

Musical education at the preschool age – the start on the road to performance

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Abstract: *The contemporary society oriented towards pragmatism and professional flexibility is living in a paradox. On the one hand, declaratively, the accent of the modern society is put on knowledge; competencies are talked about as a product, as goods which are put on the market. In such a context, the acquisition of competencies at the earliest age is extremely important.*

The paper deals with musical education at the earliest age, the role of the educational system, possible difficulties in the musical development which can occur as a result of a lack of adequate competencies. To what extent music should be a means of intellectual emancipation and what roles it should have, remain open questions.

Keywords: *musical abilities, musical giftedness, preschool teacher, musical education.*

1. Introduction

In order to form an adequate relationship with music, one of the preconditions is knowing its functions. This is especially important for those who in their professional life and everyday lives are engaged in education; processes in which the preschool teacher has the starting and one of the most important roles. The systematization of different functions of music depends on many factors and can differ from one educational system to another. In the range from the hedonistic function and high aesthetic function which is followed by a high level of musical performance, we can incorporate various different views and assumptions when music is in question.

The psychological function of music could be systemized by saying that it presupposes the stimulation of psychological affective processes, stimulation of thought, memory, attention, imagination and creativity. Music also stimulates voluntary processes, persistence and self-awareness and moral-creative

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characteristics. We cannot overlook the four types of psychological-biological temperaments which were described by Leon Burdel, on the basis of reactions - sensitivity of participants on three basic elements of music. They are:

- Melodical type: it is an extrovert, open, optimistic, communicative person who feels the need for interpersonal contact;

- Rhythmic type: dependant on the surroundings, active, a little bit emotional, responsible;

- Harmonic type: introvert, conservative towards others, emotional, a little egocentric;

- Harmonic-melodic-rhythmic type (the complex type): is a synthesis of the aforementioned types, a personality which is attracted to refinement but also vulgarity, pessimism and has a disturbed soul (Vasile, 2004:22).

A very important task which stands before future preschool teachers, primary school teachers or secondary school teachers, among others, is to come close to the specificities of the artistic, i.e. musical, understanding which significantly differs from the scientific one. While the scientific approach is focused on the search for the truth and the facts, the artistic searches for the beautiful. Rationality and conceptuality of the scientific approach differ from the intuitive approach of art. Furthermore, analytic and objective characteristics of science represent the opposite of synthetic and subjective characteristics of artistic experience. In the end, the precise and closed style in the language of science oppose the open and metaphorical style in art. We have noted all of the above because we often do not feel the border between these two fields, we strive to measure artistic experience with scientific etalons and vice versa, to place the artistic experience in a scientific framework. The aforementioned intertwinement can remind us of the old dilemma, if we can search for a scientific framework in religion and whether its postulates on which it is founded would be endangered or strengthened with a possible scientific base. However, one important fact is forgotten, and that is precisely the starting points of faith and science. While true faith excludes doubt, science and scientific development were possible throughout the centuries precisely because of doubt of the existing.

Music is an expression of a very complex intellectual activity. It enriches the human brain, voluntary functions and puts logical structures in the foreground. It is based on intellectual abilities and knowledge, it influences both brain hemispheres, the left through logically organized information and theoretical perception, the right through stimulating affect, imagination, creativity etc.

The development of the inclination towards the beautiful, harmony and balance are attributes not only of art but also education. Music represents an active participant in the spiritual, moral and social aspects of life. The development

of aesthetic emotions from the earliest childhood, is necessary for the formation of future social and especially intellectual communication. Differences in the aesthetic understanding caused by their insufficient presence in the process of character development and education or other reasons, can latter manifest in various spheres of life and cause big problems in communication and understanding of life in one's environment. Education which, in its core, does not care for the development of aesthetic frameworks is not complete. Commitment to aesthetic values, however, needs to be sincere, not just declarative, as is the case today. In order for the music function to be complete, completely different basis for music education need to be formed along with conceptual changes towards a bigger, realistic role of music content in curriculums.

2. Aspects of musical development

An exceedingly important period for the musical development, is considered to be the so called period of *musical cooing*, early childhood. From the third to the sixth year children develop their musical ability extremely quickly; they manifest their potential for learning and understanding firstly the musical characteristics of their culture (Andre, 2009: 24).

During the primary musical development, children develop the mental representation for understanding music. E. Gordon compares this period with the example of cable television in which the content from all of the channels is available but a television (receiver) is needed for them to be visually presented. The music potential at this age is very delicate; it is susceptible to both positive and negative influences. It is undeniable that every child is born with a certain potential but equally important is the *adequate dialogue with musical occurrences*, i.e. the adequate positive environment (family, preschool, the community) which will monitor and adequately fulfill the needs of the child. The child's musical development is tightly connected to the level of general development and therefore a certain level of maturity is needed for certain musical achievements. Pedagogues talk about certain *periods of sensitivity*, about the most adequate periods for learning music (Andre, 2009: 25).

Newer research shows that musical development starts as early as the prenatal period (before birth), i.e. that the fetus reacts to sound by accelerating the heartbeat from the sixth month of the pregnancy. The famous pedagogue Suzuki, who is mentioned in other parts of this book, believes that the *prenatal musical stimulation* is of utmost importance. In this regard, he recommended future mothers to sing to their babies before birth, and to present themselves to their children as much as possible. Latter research showed that children whose mothers

adhered to the aforementioned recommendations reacted a lot earlier to and accepted musical stimulations in comparison to other children (Činč, 2013b: 34).

Musical noticing directed towards tone pitch is key for understanding and performing music. Here confusion about the concepts always occurs; the child is frequently confused by the demands of the adults to answer if a certain tone is high or low, because they are used to these concepts in a completely different context (the visual). Three year old children, for example, chose a picture of an airplane in air as a visual representation of a low tone (because it looked small, low), and a picture of a big plane on the ground as the representations of a high tone (Andre, 2009:30). Confusion regarding the concepts of *high – low* can also be noticed in adults who did not deal with music to a sufficient extent. Children can, however, be assisted to understand the aforementioned concepts through a comparative visual and sound presentation of high pitched sounds, i.e. low sounds. The same principle can be used for tone length. When it comes to the formation of the concepts silent – loud, we can conclude that children spontaneously differentiate them at the earliest age. In the case of melody, the child will first notice the melodic contour, movement and only later melodic elements, intervals etc.

Rhythm, as a rule, represents the element of musical language which children recognize well from the earliest childhood. The reason for this probably lies in the man's inner connection with ancient magic practices and its mystical, we can say, exotic function. Rhythm, defined as a sequence of different lengths which do not always need to contain pitch, is recognized by some children in the first year of life. Of course, we are only talking about length, without the elements of metrics (children can differentiate the relation long – short but usually not the relation between the mentioned lengths or accents). Rhythm at this age, and latter, is usually connected to movement which is initially spontaneous and latter directed (by the preschool teacher).

Human nature is in its core of a *vocal type*. Voice is the closest to the human body and soul; it is the most integrated *source of sound*. That is precisely one of the most important arguments transformed into the Orthodox Christian dogma according to which voice is a gift from God; the most perfect instrument, unlike the other instruments which were made by men and therefore are not worthy enough to convey the praise to God. Unfortunately, the concept of musical education, for understandable but unacceptable reasons, insists on instrumental musical expression of children starting from the lowest grades of elementary school. The human, and therefore the child, nature opposes (luckily) unnatural occurrences; therefore the voice and vocal reaction represent one of the main forms of musical development. It, however, differs from area to area, and even when it comes to

gender (according to some studies, girls achieve more precise performance of high pitch than boys – Andre, 2009). For the achievement of greater precision, group singing is especially important and therefore the most common in preschools.

If we turn to instrumental performance, it is clear that musical development through this prism cannot be successful without the adequate development of motor components. In one and a half year olds it is noticeable that spontaneous movement is directed towards the experience of music, and from the third year their coordination is improved and with it their metric organization, which leads to the decrease of spontaneity. An imaginative use of instruments, a free improvisation of musical content, should occur after a formal learning of instruments which prepares for a moment in which the motoric development enables its formal start. For the quantification of the motoric musical skill development level there exist instruments in the form of tests which can be implemented from the fourth year onward. Of course, the moment for the start of formal learning of an instrument must respect the individual characteristics of each child.

3. Musical abilities and aspects of identification

The topic of musical abilities, their identification and development, is the topic of many studies, scientific papers and discussions. There exists a lot of confusion when this is in question; it often happens that during a musical ability examination of children, some are labeled as untalented or as not having basic music abilities, precisely because of the aforementioned confusion. For example the lack of a well enough developed music memory is often treated as the lack of other music abilities, which is a mistake (in the identification process, the child is asked to repeat a musical fragment which is too long and which the child, naturally, is not able to do). There exist situations in which individuals who do not have enough knowledge and experience conduct the test of melodic ability in an unsuitable tone range (the child is asked to sing intervals or musical fragments lower or higher than are the realistic voice abilities at that age or in those conditions) etc. The description of these situations would be never ending.

During the testing of the existence of music abilities (identification) certain aspects must be verified step by step and through an algorithm. The first sign of the existence of music abilities (the lowest level) is the ability of the child to correctly sing a melodic fragment of a certain length, i.e. to precisely intonate pitch and intervals. In this case one does not need to demand from the children to correctly repeat the rhythmic-metric wholes.

When this first phase is successfully completed, the next phase is reflected in the precise intonation of a musical fragment, including rhythm and metrics. A successfully sung fragment with precise intonation of the melody and rhythm is a sure sign of the existence of music abilities which should be further developed.

The next phase, which simultaneously confirms the existence of a higher level of music abilities, is the successful repetition of given changes in dynamics, tempo. Variations of already sung fragments should also be added.

In addition to the test of the existence of musical abilities and rhythmic-metric abilities within melodic fragments, rhythmic-metric formulas need to be correctly repeated (marking on a table, with tapping) in the separate test of rhythm and metrics. The rhythm-metric formulas should move from the easier ones to the harder ones (the same as melodies); the inability to correctly repeat a certain fragment because of an insufficiently developed musical memory should not lead the evaluator to the wrong conclusion that no level of ability exists, which we have already talked about.

The basic test of music abilities can be conducted fairly early. Some correctly done rhythmic-metric motives or fragments can be noticed even at the age of two years. Of course, such cases are rare. The test can be conducted in a few phases and each leads to the expression of a higher level of music ability development. Synthesized steps for the test of music ability can follow the following form:

1. the child will repeat the given simple melody arrhythmic and ametric models;
2. the child will repeat the given complex melody arrhythmic and ametric models;
3. the child will repeat the given complex melody models with the presence of rhythm and meter, and latter also with dynamic variations as well as variations in tempo;
4. the child will repeat the given rhythmic-metric models;
5. the child will sing a music fragment which he/she knows well;

When *music talent* is in question we could say that it presupposes the existence of the following:

1. musicality (intellectual abilities, intelligence, memory, attention abilities, persistence, imagination etc.),
2. free will and character components (strong will, working energy and discipline, self-control, wish for affirmation, attention, confidence and self-criticism),
3. affective components and temperaments (sensitivity, emotionality, flexibility).

As early as kindergarten a big role is played in the whole landscape by the educational system and the approach and way of implementation of music activities. The first key to the identification and development of music abilities lies in the hands of the educator. This implies many other factors such as problems of the professional qualifications of preschool teachers and the whole teaching staff, conditions caused by the curriculum or purely the problem of disinterest and many others. Still not everything should be left in the hands of the system. Simply put, sometimes there exist objective reasons why sufficient attention cannot be devoted to musical education and content. In developed countries, this problem is solved through a rich activity of informal education and the activity of the non-government sector. These organizations direct their activities towards stimulating musical abilities through various interesting, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary contents. Here, unfortunately, there does not exist hope that such a form of activity will start functioning any time soon; among other things, because of an almost pathological tendency of the authorities towards centralization and their unbelievable inflexibility. Still, the preschool teachers and primary school teachers are primarily obliged to do everything in their power to develop in children musical ear, voice abilities, a feeling for rhythm, musical memory, interpretative abilities and the perception of musical concepts. It is of great importance for preschool teachers and latter primary school teachers to develop in children sensitivity and develop their imagination and creativity through stimulating their wish for participation in music activities.

4. Difficulties

Although the level of sensitivity to certain elements of music is conditioned by the individual characteristics of each child, the elements which could point to potential musical giftedness, or on the other hand, potential difficulties in musical development can become noticeable as early as the age of three.

Sensitivity to pitch, rhythm, metric organization, harmony and melody represent the key musical abilities; i.e. abilities which enable noticing, experiencing, but also performing musical content. The combination of genetic factors and encouragement of the environment, whether it be the family, the preschool or the wider environment, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the guarantee of musical success of the child.

When we are talking about the difficulties, they are most commonly expressed in an insufficiently developed musical ear (imprecise pitch or rhythmic intonation) and music memory. The aforementioned difficulties are often taken as signs of unmusicality, which is a wrong judgment. It is not uncommon for confusion

to occur between the different difficulties in music development, and so, for example, an insufficiently developed music memory could be mistaken for an insufficiently developed ability for the intonation of the precise pitch.

If we view music (and it is correct to view it in this way) as a complex system of adequate reactions to musical stimuli and do not simplify the meaning of the term by identifying it with the simple differentiation of pitch and tone length, we can agree that unmusical children practically do not exist. Reality showed the writer of this text that the lack of adequate music education, musical vocal or instrumental practice, can to such an extent *cover* the existence of musical ability that it is very difficult to identify it. This represents the most common reason for a wrong labeling of a child as unmusical.

Of course the easiest thing to do is label the child as unmusical, without paying attention to the fact that his/her voice may not be physiologically developed enough and that due to insufficient musical stimulation in the environment his/her musical memory is not sufficiently developed. Difficulties can be overcome. Of course, for success a great deal of devotion is needed primarily from the preschool teachers and parents. Recently, the process of inclusion is very popular as a model for overcoming different levels of development in certain children. On the other hand, musical education, in its professional form, depends on the individual approach because, at the moment, there does not exist a more successful model for the achievement of performance. When it comes to overcoming basic difficulties in the musical development of children, within the framework of the general educational system, we can say that the middle road is best; in other words, the implementation of a certain level of individualization for the children with difficulties in musical development, which should not include the isolation of such children from the group since collective performance would have a positive influence on them. The same model should be implemented in the case of insufficiently developed musical memory. Participation in group performance will also help the children with a poorly developed musical memory to gain self-confidence and in time develop the ability of precise repetition of music fragments.

5. Conclusion

The educational system, the approaches and ways in which the music content is implemented play a significant role in the whole landscape. In the hands of the educator lies the key of the identification and development of music ability. This implicates many different factors such as the problems of the professional capabilities of the preschool teacher and the whole teaching staff, conditions conditioned by the culture or, simply, the problem of disinterest, and many others.

However, we should not leave everything in the hands of the *system*. Simply put, sometimes there exist objective reasons why musical education and content do not receive the adequate attention. This problem in developed countries is solved through a rich activity of informal education and activities of the non-government sector; organizations which their engagement devote to the stimulation of music abilities through various interesting, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary content. Here, unfortunately, there is no hope for activation of such an activity type any time soon; among other reasons, because of the slightly pathological inclination of the authorities towards centralization and their unbelievably low levels of flexibility. Nevertheless, preschool teachers and primary school teachers primarily need to everything in their power to develop in children to the best extent the musical ear, voice abilities, a feeling for rhythm, musical memory, interpretative abilities, the perception of musical concepts and creativity. Of great importance is the preschool teacher's and later the primary school teacher's ability to develop in children the emotionality, to develop their imagination and creativity by stimulating their wish for participation in musical activities.

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