

Teaching Music Composition: A Poetic Interdisciplinary Path Through Art and Life

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Resumo: Neste ensaio apresento algumas ideias e experiências que, para mim, têm sido objeto de pesquisa e fontes de recurso para criação musical já há muitos anos. Essas informações têm a ver, primeiro, com um contexto de estudos e de criação no campo interdisciplinar relacionado à minha tese de doutorado (1996); segundo, com pesquisas e experiências criativas baseadas no gesto musical e de seu exercício como um modo de “encenação”; e terceiro, com uma visão poética da arquitetura sonora do trabalho artístico a partir de uma relação intrínseca entre som e silêncio.

Palavras-chave: Composição musical, Ensino da composição musical, Interdisciplinaridade, Corpo e Gesto Musical.

Abstract: In this essay I introduce some ideas and experiences that have been the object of numerous studies and resource materials for composition for several years. This whole information has to do, firstly, with an interdisciplinary context of studies and music creation that refers back to my doctoral thesis; secondly, with research and creative experiences based on the musical gesture and that one under the perspective of “enactment”; and thirdly, with a poetic view of the sonorous architecture of the artistic work from an intrinsic relation between sound and silence.

Keywords: Music Composition, Teaching Music Composition, Interdisciplinarity, Embodiment and Musical Gesture.

The horizon that shores up this essay belongs to a universe of complementary experiences that embrace teaching music creation, research and composing for several years. They refer to music and life. From this horizon of experiences, I learned that the relevance of teaching musical creation nowadays is proportional to the variety of experiences that are available for the artist student, in a wide and productive aesthetical domain of artistic activities; experiences that can propitiate defying social encounters and critical engagements with sound materials in distinct contexts of life.

The notion of interdisciplinarity plays an important role in this essay. It denotes a complex horizon of meaningful experiences in which one is able to act upon distinct or conflicting situations or cultural realities dialogically – with an arousal conscience of the limits that define his / her historical life. By discussing that contextualizing horizon, thus, I intend to raise questions I consider relevant to encourage that artist student, in his / her learning process, to find a constructive path of aesthetic self-achievement; and eventually, to make that path into a political stance towards his / her life.

1. The pathway

In Brazil, as a whole, undergraduate and graduate music schools in academia, apparently not without resistance, begin to realize that interdisciplinary contexts for learning are relevant sources for investigative artistic experiences. Art thrives in the living world. “Like all the arts”, says the educator John Paynter, “music springs from a profound response to life itself.” (1970, p. 3). So, there is no point, in my view, to hold onto that paradigm of “music for music sake”. In part, to learn music represents to master particular contents and techniques that will, hopefully, found one’s knowledge of his / her future professional life – students, in general, have to learn by themselves how to abstract and systematize lots of information they gather throughout their entire academic years. But there is another aspect to be considered. An artistic activity is an aesthetical experience. It is a “mode of being” – a particular mode of being engaged, poetically; a

strongly perceptive, insightful oriented way of knowing the world¹. To teach music, thus, is not only to teach music, insofar as “music is always a contextualizing experience”².

The music educator and composer Carlos Kater, in the conclusion of his article “‘Why music in the schools?’: some reflections” (2011, p. 44) recommends educators in general to be observers of their present reality and careful with choices concerning prevalent institutionalized materials and dated ideological bias. In complement to this recommendation, however, there is a question that requires closer attention for the purpose of this essay: teaching / learning experiences of creative activities frequently are complex in nature. The arousal of feelings, multiple senses, modes of perception, or gazing with admiration can be productive to social interplays and communicative exchanges in classrooms. They are, in this sense, aesthetic and holistic experiences insofar as they may open, for those students, opportunities for self-expression, enjoyment and making art. This is a step, I suppose, towards the challenge of *enlivening* tradition from abroad.

In this essay, I have chosen not to give in to my willingness to discuss particular disciplinary contents in music creation insofar as there are considerable reading sources for this purpose. And I do not mean only those bibliographical references acknowledged by the composer Liduino Pitombeira (2011), in his article “Paradigms to the teaching of musical composition in the XX and XXI centuries”, whose authors may gather, describe / analyze selected materials, structures of musical thought or tendencies in musical poetics – conceptual elements and compositional techniques that they considered relevant for the knowledge of the field. In music literature, as far as I know, there is much wisdom and insight, self-questioning and aesthetical concerns raised by composers around the world. Some of these theoretical works became outstanding references in the field of music composition³.

¹ Walter A. Brogan’s (2006) interpretation of the conflictual bond between *physis* and *techné*, in the context of Heidegger’s ideas, illuminates the philosophical context of this view.

² This insightful thought was spelled by my student Carolina Bee Araújo at the final presentation of her undergraduate dissertation (2019).

³ I can only recall some of them: Cage, Feldman, Schönberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Varèse, Schaeffer, Hindemith, Sessions, Cardew, Boulez, Ligeti, Ferneyhough, Stockhausen, Kagel, Takemitsu, Messiaen, Berio, Koellreutter, Sciarrino, Lachenmann, Czernowin, Grisey.

2. Resuming my journey's path

2.1 Interdisciplinarity and the “grid” structure

In her article “Dialogue inter-areas: the role of musical education today” (2007)⁴, the music educator Marisa Fonterrada assures that traditional prevailing functions in institutions, in general, are not suitable to form talented students or skilled professionals to exercise their social roles in their communities. It is important, says the author (2007, p. 29-30), to consider the impact of music, its effectiveness, to produce self-expression and communicative relations among individuals; and to strengthen human sensitivity. And she complements: “There is much evidence of the power of music to affect deep structures of the psyche not easily accessible by verbal communication.” (2007, p. 30). From her keen awareness of the contributions that music can offer to the global formation of individuals nowadays in a complex society, a “multiform society”, in her words, she then grounds her main discursive strategy on a dialogic perspective, one that brings closer music to other areas of knowledge.

In this context, I will distinguish Fonterrada’s notion of a “dialogue inter-areas” from that interdisciplinary horizon that I referred to at the beginning of this essay. The music educator understands that musical learning embraces broader experiences of knowledge; in her view, those experiences are dialogic in the sense that they grow out from practices in which the sound, in the context of disciplinary and interdisciplinary activities, constitutes a catalyst for prevailing multifaceted social relations and for human existence. This view of a complex reality, accompanied by her understanding of music as a mode of knowledge – in a certain way echoing, in this context, her awareness of the music as a potential instrument to trigger healthful and constructive changes to enrich human life – can be found in *De tramas e fios* (2008).

In that book, Fonterrada conceptualizes a “grid” structure – a “net of procedures” – to point to the multiple exchanges and sharing experiences that take place in a complexified field of knowledge. Contrarily to disciplinary teaching models, where procedures are attached to linear and narrative forms of presentation, procedures “in net”, according to the author’s view, imply a holistic perspective of engagement in complex forms of human experiences. Her understanding is

⁴ Title and quotations from Fonterrada’s texts were translated by me.

that procedures “in net”, in a dialogical, inter-areas perspective, can open up alternative paths for the student to exercise his / her intelligence and self-expression in social life and institutional work.

However, in keeping with that view as a strong artistic and political standpoint, I want to distance myself from Fonterrada’s notion of a “net” to explain how I conceive of an interdisciplinary model. On the one hand, a grid structure is a weft of connected points. We can imagine, as in a picture, one’s accessing multiple “places” and directions throughout that functional structure; and gathering information and meaningful experiences from each choice. But on the other hand, I understand that, in a historical perspective, more complex experiences do not fit easily in that net – such as, for example, critical experiences of self-assessment. What is, after all, that operational “grid” structure conceived by the author? Is it a way of coordinating multiple forms of activities in a complex field of work? Or, otherwise, of building strategies for a high-standard formation in music that somehow pave the way for alternative areas of institutional work and life? Whatever be the answer, though, my view is that, from a metaphorical perspective, we cannot challenge the principles / values that ground our meaningful horizon of experiences without “folding” that “grid” of procedures or strategies of work. A dialogic interdisciplinary context for learning, as I propose in this essay⁵, implies social and communicative interplays among people as well as the search for models to represent conflicting, contrasting forms of realities. To some extent, it implies to acknowledge and challenge ideas that were taken for granted. So, learning music, learning well music is, in part, to learn how to create “by own means” – a path – to access and widen one’s own horizon of knowledge in that field, over and over again.

⁵ In my music composition thesis *Standing and Conflating: A Dialogic Model for Interdisciplinarity in Composition* (1996, p. 42), I explain – based on the philosophers Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) – how the concepts “play”, “mediation”, “conflict”, and “resistance”, which define critical dialogues, can be correlated with the principles of interdisciplinary composition.

2.2 The body and the “impulse”: a search for “authenticity”

A second aspect that I consider relevant for teaching musical composition refers to the role that the body – in movement – can play within creative processes of sound investigation. Through intentional body movements, concretely realized or internally manifested, the artist student can animate – enact – emerging gestural sound events or phenomena that are brought out intuitively in his / her creation with sounds. Awareness of this process is important since its complex nature can prove to be a highly productive experience of “performing” in time. Enactment – through intentional gestures – makes them accessible for that student to perceive and sensitively grasp, distinguish and “touch” the materiality of “sound ordinations” in time⁶. This in mind, I suppose that exercises of shaping musical gestures, thus, with or without the voice, may *enliven* the body’s impulse, energy and his / her modes of listening.

Improvisational activities, particularly when approached as collaborative experiences, are also well-suited, as a free, live and playful mode of body enactment and listening. From my own creative process, I understand that embodying experiences of music, experiences of enactment, concrete or subjectively animated, are “ways of making one’s creative process alive”⁷. They constitute modes of “getting in touch” with sound materials and their ordinations in time – they are, effectively, particular “modes of being”, therefrom one can intentionally product live forms of existence as “meaningful presence”⁸.

The composer Chaya Czernowin, in her article “Teaching that which is Not Yet There” (2012), sustains that the most relevant problem today, concerning teaching / learning processes in composition, is not to be good or not in one or many musical styles. The main problem, she says, refers to the question of “authenticity”. In her words: “finding a niche for one’s self; a niche which

⁶ In this context I partially rely on Deniz Peters understanding of *bearing in* and “felt body” (2012, p. 19-21). Also, for the composer Ulisses Ferreti (2011, p. 33-34), the term “sound ordinations” implies sound organizations that emerge in a particular sound environment. The listener’s capacity to abstract sound objects from their environmental references is also implied in this notion.

⁷ In another article, I present the concepts of enactment and sound gesture in view of a more in-depth discussion (YAMPOLSKI, *Percepta*, v. 4, n. 2, p. 33-46, 2017).

⁸ Based on Ilona Hongisto’s studies (2013) about William E. Connolly’s “materialities of experience”, Daniel Stern’s “affections of vitality” and Raymond Bellour’s “amodal perception”, the meaning of “presence”, in this essay, refers to nonrationalized artistic experiences in music. They are modes of expression in which one can apprehend “contours” of affections, dynamic forms of intensities, curves of inflections in articulations and projected durations in time.

is based on authenticity. And this authenticity has to be communicated through and through, from the choice of means to the end result.” (2012, p. 284)⁹. Czernowin’s standpoint refers to the artist student’s experience of learning to search for a particular field of work and finding out the proper criteria of that field. She asks: “What is at stake in this garden or sea which ARE one’s work? What does it mean to walk or swim? What does it mean to have a good path or a failed path?” (2012, p. 284). In light of this, she explains metaphorically how the chosen paths and the outcomes of the related processes are intrinsically inter-related:

As I mentioned before, the student needs to learn to find and create his own ocean garden / garden. But maybe it is not a garden. Maybe for one student artist it is a swirl of moving energies, and for another it is a circus of freak creatures that he creates in music. A circus of freak creatures will lead to very different techniques than a garden. A swirl of energies will lead to very different particles than modular geometrical sonic forms that could be the arena of another composer. It would be silly to build a collection of modular sonic forms with the same means and the same particles of thinking by which I build a peaceful garden. (CZERNOWIN, 2012, p. 285).

According to the composer, that artist student must search and strive to understand what are his / her internal impulses. “What in this impulse is meaningful and which potential is it opening?”, she asks. And then she explains that a sonic impulse is the starting point of an idea and also a “guide for the technique needed to articulate it. It means that one needs to sit a long time with this impulse. [...] This means going inside and having a long conversation with one’s intuition and one’s analytical wisdom in order to figure things out from inside.” (2012, p. 286).

Every creative act, in a certain way, is also an exercise of self-investigation, of acknowledging one’s own tastes, histories and experiences of social life. Under this perspective, the search for a genuine impulse, in harmony with that analytical wisdom, constitute, then, a crucial step to broaden and deepen that student’s potential sources for creation. Disposition, curiosity and patience are, in this regard, decisive factors for one’s undertaking his / her own path. However, there is something else that plays a role in this process. The search for authenticity, in this context, is also

⁹ The concept has nothing to do with “originality”. The composer Brian Ferneyhough defines the concept as “a superior skill to manipulate diverse categories of stylistic norms already formulated”. For Ferneyhough, we should favor, instead, “an individual initiative that does not rely only on the manipulation of prefabricated musical materials” (1998, p. 190).

an aesthetic experience. For this reason, I consider that such a mode of investigation is always more complex and physically engaged by the senses and self-perception – a task that demands a mode of “expressive” presence, of “staging” with gestural sounds and listening.

To find one’s own creative path, therefore, is to embark on an enlivening and holistic experience that is twofold: the search for an authentic self-expression in composition is, nevertheless, based on a perceptive, non-verbal experience with the materiality of sound, in time and space¹⁰. To sum up, I acknowledge the body as a grounding source for the student’s creative process and self-searching flight. It means that one’s path for authenticity is not a privilege of the spirit or the mind. Every art thrives in life and life is always hybrid and complex in its nature¹¹.

2.3 Sound and silence: listening to yourself and the “other”

During this year’s semester class “musical creation and aesthetics”, my students and I went to an exhibition of installation art¹². In the course of this enjoyable experience, a student asked me how one could find meaning out of the materials in question. In my response, I first called his attention to the material and historical references that artists intentionally single out from other fields of life, nature, to convey them anew in their works. And then, I compared the sounds of “new” music¹³ to the chaotic urban sound environments, somehow, by pointing out their sounding qualities, particular gestural forms and orderings in time and space. From that point I asked him the following questions: “Do we exercise listening while walking? Do we pay attention to the sound environment while working or enjoying social life?” And without waiting for his answer, I raised another general question: “If art springs from life, how is it possible to enjoy, make sense of contemporary music, if we tend to miss the environmental sounds out of our life?”

A particular sound environment, with its noisy, chaotic and / or smooth sound qualities, for example, is constitutive of a particular place. We can perceive these sounds, incorporate them

¹⁰ I understand time and space as intrinsically related.

¹¹ In his article “Embodied Musical Meaning” (1997-98), Mark Johnson stresses the inseparable connection between our bodily experiences of meanings and our capacity for conceptualization and reasoning.

¹² BIENAL INTERNACIONAL DE CURITIBA (CUBIC 4), 2019. Curitiba: Arts Gallery – Department of Arts, Federal University of Paraná, 2019.

¹³ This is an easier way to refer to contemporary music, understood as part of the European classical tradition.

partially, and hopefully, keep them alive in memory. However, I share the composer Rodolfo Caesar's point of view that musical experiences of listening, in a way, can mix themselves up with other recognizable models of sounds we encounter in nature¹⁴ (2008, p. 47). And further, Caesar's view is not so far from John Paynter's pedagogical concern for creative learning when he proposes his students to find similarities and distinctions of patterns between music and nature or other arts. Similarities of patterns in rhythm, gestural curve, high and low sounds in nature, for example, can be a starting point, according to Paynter and Peter Aston, for creativity:

Just as you filled your paper with an idea from the object, take an idea from your paper and fill a space of time with an organization of sounds and silences based on the same qualities. Take these sounds in the same kind of directions that you felt the lines and shapes needed to move in. Try to catch the same quality of movement using your visual work as an idea on which to improvise. You need not stick slavishly to what you have on your paper: you are not trying to *translate* what is seen into something heard but you should be following-through an idea which you began to work on its visual terms and now extend into musical terms. (PAYNTER; ASTON, 1970, p. 89).

Paynter's pedagogical view for teaching music creation takes in consideration a kind of "extension" between objects and beings of different domains. One extends into another. They "coincide" in certain points. With this in mind, I presume, not without any doubt, that embodied and "felt" experiences of listening to a particular environment may enlarge and refine our perceptive skills in the music domain. And vice versa, higher levels of proficiency in music perception strengthens our choices to engage qualitatively with a particular sound environment that means something to us¹⁵.

One of John Cage's most instrumental ideas in relation to his compositional process is that art should imitate nature's modes of operation (1961, p. 9). Despite the controversial meaning of this assertion, it reminds me that even for the composer, abstraction, understood as modes of reasoning and conceptualizing, was partially a way for him to impart meaning to his sense or perception of nature and its modes of operation. Working with sounds corresponds, inevitably,

¹⁴ Some of the authors' thoughts about materials and processes he dealt with while creating his electroacoustic work *Círculos ceifados* (1995).

¹⁵ John Paynter's conception of music education provides the background for this assumption. At the conclusion of his book *Hear and Now* (1972, p. 96), he says: "The activities we've been considering in this book can lead to any number of useful points but the main reason for bothering with them at all [...] is because they *open children's ears*. They help to awaken sensitivity and imagination: they educate the *feelings*."

foregrounding their material and historical natures – particular configurations, resilience in structure, levels of intensity, energy, volume, timbre; and from there we abstract models, laws and principles from nature and the world, so as to impart meaning to these materials in art.

Listening to sound and silence: Cage's word is the epitome of a supposed poetic wisdom that changed the way we deal with music. Silence is not the reverse side of music experience. It is not an amorphous substance for the music artist as well as not a blank paper for its poet. Also, it is not just a discrete material that provides local meaning to previous and subsequent events in a work. The interplay of sound and silence shapes the dynamic architecture of sound gestures and other materials in time. Sound and silence, together, shape the quality aspects of timing in music, perceptively, generating a sense of flow. Sound and silence – as that interplay – expands the sensitive and embodied experience of time. It expands our perception of continuity and breath, turning them into a unity. It expands our listening comprehension of the “whole” and its dimensions; and the dynamic interrelation among qualitative gestural events at work, with their forces, shaping, breathings, directions, impulses, durations.

Coherently, I assume that teaching composition as the art of sound is only half the way towards one's fulfillment to be a qualified professional. In the same way, for the artist-student, the search for authenticity demands an embodied experience; an experience of enactment that accounts for that dynamic interplay of sound and silence: their articulation in time, their distinguishing energetic forces and illusory projections that shape the dynamic flow of events in time – among other features that animate the senses to the musical perception of intentionality, direction, breath and impulse.

In this perspective, one of the key problems in teaching composition, then, is to *enliven* that artist student inner search so that he / she will, in time, be successful in working creatively with sound and silence interplays. The search for authenticity is a complex path that one accomplishes in time. Let's fully realize it with our reason, feelings, imagination and curiosity – and definitively not forget to make it much alive with our moving, “felt” body, spirit or the mind. Every art thrives in life and life is always hybrid and complex in its nature. Therefore, embodying musical experiences – through gestures, as a mode of enactment – and the exercise of listening, as a whole, can be an effectual path, among other experiences, for one's process of aesthetic self-

investigation; a “mode of presence” that unfolds opportunities for self-learning and critical involvement with other activities in life.

Resuming the pathway again...

For the music teacher, the problems to be raised with his / her students evince a variety of questions / experiences that will contextualize and provide meaning for learning. In this essay, I proposed some ideas that, I hope, will be somehow rewarding for one’s own musical creative process. The central line of thought that propelled me through this path refers to the premise that embodying modes of being poetically engaged in musical creative processes, especially within interdisciplinary contexts, can be productive in teaching / learning experiences. I also presume that other perspectives of educational learning are just as relevant for this aim as the one proposed in this essay. It is wise, perhaps, to take these perspectives together, as far as possible, in a complementary way. Whatever be the choices one may follow up, though, let’s have in mind that aesthetic experiences are at the core of such creative processes. They are strategical ways for the students to search for their genuine impulses, as artists. Overall, that understanding may also be the source for one’s finding an ethical purpose to this process, as he / she is fully compromised: intelligence, sensitivity, perception, memory, curiosity, moving body and affections. Hopefully, those artist students will be able to project their own search for authenticity, as a path, in more comprehensive, global experiences of social, political and institutional life in the future. After all, art thrives in life and life gives itself back to art.

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