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Composing and Recording Music with Adolescents in Public School: An Action Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of composing original music and then recording that music to produce a CD.. The research was carried out with a group of ten adolescent students in a music composition workshop offered as an extracurricular activity at a public school in the municipality of Gravataí, Brazil. The methodology adopted was action research. Data included active observations and transcripts of audio-taped interviews. Analysis of the data revealed that compositional processes resulted beyond musical structures to those of social-affective inter-relations among the group members. The recording of the compositions provided the students with auditory feedback, facilitating the establishment of new aesthetic understanding about their own compositions. Moreover, CD production became a tangible result of the music making of the group, in which collective and individual identities were fused.

Keywords: compositional process, adolescents, recording, CD, technology, action research.

Introduction

In recent decades, technological advances have changed the relationship adolescents have with music. According to Souza (2000), examples of those changes include the speed with which musical information is transferred or exchanged, methods of distribution, methods of music production and portability of equipment. As a music educator, I have been trying to incorporate technological resources such as the ability to record students' compositions into my musical practice with students at both the elementary grades in public school and in Pedagogy and Arts courses at the college level. To that end, I developed a pedagogy that focuses on composing which results in the recording of students' creations on a CD.

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The impact of recording a CD in a school environment attracted my attention and this practice raised the question of how students compose original music. In addition, as well. I wondered what the significance of this pedagogical practice in students' musical development might be, and how it might contribute to a wider musical and educational experience within the context of varying levels of formal schooling. To answer these questions, I carried out a study with adolescents from a public school that included the analysis of musical composition and incorporation recording technology. This study aimed to answer the following questions: (1) How does the use of sound recordings affect the collective compositional process? (2) What are the implications of composing and recording music with adolescents? And (3) 'How do they develop compositional processes when the objectives are focused on the production of a CD?

To study these questions empirically, I created a Music Composition Workshop with a group of ten 8th grade students from a public school in Gravataí, a town in southern Brazil. The workshop lasted a total of 42 hours over the course of two months. The purpose was to compose music, whether instrumental or not, and to record the compositions on a CD.

Theoretical Framework

Composing music with adolescents and recording the resulting compositions onto a CD involved at least two aspects. The first was that of the composing process itself as an educational experience in music. The second was the process of producing the sound recording. Embedded into both aspects were a range of socio-cultural implications, specifically as related to conditions of musical listening that are connected to technological innovations.

Music education has been concerned with the investigation of musical composition as a pedagogical practice in schools in both formal and informal settings for some time (SWANWICK, 1979; SCHAFER, 1991, 2004). Music educators such as Jaques-Dalcroze, Carl Orff, Gertrud Meyer-Denkman, John Paynter, Murray Schafer and Keith Swanwick have put emphasis on musical composition in their teaching.

Creative practice in music has been connected to direct contact with sound materials, including both musical instruments and the voice. As a result, musical creativity is revealed in more spontaneous ways, creating more complex structures of music, acting as the expression of

each individual's musical skills. These concepts guided the methodology of the Musical Composing Workshop.

I used Fautley's (2004) concept of formative assessment to analyze the data. Specifically, formative assessment focuses on an understanding of the processes and the way in which that process is negotiated by the group with their teacher

Another theoretical construct is McDonald and Miell's (2000) transactive communication concept—a concept which focuses on the nature and quality of the interactive processes which occur during music-making. In this view, one person or another in transactive communication defines communication as a creation of and an expansion of ideas that are expressed. According to them, students who work with friends in groups develop compositional tasks more fluently, resulting in diversified and expressive musical results.

In the field of Communication and Information Technologies, the main framework for the analyses were the sound digitalizing processes and their handling. Iazzeta (1996, 1997, 2001), Rodrigues (2002) and Carvalho (1999) suggest concepts linked to new ways of composing, performing and listening music that come from technological advances which allow for larger numbers of people to perform and record their own music without being in a professional recording studio. Likewise, these digital processes for sound recording have spawned new forms of musical listening. The portability of equipment for playing music has significantly changed listening possibilities, especially in relation to those moments in which someone listens to music and in places where this happens. The production of the CD during the Musical Composition Workshop is in this context.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study was action research. Among several approaches to action research, I chose Andre Morin's (2004) Integral Action Research (I.A.R.) model. In this view, the actors create theories and strategies in the field which are validated and challenged. In the instance of this research, the goal of the workshop was not to prove a hypothesis or to study the group as a unit. Instead, it was conditioned on the need of all the actors to participate in various stages of the process, experiencing the real possibilities of the actual "doing."

There are five concepts to the Integral Action Research model. They are:

1. Contract - of open nature in which participants take an active role in the action;
2. Participation – to refer to as a co-management;
3. Change –to bring about a complementary relationship between the action and speech as connected to the subject
4. Speech –to join what is lived and influences awareness;
5. Action-- to give the participants the possibility that “their living powers” can be used as much as possible (MORIN, 2004).

The data for this research included active observations, focused interviews, semi-structured interviews and video/audio recordings. Students worked in small groups through four phases. The first phase consisted of integration activities and soundscape production. During this phase students had their first contacts with musical instruments. Next, there were discussions about the CD profile, composition of four instrumental pieces, and talk with the students about the recordings. In the third phase, two pieces with lyrics were composed and there were discussions with the adolescents and recordings, too. At the end, the recordings were mixed and the graphics for the CD jewel case were designed and chosen.

Results

First, it was possible to identify the steps students followed when composing. For example, exploration was the first step. Next, the researcher observed discord among the students as they corrected, revised and changed their compositions.

Issues of musical as well as interpersonal factors directly affected the role of each individual student in the group. Compositions with lyrics, developed in the third phase, provided the students with the experience of composing music which was very similar to the music to which they are accustomed to listening. Consequently, the composition process was more dynamic and less exploratory. Another challenge was identified when they had composed lyrics, as they needed to express ideas that made sense to the listener; however, musical choices came from musical genre and not from the lyrics.

In the sound recording process, the difference between single-track and multi-track recording systems was clear. On the single-track system, the 8th graders recorded their music in a way similar to their usual instrumental rehearsal format, in other words, in a collaborative way.

On the multi-track system, they recorded each part of the music separately, which was different from the way they had rehearsed music with lyrics. However, this difference was understood by the groups. The multi-track system aided editing and mixing as it allowed for individual arrangements in each recorded part.

In the end, the students produced a CD they titled, *Pense Bem* (Think Carefully) with six compositions: *Meia boca* (More or Less), *Pense bem* (Think Carefully), *Quase nada* (Almost Nothing), *Enésima* (Umpteenth), *Adolescente* (Adolescent) and *Inventa* (Invent).



The

compositions that were made in phases 2 and 3 of the workshop were included in the CD.

At some points, students had difficulty working together. This was due in part to their not knowing each other beforehand and that sometimes caused an impasse when they had to reach consensus on the final product. In other words, the CD that was recorded by the group was not just a specific and punctual musical result, but it involved a range of elements and relationships of each individual's home history, community and social nature. It revealed the way children in adolescence compose music and how they relate to their own music-making in a collaborative ways.

Composing and recording music with adolescents deals closely with two realities in the pedagogy. First, the act of composing music in a school environment, while a common practice in formal environments of music teaching, is an unusual one in the public schools in Brazil.

Second, recording their own music, performances or compositions, which is a common practice outside of school, where adolescents and young people use technology in the process is not a usual occurrence in schools either. In this experience these two realities came together in the production of the CD.

When musical composition links to sound recording, the collaborative process of music-making reveals two dimensions. First, recordings made along the process allowed students to hear and to analyze their work exposing the need for change and revision. Most specifically, it facilitated an opportunity for the students to engage in aesthetic decisions relative to their own musical creations. Then, the final recording in the form of a CD opened possibilities for distribution to family, school, institutions, and more, thus drawing a wider connection between the product, the composers (i.e., students) and the listeners. As a result of the workshop, the production of the CD uncovered two other realities that informed the methodology of teaching musical composition. The first one concerns the process of creating the music itself. In it, the compositions revealed varying levels of proficiency, and differences in the students' own musical identities. That is, their individual personality traits, anxieties, and ways of interaction, came together in this palpable and portable material. Further, it revealed perceptions, musical understandings and particular forms of composing built from a range of collaborative interrelations that mixed with the compositional process, which were lived during the workshop. The second one, as a result, was the transformation of the music into something real--the CD and, therefore, of the students' individual and subjective ways of being. It is the "self" of each individual student composer that is documented on the CD, giving each of them a rewarding musical experience.

Young people have direct encounters with the ephemeral nature of music played on the radio since they constantly live with the media. At the same time, they are co-responsible for the spread of music through the purchase and/or exchange of CDs. In this context, they participate in a cultural macro-reality which they follow everyday. However, in the instance of this particular project, it is with a reduced achievement, considering the non-commercial nature of the CD produced by them. So, the final musical product is seen as a valid model for adolescents, since this kind of media provides an important contact with music.

New forms of musical listening resulted from technological achievements, supported by the portability of music players, providing access to musical models that are offered by media

(IAZZETTA, 2003). Although adolescents know that the way to musical success is not as simple as it may appear, they do not hesitate to take this as a reference. In their perception of recording a CD with their own music, it is undeniable that the possibility of commercial success emerged and consequently could have been a stimulus for their participation throughout the workshop.

The linking of pedagogical and musical aims with the use of technology and sound recording facilitated the development of the students' musical understanding. This resulted from the listening processes involved in making the CD. Listening provided immediate feedback and a catalyst for the students to make comparisons between created compositions and recorded ones in an immediate way. This possibility led them to make decisions which were punctual and collaborative in nature. Consequently, the range of development of listening skills was varied among the students, ranging from a recognition of pitches to a wide understanding of the pieces. Both provided for them the ability to make musical meaning. There is no doubt that the technological resource of recording is a pedagogical tool that is able to enhance the horizon of musical perception. In that sense, sound recorders aid the compositional processes as they facilitate an awareness in relation to the final musical result. In a wider sense, this process facilitates music appreciation in diverse environments.

Conclusion

This research points to the understanding of relationships among the media used by adolescents in their musical experiences, their compositional ability and the methodological needs that school reality shows. Pedagogical compositional practice is something possible, as well the use of technology in this process, because they provide channels through which the adolescents' skills flow.

The involvement by the students in the Workshop showed that their compositional practice - although they do not have music classes at school – fosters the development of a critic, especially in the specific process of musical creation. Investing in musical composing as a rich and complex way of making music is a necessity for schools.

Beyond musical aspects that were developed and experienced, composing and recording a CD with their own music may have contributed positively to students' lives by helping them to make decisions as they face several challenges every day. In light of this, my insertion in the

empirical field was doubly challenging. First was the challenge of working *with* a group of adolescents with defined objectives and deadlines to be met. Second was that of constantly rethinking my practice as a musical educator in the context of the actions developed by the group. In conclusion, it is certain that pedagogical-musical action which links composition to sound recording through technological resources, combined with an investigative approach, can contribute to a meaningful and enjoyable musical education in public and private schools.

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