concerts, and she feels that she is part of a project that is greater than the individual work we have done together. She is aware of the difficulty of certain tasks, but she likes challenges. As she once said to me, "You are asking a lot! What matters is that we adore you!"

The concert here . . . was something [of] ours, you know? We were trying to show people what you managed to teach us and what we managed to learn. (Maria João, final interview)

Maria João likes to talk with me, and tells me some intimate details about herself. Maybe she sees me as someone with whom she identifies, from the world outside prison. I notice that she develops a very special affection and respect for me. "You have to grade Inês's work as high as possible!" she says to my PhD supervisor, on one of the days he comes to the prison with me.

I learned that the words "I can't do it" doesn't exist. The love that you give to me and your teaching make everything seem so easy, everything is possible. (Maria João, written testimony)

Maria João is completely devoted to the project and she works on her repertoire, as she says, "until her fingers hurt." She values individual practice highly, as the only way to achieve good outcomes, and she is sorry that it was not possible to practise sooner. She is aware of her improvements: "Did you notice that I played without looking at my fingers? It is a big progress!" It is in the work on repertoire that she excels. Of the four participants, it is with her that I develop the approach that is closest to that of a traditional piano lesson. I realize that it is what suits her best. I see in her final performance how much she learned as a result of her independent efforts: she plays solidly, without hesitation, aware of all the expressive and technical details.

I learned that we can learn to play an instrument as long as the affection overcomes the difficulties. The name of our project, *On the Wings of a Piano . . . I Learn to Fly*, defines everything I feel when I sit down and play. (Maria João, written testimony)

Maria João seems much more accomplished when she is working on repertoire than when she is engaging in creative activities. When she is improvising, I often feel that, despite keeping the pulse correctly, she is not looking for the best musical ideas. However, when she manages to create sounds that are more organized, her satisfaction is evident. "Did it sound good back there?" she asks the prison guard who accompanies us that day, with a big smile.

She is afraid to expose herself in the public performances. "It's just getting there and playing, isn't it, Inês? I like your optimism, it makes me feel good," she tells me sarcastically. Nevertheless she experiences the applause as food for her ego; it brings her happiness.

One thing is when you to tell us "you can play this, and you play it well." Another thing is that I see someone, see a bunch of people watching, that think that I played well. Because we weren't just playing! We were sharing the joy we felt of being there! (Maria João, final interview)

Maria João was released in January 2015. Days before finishing the project, she asked me for new repertoire as she was interested in buying a piano as soon as she was released so as to continue playing.

Third episode: Helena. Helena has big hands, with thick and calloused fingers. In our conversations, I sense darkness in her past life and I realize that her imprisonment represents an opportunity to escape the negative spiral in which she had found herself. But she is afraid of what will happen in the future, when she has been released—"I get scared when I see . . ."—and she tells me the stories of many women who returned to prison having been released, because they were unable to fill, in Helena's words, "a void of their mind and of their soul."

She sits down for the first time at the piano and looks at the keyboard, eager to discover it. The smile, the laughter, and the clapping, so frequent throughout this first session, and throughout the project, clearly show her joy.

[This project] did me very well! [It] valued me. . . Sometimes I found myself thinking about how I was able to play the piano. And so, if I was able to do that in such a space I will also be able to do many different things outside! (Helena, final interview)

In Helena, trust, persistence, need, and fragility come together. She likes to repeat each new section of music several times, until she feels completely secure; she stamps her feet, shakes her head and says "no!" to herself, when she fails. It is clear from the outset that when I teach her something new, she needs to take her own time to internalize it. She listens to all my instructions very carefully and does not rush, organizing herself before starting to play again. But there are moments of frustration when she looks as though she is paralysed. She is "a strong woman," as she describes herself, however, and she manages to recover.

Helena often became paralyzed and took her hands off the piano, feeling defeated. We struggled to finish her music, despite my constant insistence to keep playing or simply invent something. It was hard to see a woman who is so active and so willing to participate looking so fragile! (Field notes dated 7 March 2014)

"I want to leave a message: I made it!" In these words, Helena sums up her experience of taking part in this project. She works at the prison laundry all day and, despite having less time to practise than she would like to, she tells me several times that she has been recounting everything we did in the last session to her children, in detail, and that she has warned them that, when she has been released, she wants a "little keyboard, even if it's used." She now looks at pianists on television much more carefully and appreciates the way they move their fingers, making everything look easy.

It made me evaluate, at this point in my life, my ability to learn, to know a little more about what an instrument represents in music. I wanted to learn, wanted to know . . . and wanted to feel! (Helena, final interview)

Her concentration is consistent: she does not speak while playing, and she has a clear idea of what she wants to communicate through sound, correcting herself. She takes my compliments with a smile, but she is very demanding of herself and wants to do better. Helena likes challenges: "This is really daring!" she tells me, when working on Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. Although she finds it difficult to master complex tasks such as playing with both hands together, she never gives up. She gives of her best at public presentations, living each moment with intensity and getting the most out of it. When we are working with university students and a group of men from the Aveiro prison she says to me enthusiastically, "we should sing among them!"

From the first day, it is inspiring to see how Helena responds to the challenge of creating music spontaneously. As soon as we finish our first joint improvisation, on black keys, she looks at me, claps and laughs. She is visibly excited.

Helena's first free improvisation moments: fantastic! In the end I told her that it gave me a lot of pleasure to make music with her and Helena replied to me, very touched and moved: "It's really wonderful! Really wonderful!" (Field notes dated 30 November 2013)

The magic of improvisation happens every week. We always start with a few minutes of creative freedom at the beginning of the sessions, even if the time is tight to carry out all the tasks I have planned for that day. I am aware that these are very special moments for Helena. "It is wonderful! I want a piano!" she tells me. And, deep down, I am aware that I have as much pleasure as she has.

That magic of . . . what flows from you, the notes that you don't know how to play, but that you play, and when you can listen that they have a unique sound, something that makes you feel good . . . There were times that I almost flew! . . . That I thought I already knew it all! (Helena, final interview)

Helena's musical abilities are most easily observed when she is improvising. She reveals great musical understanding, preparing both moments of greater tension as well as points of relaxation, especially at the ends of improvisations. She is very careful with timbre and, despite her muscular tension, shows intentionality in the way she attacks each note, knowing the exact sound she wants to make. Her improvisations are structured symmetrically using a clear question-and-answer scheme. When I tell her that her musical thought is very well organized she replies, "I cannot describe or understand it . . . but I do know what I am feeling. And what I am playing is what I am listening [to] inside."

Helena was released in September 2014. I carried out the final interview with her after she had left the prison. At that time she was trying to reorganize her life with her family, wanting to make up for all the time that she had missed with her children and grandchildren.

Fourth episode: Clara. Clara is a delicate, peaceful woman with a very calm tone of voice. She is not embarrassed to tell me that her dream is to play guitar, not piano. In the first session, she laughs when she realizes that she is unable to use just one finger at a time on the keyboard. But she is happy to discover this and smiles at her own difficulties.

When I was invited to learn to play the piano, I smiled, but I said out loud I should be learning to play the guitar, which is my passion. But I was expectant, because I thought it would be an interesting experience. (Clara, written testimony)

Inside prison, she has chosen to work in the arts and craft space, where she paints on all kinds of materials. During the project, she offers me several gifts that she has painted. Realizing that I often don't have any breaks between sessions, she starts bringing me something to eat every week: "a treat for you," as she calls it.

She took a surprise out of her folder. "You have the world in your hands and that's why I did this for you." "This" was a white satin pillow, painted by her, with two hands holding Planet Earth. So beautiful! (Field notes dated 28 March 2014)

Clara really wants to learn and devotes part of her time to tasks that she thinks are the best way of enhancing her skills, even though they may not be the most pleasant or motivating. After the first session she sketches a keyboard on a sheet of paper, on her own initiative, so she can “practise the fingers every day” in her cell. She is always interested in learning more material to be able to play even better. When I ask her if she wants another set of finger exercises, she replies, “I want everything!” She doesn’t know why, but she has difficulty remembering which is her third finger and tries to help herself by painting a very discreet “3” on the appropriate fingernail.

She enjoys the time we spend improvising and often closes her eyes when listening to my playing. I realize that she tries to surpass herself every day. “I didn’t play anything good today, but I was exercising my fingers, did you notice?” she asks. She is very much aware of the sound effects she wants, and explains her intentions to me in detail when we have finished playing.

We always started with invented music, and that made me feel totally relaxed, because nothing was required, I could play at will as if I was flying with closed eyes, and bits of music came out that sounded very good to me. (Clara, written testimony)

Clara listens very carefully to my instructions. She is always willing to accept any challenge I give her: “I’m ready for everything!” She plays a very important role in maintaining group unity and a positive spirit when we all work together. She is generous, and immediately relinquishes her leadership when she realizes that this will help facilitate the management of the group.

She is always excited at the prospect of learning something new. “I see two balls here . . . and I don’t know what they are,” she tells me, looking at a new score for the first time. I explain to her that there are two notes that are to be played at the same time and, wanting to try to play right away, she replies enthusiastically “Wow! How funny!” Although she shows some frustration when she feels that her level of performance is not meeting her own expectations, she does show a degree of pride in her work. “I’m an ace, now! You will see my little hands here on the piano.”

I started My Heart Will Go On on the white keys and it was an incredible experience, as if the music world opened up to me a little more. I shouldn’t, I know, but I felt a little vain. (Clara, written testimony)

Clara values individual practice. “Coming here to play is really relaxing . . . it’s really good, good, good . . .” She likes the freedom to be able to do what she wants with her time and the autonomy to be alone in a space other than her cell.

Sometimes they [the prison guards] listened to me and say “oh, play a little” and I, full of conceit, asked “what do you want? I can give you three to choose from!” It was funny . . . No . . . it was spectacular! (Clara, final interview)

She sees the concerts as a very important milestone in the project as they allow her to meet new people and to have different musical experiences. Even if she doesn’t play as perfectly as she would like, she always maintains a very positive attitude and tries to disguise her hesitation and errors as well as she can. However, I know she is sad that she cannot play better.

Clara shows confidence in my ability to guide her in her musical development and the process of learning to play the piano, and she doesn’t want the project to end. “When you finish this, will you come back to do the follow-up? You could do something . . .” I feel that she has formed a very special affection for me, and that much of the joy in her own success comes from knowing that I am happy with the results of the work we have done together.

I realized that Inês was a demanding person, but full of incredible patience, and I started to have a very curious desire, I wanted her to be proud of me . . . I felt that she gave me so much of her, her patience, her goodwill, her smiles, the strength for me to like it more and dedicate myself even more. (Clara, written testimony)

Clara remains at EPESCB, thinking about the future and how she can keep playing music, wondering if she will be able to learn more repertoire on her own. She makes plans to play music with her sister when she is released.

Development

Forty-five years ago, Foucault stated that it is self-evident that the prison “is based on its role, supposed or demanded, as an apparatus for transforming individuals” (1995, p. 233). More recently, Wacquant (2009) claimed that prisons are dominated by austerity and security, reducing rehabilitation policies to a mere bureaucratic marketing slogan. Within this context in which power over the people who have been detained is a central part of the system, community music principles and practices become not only an approach, but an essential characteristic of any program that seeks to develop a positive identity through supporting personal growth and social strengths (McNeill et al., 2011).

The structures of power and the rules to ensure security, by which incarceration is defined, pose a challenge to community music practices. As emphasized by Cohen and Henley (2018, p. 161), prisons are characterized by an institutional environment where everything, from architecture to policies and security measures, is designed to work “*on* people,” instead of “*with* people” (emphasis in original). The still-recurrent use of the word “treatment” to designate the purpose of imprisonment, with people “diagnosed” as offenders who need to be treated so as to be “cured” of offending, is a clear reflection of this.⁴ By contrast, community music is defined as “an active intervention between a music leader or facilitator and participants” (Higgins, 2012, p. 3). These participants commit themselves to the project because they want to be “worked with” rather than “worked on” (Higgins, 2012, p. 155). The narratives presented in this article reflect the respect of the facilitator–researcher for each participant. By listening to their requests, by understanding their strengths and weaknesses, and, at the same time, by offering them the knowledge and the technical and theoretical skills that were not available to them until that time, it was possible to open doors to a profound, unique, and, to use Maria João’s word, “special” experience.

From the standpoint of criminal studies, the impact of the researcher’s presence is an important variable to be taken into consideration since “individual connections are meaningful for those who have been symbolically and literally removed from the world through incarceration” (Bosworth et al., 2005, p. 261). Based on previous publications in the fields of research on criminal studies and music in prisons, Cohen and Henley (2018) stress that relationships formed with people from the outside enable social and personal agency and the development of a new social identity. Considering the time frame of this project and the facilitator–researcher’s intimate contact with each participant, these bonds were very relevant to this project. For the participants,

4. Portuguese legislation states that penitentiary treatment consists of a set of activities and social reintegration programs aimed at preparing prisoners for freedom, through the development of their responsibilities, the acquisition of skills that allow them to choose a socially responsible way of life, without committing crimes, and provide for their needs after release (Decree-Law 115/2009, article 5, number 2).

the researcher was not only a music facilitator but also a sympathetic friend from the outside, someone who could be trusted and to whom confessions could be made. For the facilitator–researcher, growing affection for each participant fuelled her desire to give them the best experience possible. These bonds and affection can be understood as underpinning a meaningful experience that enhanced the impact of music making and resulted in an embodied narrative, presented here as “an act of coming to understand the world empathetically, exploring and negotiating polysemic meanings” (Bresler, 2006, p. 22) and in which “the research relationship is one in which the researcher too can be changed” (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 12).

Higgins (2012) argues that face-to-face encounters between facilitators and participants emerge as unequal friendships, challenging the ordinary conception of the term, as a demarcation of the boundary between the roles of participant and facilitator is required. Even if the demarcation is faint, it ensures that the ethical nature of the musical experience is not in jeopardy. From another perspective, criminal studies point to the importance of being aware that the observations and reactions of the facilitator–researcher reflect their privileged position as a temporary guest in the prison environment (Sutton, 2011). In the project *On the Wings of a Piano . . . I Learn to Fly*, mutual trust and respect between facilitator–researcher and participants were key to a fruitful experience for both, as clearly demonstrated by Maria João and Clara. There was an “investment in each other” that created an environment in which meaningful music making could take place (Higgins, 2012, p. 159).

Even though one-to-one sessions with each participant were at the core of the project, group sessions and public performances were also fundamental to its success. When conflicts arose between the participants in group sessions, they were resolved as the result of participants’ respect for and trust in the facilitator–researcher, and their shared goal of giving the best performances they could. This was also evident in the performance of *Stories of a Piano that Taught Us to Fly*, given for babies and children; again, the participants took particular care to integrate them into the performance and ensure they enjoyed themselves to the utmost. Thus each participant became a facilitator of positive musical experiences, the channel through which each baby and child could experience the dimensions of hospitality and welcome that, according to Higgins (2012), characterize community music activities. In this way “being for the other [took] precedence over being-for-itself” (Levinas, 2006 as cited in Higgins, 2012).

While the focus of this article is on the human and personal experiences that resulted from this project, the research can also inform our understanding about the processes of teaching and learning that can take place in carceral environments, giving insight into the most appropriate tools for teaching. These elements are rarely considered in most of the literature in this area (Anderson, 2015). Grounded in community music’s principles of “decentralisation, accessibility, equal opportunity, and active participation in music-making” (Olseng, 1991, p. 84), the pedagogic outcomes of the one-to-one sessions in this project are clear. It was possible for the facilitator–researcher to understand that participants had different goals, depending on their musical tastes or special desires, and to nurture each participant appropriately, using her considerable experience as a piano teacher to work both musically and pianistically at the highest level. While taking multiple approaches to teaching, resulting in a range of outcomes for learning, the pursuit of excellence was a constant both in music making and its products. This pursuit is defined by Higgins (2012) as a process that must always be related to the participants’ aims, a characteristic of community music practice.

As postulated by Cohen and Henley (2014), “people who come into prison facilities to lead music-making in prisons regularly describe the values they gain from these activities” (p. 126). Accordingly, they note that further research on training opportunities for professional musicians developing music projects in detention settings is needed, as well as a deeper

knowledge of the influence of such projects on their facilitators. Although the present article does not focus specifically on the facilitator's experience, it responds to this point insofar as the narrative of each participant is told by, and in the voice of, a facilitator who was intimately involved with them.⁵

Conclusions

Coda

I recently discovered the amazing story of Demetrius Cunningham, a prisoner who learned to play the piano on a cardboard instrument which he had constructed in his cell (Cunningham, 2016). This story of resilience resonated with my experience at EPESCB, making me think of Clara, "practising [her] fingers" on the keyboard that she had sketched within the confines of her cell.

Greene (1995) argues that "there is a connection between narrative and the growth of identity," pointing out the importance of shaping our own stories (p. 186). Generally speaking, the arts are a medium for shaping narratives of ourselves, and this is no different in a prison. By giving voice to the unique narrative of each participant, this research explores the experience of making music in a way that goes far beyond the idea of music solely as an aesthetic phenomenon. Focusing, within the boundaries of community music practices, on individual piano practice, this fugue tells the story of Marta, Maria João, Helena, and Clara, four women who, on the wings of a piano, learned to fly.⁶

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5. Áine Manguoang's article in this Special Issue reports an example of research addressing this issue; see also Lamela & Rodrigues (2016) concerning leadership in music projects behind bars. Anderson (2009) has compiled a series of resources including activities and ideas for teachers working in prisons.
 6. The articles in this Special Issue reporting music research and practice in prisons are informed by discussions between the members of the Social Impact of Music Making (SIMM). They represent three possible approaches to the topic, reflecting the need to address it critically. Ultimately, the experience of making music inside a prison does not remain behind its walls; it travels beyond them through everyone who experiences it, whether detainee or facilitator, influencing society at large.

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