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The Role of Children's Musical Instruments in Communication with Musical Language

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Abstract

The study, in which we looked into the role of children's musical instruments in holistic music education, was conducted among children in the initial phase of primary schooling. Based on a theory of dialogue, we observed how children engaged in communication in musical language with respect of their own choice and inventive use of children's musical instruments. The research was conceived as a phenomenological case study. With this method we obtained data which enabled a deeper understanding of what the participants experienced when using musical instruments and insight into their social competences in using musical language. Having used qualitative data analysis, we established in the final grounded theory the following three conclusions: a) working with musical instruments functions as an area where the only possible realisation seems to be in line with the presumption that a person with an instrument personally identify themselves with the sound of the chosen instrument, b) the use of children's instruments cannot be effective outside the framework of dialogical dimensions of musical language, c) by using children's musical instruments, children apprehend the basic principles of group performance.

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1. Introduction

Music as a distinctive product of humankind, includes songs and instrumental music. Singing and speech are formed in the vocal apparatus (Tecumseh Fitch, 2007), while it seems that instrumental music originates in body percussion in primeval music and is basically connected to movement and dancing. This represents the starting point of holistic music education which promotes creative use of musical language in group (Jungmair, 2003; Orff,

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2002b). In school situations, where we work with an entire class of children, we often use children's musical instruments, i.e. (children's) folk, improvised and Orff's instruments (Oblak, 2003). The latter derive from the sounds of exotic instruments and, according to their author, C. Orff, lessons which make use of those instruments will differ from any conventional lessons. In his opinion, every student should perform a certain movement, accompanying it rhythmically. Thus, he introduced into the music education method, based on rhythmical character, a natural need for instruments which are not merely suitable for the "clumsy little fellows". Rather, the performer's body identifies with the instrument, so that together they form a single music-making body (Jungmair, 2003). Ideas and expressions of one's own inner musical world are realised by playing instruments, and it is also relatively easy to imitate the procedures used in authorial music. The specific characteristics of these instruments offer children as well as adults, healthy or with special needs, numerous possibilities of expressing their sound-related experiencing that they have never been able to hear before.

The objectives of musical communication in a group (with body-percussion, folk, improvised or Orff instruments) described by text books (Blazekova, 2011; Frazee, 1987; Goodkin, 2002; Gunther, 2002a, 2002b; Haselbach, 2004; Jungmair, 2003; Keetman, 1974; Kugler, 1995, 2002, 2005; Sangiorgio, 2013; Steen, 1992) include development of artistic sensitivity and aesthetic evaluation of music, development of active musical intelligence, encouraging recognition and expression of musical experience with musical parameters, development of musical identity, and they are also connected with socialisation and cooperation among the members of a group. Based on our experience from years of practicing holistic music teaching with groups of children, we presupposed in our study, that in group music-making, there are a lot of similarity or even equivalence of relations and relationships between persons in a group in terms of Buber's dialogue theory. While elementary music, which originates in human primeval experience (Orff, 2002d), represents the basis for C. Orff's holistic music education, M. Buber develops his basic idea from the statement: "In the beginning is relation." (Buber, 1995, p. 19).

2. Method

The study aimed at identifying and describing the role of children's musical instruments in communication with musical language. We were particularly interested in how the participants were expressing themselves with instruments individually and how they functioned in the group. The presumption was that they led a dialogue ~~with~~ IN musical language as an expression of mutual relation, and we asked ourselves how – if at all – they got to know each other in their primevalness, i.e. in the process of expressing themselves with primeval musical language.

The following two research questions were formed on the basis of the research objective: how do children engage in the communication in musical language in terms of their own choices and innovative use of children's instruments; and how is it possible to connect their music-making with live interpersonal relations in the group, as they are defined by the theory of dialogue.

The research was designed as a phenomenological case study. In the process of interaction between the participants, this research method enabled direct observation of what they were experiencing while they were communicating in musical language and identifying themselves with the musical characteristics of individual musical instruments. It was also possible to monitor the participating children's behaviour towards each other, their reactions to musical and other artistic stimulations, interactions between children and the teacher and also the entire context in which musical language was formed.

The study was conducted over a nine-month period in the framework of an extra-curricular activity entitled "*Orff instruments workshop*". We carried out 44 lessons. The group included 18 children, of which 10 girls and 8 boys. 11 children were 6-years old, 6 children were 7-years old and one girl was aged 9. We chose to include younger children in the study, as we presumed that, due to their young age, they had internalised less influences from the acoustic environment and would be more susceptible to elementary musical stimuli which primary school music education in Slovenia is based on (Zalar, 2012). We did so in order to obtain the best possible internal validity of the study as regards the question of originality of the selection of instruments in musical language, since we presumed, in line with the research objective, that younger children with less previous musical experience would communicate in musical language in a more primal manner. Furthermore, we believed that children at the beginning of primary school would have the right curiosity for exploring instruments, as sound-producing objects, and symbolic play, which is characterised by representation of other, non-musical phenomena, e.g. "translation" of an image, event or story into music (Sangiorgio, 2010).

During the lessons, data were collected in the Descriptive Protocol through overt participant observation and by videorecording the lessons. By using overt participant observation we aimed at reaching the children's experience field at the point of selecting instruments and using them to shape musical language, and recognising the elements of the theory of dialogue. This method was chosen as the most suitable on the basis of the presumption that it enables the teacher to get a direct, "in vivo" experience of the research process.

The data were collected in the Descriptive Protocol which represents the happening description (HD) from the point of view of each individual child as well as that of the group as a whole. It was produced in the following manner: immediately after each lesson, the teacher wrote down everything he could remember about the lesson. Since he could not rely completely on his memory and on objectivity of his own reporting, his notes were supplemented with transcriptions of the video recordings (V). This way it was possible to describe in detail even the events that were impossible to perceive during the lesson and were concealed to the teacher due to his own involvement. Based on the transcriptions, the teacher's speech (V-TS) and the speech of the children (V-CS) were also included in the Descriptive Protocol, which enabled parallels of verbal reporting about the selection and use of the instruments in the phenomenological discussions among all participants.

2.1. Definition of Categories

The data from the Descriptive Protocol were presented with a timeline. We processed the material we gathered with qualitative data analysis which, in defining the categories, included open coding and axial coding. We derived 18 categories, five of which proved to be relevant for the engagement in communication in musical language in terms of the selection and use of children's musical instruments and in terms of establishing connections between group music-making and interpersonal relations as defined by the theory of dialogue.

Musical Knowledges

The category "*Musical Knowledges*" represents the knowledges about musical instruments which children showed during the lessons. The records in our materials report about a high level of participants' musical knowledge – higher than required by the curriculum for the initial level of primary school. However, that knowledge seemed to have hindered more than helped them immerse into the expressive power of individual instruments. Instead of reporting about how they experienced the musical character of the instruments, they were rather looking for "the right" answers. This was particularly true in the first few lessons of our study. For example, the teacher started the presentation of a new musical instrument – kazoo – by playing a short song, without showing the instrument to the children, asking them to describe the sound colour and character of the instrument as they felt it. Instead, the children, not understanding her instructions, started to enumerate musical instruments which they already knew. "*They are thinking about which instrument this is. Without any connection to what is going on during the lesson, they are naming instruments that they know (flute, recorder, piccolo, piano, etc. – they come up with the names of 17 musical instruments).*" (DP)

In accepting new information, children showed curiosity and were sincerely glad of anything new (DP). Their awareness of the acoustic characteristics of instruments was built gradually over several months. Initially, they relied on the appearance: "*You have to play the big one first, and only then the small one!*" (V-CS) Later on, by exploring their own voice and working with improvised musical instruments, they became aware of the acoustic characteristics e.g.: "*with the movement of the entire body and by imitating the sounds with their voices, they spontaneously show how the balloon 'lived' near the floor, how it grew, moved upwards and circled around faster and faster through the air*" (DP) or "*... when you dance, I will accompany you with the stones the way you will feel like.*" (V-CS)

Cooperation in the Group – Choosing and Using the Instruments

For the purpose of the research on the choice and use of children's musical instruments, we gathered in the category "*Cooperation in the Group*" those data from our materials, which relate to what children were experiencing

in the group before, during and after playing the instruments. According to the reports, the initial concentration was fragile, with children allowing external distractors, such as sounds and noises from outside the school, their desire for the biggest or most attractive instrument etc., to influence them (too) strongly. In the initial lessons, verbal comments about what they experienced using the instruments, were poor: "...it was somewhat weirdly different, wasn't it?" (V-CS), even though the data obtained from the videorecording (V) of the event, indicate that children had happy expressions on their faces, got on well together and seemed harmonious in expressing themselves with sounds. On the contrary, in the transition to a confident choice of musical instruments, based on their own sensations, children used spoken language a lot, sometimes even to the extent of drowning out their own sensations. By reporting about group performances, e.g. "*This music wasn't soft at all. You played so sharply*", most of them eventually became aware of musical language the main characteristic of which is non-verbal communication. Thus, in the concluding weeks of the research, they only now and then felt the need of making arrangements in advance. Mostly, they only commented on their motor, singing or instrumental performance in short conversations, like in the example below, when they were playing on bells of different sizes: "*They are seasons! Different tones, one for each season. No, there are even more seasons! Here is winter, it's cold. I'm hidden in this one which is summer!*" (V-CS)

Building Common Musical Stories

This category presents those elements of the creative process which enabled children to make a common musical product out of individual sensations about a certain stimulus (a painting, coloured ribbons laid down on the floor in a random form, movement of balloons, etc.). Children showed a considerable amount of inventiveness by IN using various speech modes and including small percussion instruments (DP). They were able to incorporate into the story even those children who seemed disturbing during the performance. "...all the planets were twirling around here, except you. Okay, so you weren't planets." (V-CS).

Within this category we also describe the difficulties that some children experienced with regard to the construction of common musical stories. Mostly, it was a matter of more strongly expressed individualism: "*Can I tell my story with music, so that everything will be all right then?*" (V-CS). However, gradually children grasped the idea of making music together and accepted it: "*Yes, it's nice if more people play together!*" (V-CS)

Original Use of Orff Instruments

This category contains a selection of the key descriptions from our materials which reflect how the participating children set about the task of playing Orff and improvised instruments. We started by describing the moments when children were discovering the possibilities to produce sounds with the above mentioned instruments and we realised that creating the music-making environment is a very demanding and straining task for children. Due to the fact that the instruments were disrupting children's concentration (DP), we brought into the classroom objects from the nature, e.g. gravel stones. This stimulated children to express an important element of musical co-existence: they realised that the "enlivened instrument" depends on their own will: "*The stones need a pair to become an instrument! Me!!*" (V-CS). They were also using body percussion spontaneously and effectively.

The category "*Original Use of Instruments*" can be illustrated best with the activity when children were spontaneously composing musical stories, including in their own original ways not only the instruments, but also all sorts of objects producing sounds and noises, as well as their voices. In doing so, they became sensitive for tone colour of instruments and objects from the nature, so that after a certain time of practicing they knew in advance what they wanted to use, e.g.: "*I'm flying around the Moon*", "*I'm flying around the Sun*", "*And there are planets there, too, can you hear it?*", "*To me this was like a space avalanche*". (V-CS)

Encounter

The name of this category is a term we borrowed from Buber's theory of dialogue. The category includes descriptions of those moments in the lessons for which it clearly results from the materials that the participants felt each other, i.e. that they "encountered" each other in their common music making. We also included those moments for which we believe that common sensing would have occurred, if individual children had not reacted to the

(disturbing) external influences and if they had not succumbed to the (verbal) type of communication which they were more familiar with. We identified common sensing at the beginning of performances when children bred in together, even if they were playing instruments, without agreeing to do so in advance. At the endings of performances or improvisations, such common feeling was less frequent, since children often got too absorbed in playing. However, it did occur occasionally: *“Everybody stops playing at the same time, without any previous agreement.”* (DP) Furthermore, it WAS possible to detect that they recognised the sensations of others in the peer evaluations of performances: *“You were like a camel, and you? Did you play like some kind of water?”* (V-CS)

The encounters of their sensations in musical language were occasionally disrupted by influences from the environment, e.g. noises from the street, which showed their power by preventing spontaneous music making in the group. The same happened in interviews, e.g. in the interview about the “musical jungle” in which children expressed their ideas with their own musical expressive elements: *“If I really was a monkey, I would learn, so that if it really happened to me that I turned into something, I would know how to do things.”* (V-CS)

3. Grounded theory

We identified the paradigmatic model of relationships between categories in selective coding of the material gathered on the role of children's musical instruments in communication with musical language. We distinguished between codes and categories of key relevance and codes and categories of secondary relevance, the later touching upon the researched topic only indirectly. This procedure led to the formulation of the final grounded theory with the following findings:

3.1 Working with musical instruments functions as an area where the only possible realisation seems to be in line with the presumption that a person identifies themselves with the sound of the chosen instrument.

Children included in the research started making music by basing themselves on movement, to which they added individual sounds and syllables thus intensifying individual movements. This combination spontaneously evolved into the use of body-percussion. Since these are distinctively rhythmical instruments, already during the accustomation phase, children developed their own rhythmical patterns which they then imitated and arranged into sequences. According to Orff (2002a, 2002c), such approach represents the ability of each person to experience and perform elementary music (i.e. music which arises from inside a person). He understands it as a child's desire to play. This is the basis of holistic music which enables the children to get to know music in the broadest and deepest sense, create and imagine it and play with it. With their actions, children participating in the research confirmed the premise of Sangiorgio (2010) about the development of the so called “musical body” (ibid., p. 10), a body that perceives itself and the surrounding environment, expresses itself with movement and that has its “extended” expression in voice and melody, rhythm, dynamics and articulation, as well as in instruments which are held in hands or attached to other parts of the body. Not an object-body, but a subject-body (ibid.).

An important insight into the use of improvised instruments was gained when children played on river gravel and realized that on their own, stones were neither toys nor instruments, but they needed somebody to enliven them as instruments. When asked about what the stones needed in order to become an instrument, one of the participating girls replied: “A pair!” which was the exact word used by another girl participating in the preliminary study: “If you want to be a whole, you need a pair!” (Zalar, 2008, p. 67)

Our findings on the use of instruments differ from the ones obtained in a study which involved adults (Wolf, 1984). In group music making, adults put work with instruments in the forefront, while with children, working with instruments proved to be an activity connected (only) with personal sensations about musical language, though crucial for communication in musical language itself. It is possible, that adults observed (only) the external aspects of the activities they performed, while in the research involving children, we focused on the source of elementary music, as described by Orff in his consideration of primeval music. Instruments proved to be the means that first helped to materialise internal musical ideas and only later to learn musical language. At one point in our investigation, children, playing instruments, started to follow their school-mate who led them like a conductor. The boy had such a strong internal picture of what he heard that he continued conducting intensely and with his eyes

closed, even after all the children had stopped playing. He was not aware of his surroundings, because he was completely absorbed in his internal musical image.

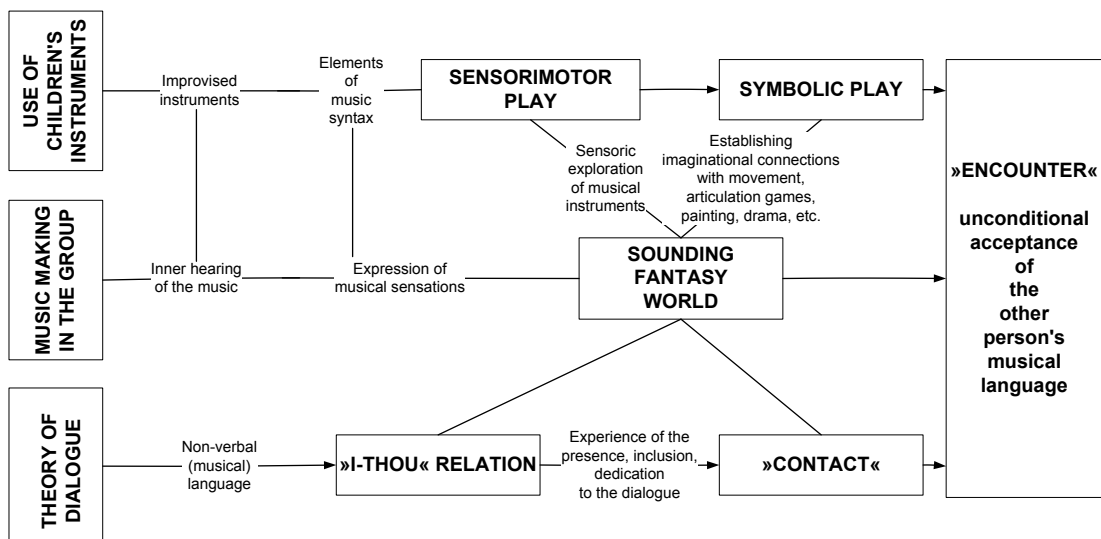
In the process of analysis, work with children's musical instruments proved to be an activity connected exclusively with the perception of musical language. Therefore, throughout the research it functioned as an area the only possible realisation of which lies in Orff's idea that a person and an instrument form a single musical entity (as cited in Jungmair, 2003) which cannot function outside the framework of musical language.

3.2 The use of children's instruments cannot be effective outside the framework of the dialogical dimensions of musical language.

According to our findings, the elements of the theory of dialogue were important factors, entering the formation of musical language with the use of children's instruments. These elements are connected with the mode of conversations in musical language in a group and with attribution of meaning to these conversations through interaction among the participating children. Both aspects are covered by Buber's (2002) term "Encounter", which we use to indicate direct acceptance of each other (in the case of our study, of other participants in musical communication), without any impediments. Without unconditional acknowledgement the conversations in musical language would be curtailed. Similarly, Jungmair (2003) claims that this total directness is the basic precondition for a successful music making. During the research, all musical activities gradually started merging into an expression of musical language in which the Encounter was shown in the (rare) moments when the relation "I-Thou" was established. This relation is described by Buber (1995, 2002) as the one in which we accept the other person unconditionally – the way they reveal themselves to us in a direct, sensitive language – in the case of our study, in communication with non-verbal musical language.

The Figure below shows the connections between the use of children's instruments and the elements of the theory of dialogue.

Figure 1: Scheme of the connections between the use of children's instruments and the elements of the theory of dialogue



In the study, communication in musical language with children's instruments turned out to be an area where the elements of musical syntax represented a sound-based image of children's musical sensations. Children's readiness to participate in the work with individual elements in the sense of building up common musical stories differed considerably: they were either totally unwilling to cooperate, or showed to have grasped the creative process perfectly. In case of good creative practice, they were successful in their playing which evolved into group

improvisation. This happened in the state of Encounter when children were accepting each other through a sounding fantasy world. In some cases, this world involved sensory exploration of the improvised musical instruments, which Sangorgio (2010) attributes to the sensorimotor level of playing. Perceiving musical parameters, the participants were receiving and taking over musical thoughts, which meant that they apprehended communication in musical language. When this activity continued into articulation games, the phase of symbolic play (*ibid.*) began, representing in the development of cooperation the imaginal connections with word games and with an important progress in phonological awareness.

In our research of the work with children's musical instruments, individual stages of group music-making did not follow each other in the pre-set order which Johnson (2006) established on the basis of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At least the first three stages, observation, imitation and exploration, were intertwined, proceeding with a different tempo in each child, however always simultaneously. According to Johnson (*ibid.*), it is not possible to proceed to the next level without a certain level of emotional involvement. However, our study confirmed that experiencing musical language is the only precondition for taking part in the processes of common music making and creating, and that it never functions in the sense of progressing to higher levels. As regards observation, which, according to Johnson, represents the first stage, it needs to be said that now and then each of the children was just watching the activities, usually while relaxing casually on cushions and pads. Yet, it is impossible to claim that such child was only passively involved. They were receiving sound signals, perceiving them each in their own way. This showed when they then joined the performance with a certain vision about their own contribution to music – they either had a musical thought already shaped in advance, or they wanted to develop their contribution by exploring certain sounds, their combinations or modes of performing. The role of instruments, especially the improvised ones, in this was to effectuate musical ideas and transmit the individual's perception of music to other participants.

In the course of the research, it started proving that in terms of dialogic communication in music language, the participating children were always led by the inner wish to contribute to music with a certain sound, tone or noise. When they took an instrument in their hands and once they overcame the desire to own things in general, they actually "made friends" with the instrument and together with it, they helped forming common stories. In some cases children included the instruments equally as sounding bodies, requisites or even part of the scene. They started using them intentionally in improvised music which they wanted to perform in pairs or small groups. Thus, learning did not occur within the group, but through the group due to the processes of acquisition of psycho-social skills and positive integration of individuals into the group. What happened was the so called contact which is one of the aspects of the dialogical approach relying on Buber's thought about interpersonal relationship. Such contact enables to experience the presence, inclusion and dedication to dialogue (Kotnik, 2003).

3.3. By using children's musical instruments, children apprehended the basic principles of group performance.

An important result of the study is also the fact that during the research, the participating children improved their attitude towards evaluation of musical abilities and skills of their own and of others and consequently, started enjoying common music making. While they showed very good musical abilities and skills in all areas of musical development throughout the study, they faced a lot of difficulties getting used to common creative work during the initial lessons. They were hindered mostly by theoretical knowledge about music and their habit of thinking analytically. As a result, they were unable to address each other in genuine musical sensations or in other artistic languages, e.g. movement, drawing etc., but kept diverging to verbal communication. A considerable amount of time was necessary in order for them to learn how to place and use correctly their knowledges, and, in particular, to achieve the level of relaxation which allowed them to spontaneously express themselves in musical language. During the eight months of systematic work, most children went through three stages, in which communication in musical language, which started with very low interest in common work and proceeded through a certain level of tolerance, developed to the level which enabled all children to participate at the same time.

Furthermore, the study confirmed that improvised musical instruments - objects from the nature - played a more important role than manufactured musical instruments on the path towards interpersonal relationships in which persons participate actively and perceive certain events also from the point of view of others, in the sense of the theory of dialogue. Using the sounds of these improvised instruments, children developed their own programme music and finally abandoned the use of the idea of "correct" and "incorrect" playing. Gradually, by perceiving their

own sensations and the sensations of others, the participants entered primeval music and expressed themselves within it.

The results indicate that the Orff-Schulwerk bases activities involving instruments on the inner hearing of music and communication in musical language or its experiencing, and less so on the use of instruments as technical requisites to bring music to life. Success in improvisation or common music making does not depend on the type of musical instrument used. As it turned out in our study, simple objects – improvised instruments – made children feel the musical activities more into depth than the melodic instruments.

4. Conclusion

The study, with its detailed description of the selection and use of children's instruments, emphasises the fact that the awareness of coexistence in common activities is far more important for communication in musical language than the use and acquisition of technical elements of playing manufactured instruments. It points out the importance of non-verbal communication and the great significance of the relationships between the participants which, if regulated with respect, enable the development of a musical activity based on group improvisations, whether with body-percussion, improvised or Orff's instruments. Such music making requires the group to always opt for "address", as the theory of dialogue calls quality experience of co-existence, which our study confirmed for musical language as well. This coexistence is the point where epistemological postures of individuals and the parameters of musical language cross and intertwine, reflecting the current experiential states (of the participants) in group activities.

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