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STIMULUS TO CREATIVITY IN PIANISTIC LEARNING: PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract: This text is a report of a teaching experience in piano lessons at a state music conservatory in the state of Minas Gerais - Brazil. As a theme, it talks about stimulating creativity in piano teaching. The research question that guides this work is: what strategies have the potential to enable a piano teaching-learning process (including erudite) in basic music education that stimulates and materializes the creative bias in teaching practices? Therefore, this text aims to share experiences, through pedagogical practices in piano lessons that have shown to be promising, with regard to aspects of creative learning as an essential element in instrumental training. That said, these proposals must be understood as suggestions to be tried out in teaching practice and adjusted to the contexts in which they are applied. Therefore, I propose a critical reflection on the findings of this work in order to provoke other and new creative experiences in piano learning.

Keywords: Teaching piano. Stimulus to creativity. Pedagogical strategies.

INTRODUCTION

This text is a teaching experience report on piano classes given at the State Conservatory of Music Pe. José Maria Xavier – São João del Rei – MG. Beforehand, I believe that, when teachers are crossed by concerns, we must reflect on our teaching practices in order to share ideas in order to contribute to the field of Music Education, understanding that my question can also be a problem for other colleagues.

Therefore, in addition to being pertinent, such a perspective justifies the relevance of this investigation, which is based on theoretical references available in the area in focus in order to guide the course of this reflective process. From this point of view, I

¹ These three levels correspond to the structure in teaching cycles consolidated in the state music conservatory Pe. Jose Maria Xavier.

² In the cartographic perspective as a research methodology, the term existential territory refers to the field of investigation.

bring as a theme for reflection the stimulation of creativity in piano teaching at the music conservatory where I work as a teacher.

When attending a course in the Graduate Program in Music at “Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais” (UFMG), in which one of the guiding principles was based on the discussion of the development of collaborative and creative learning in musical education, at the same time that I found myself, to a certain extent, a practitioner of this conception, I also found myself taken by a relevant concern. Thus, the research question that guides this work is: what strategies have the potential to enable a piano teaching-learning process (including erudite) in basic music education that stimulates and materializes the creative bias in teaching practices?

Therefore, this text aims to share experiences through pedagogical practices applied in piano lessons that have shown to be promising in terms of creative learning as an essential element in instrumental training. That said, these proposals presented here must be understood as suggestions to be tried out and adjusted, whenever necessary, to the school context of each educator, as well as to the sociocultural context of each piano student. In other words, these suggestions can act as a source of inspiration for teachers of this instrument who believe in the full exercise of creativity as a relevant tool in their teaching.

I outline basic pianistic training at the intermediate, complementary and technical levels ¹as the center of attention, as it is the existential territory ²that I inhabit as a teacher, that is, the *locus* of this work. From the same point of view, I believe that public educational institutions specialized in instrument teaching at an elementary level, such as a conservatory, are powerful fields that lack views that focus

on exploring various aspects related to teaching-learning processes. This with the aim of contributing positively to them in their social and cultural role, aligned with the demands and realities of their community and in line with Brazilian current affairs.

The State Conservatory of Music Fr. José Maria Xavier, the territory (field) of this study, is one of the 12 public and free conservatories in Minas Gerais that offers the community the teaching of various instruments in its curriculum. With over 60 years of history, the school was inaugurated on March 1, 1953, with the first class held on the 21st of the same month. Implemented with the primary mission of subsidizing the bicentennial orchestras of the city, Lira Sanjoanense (1776) and Ribeiro Bastos (1790), this conservatory has a wide range and tradition in teaching classical music, as well as valuing composers from Minas Gerais.

However, realizing the emergence of a new social demand from the local community and the region, and by understanding its role as a democratic musical teaching institution, the school seeks constant updates in its political and pedagogical plans in order to meet the expectations it lacks. the current context enabling a multifaceted music education in terms of diversity in general. That is why the institution, in addition to maintaining an entire erudite musical tradition, also includes “the training of musicians for different groups such as: music bands, chamber groups, popular music, sacred music, etc.”³

In practice, what I have been doing along the way is experimenting with methodological strategies that stimulate students’ creativity, through activities ranging from free improvisation, guided improvisation, free creation, creation from pre-established elements, and which ⁴has as a starting point technical studies and the studied repertoire

itself.

In the first section of this text, I establish a reflective dialogue with the theoretical-methodological framework that underlies and guides this study in order to contextualize key concepts and relate them to the perspective adopted here. Next, I bring to light such teaching strategies based on creativity, always suggestive, based on my experience as a piano teacher.

It must be noted that these proposals include learning by imitation, the development of technical-expressive skills and reading and understanding non-conventional musical spellings, such as relative reading, graphs, among others, as well as absolute reading. As a creative exercise, piano students are encouraged to experiment with rhythmic and melodic variations, or else create phrases based on a theme, harmonic accompaniments for a given melody, small pieces, arrangements for the songs they like, among other possibilities that will be further detailed. in the development of the text.

Therefore, I propose a critical reflection on the theme presented in this work in order to provoke the thinking of piano teachers about their practices if, in fact, they understand creative learning as a synonym of a more comprehensive, humanized and aligned musical formation to the diverse current contexts in which we are inserted. Teaching-learning strategies that place the student at the center of the process, as an active agent that creates, recreates and transforms the reality of which he is a part through music education.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS: POSSIBLE DIALOGUES

The main inspiration of this critical-reflective work is based on the philosophical

3 Available at <http://www.conservatoriosjdr.com.br/?secao=paginas&id=1>, accessed on October 07, 2022.

4 Improvisations carried out with the establishment of some “rules” – that is to say – guidelines.

perspective of collaborative and creative learning, to which I emphasize here, the second aspect – creation. In this sense, calling musician-educators and researchers in the area to dialogue in favor of the creative exercise in musical teaching-learning processes as a fundamental element is necessary. This is because they understand the creative element as opportune in a more comprehensive education that transcends virtuosic instrumental performance and mastery of reading as a synonym for successful training.

The aim is to provoke critical reflections in the reader about their teaching practices in piano so that they can exercise thinking about the stimulus and creative development in their students, seeking a break with an authoritarian and hierarchical system that most often ignores previous knowledge. of students in favor of the knowledge that it (the system) determines as legitimate and “worthy” of being taught, which according to Paulo Freire reduces education to mere training and strengthens this (hierarchical) discourse (FREIRE, 2016, p. 113). Thus, “Music education must offer space for creation, not just limited to the reproduction of works by composers from past through traditional performance” (FRANÇA; SWANWICK, 2002, p. 8).

San Gregory, one of the educators who advocate for collaborative and creative learning in Europe says that

Creative learning is characterized by creativity and a commitment to the personal and cultural development of the people involved. It is a form of learning that leads imagination to practice; seeks excellence, exercises the potential of the human spirit; seeks to engage specific cultures and communities in a creative and improvised way; appreciates participatory and non-hierarchical processes; promotes critical relationships and self-reflection practices; provokes “risk-taking”, discovery and invention, recognizes, creates and explores

new knowledge to generate new ideas and concepts (GREGORY; RENSHAW apud MACHADO; FEICHAS, 2016, p. 3).

From this perspective, it is valid to understand that being creative is not something isolated, individual or innate, like a gift. This ability can be developed if there is a favorable, stimulating environment that challenges the individual to invent. That is, “creativity flourishes in an atmosphere where original thinking, innovation and dialogue are stimulated and encouraged” (GREGORY, RENSHAW apud MACHADO; FEICHAS, 2016, p. 3).

Swanwick (1979) in his comprehensive musical education perspective presents the five essential topics to the musical learning process, the C(L)A(S)P model that “represents a philosophical vision, a hierarchy of values about making music” (FRANÇA; SWANWICK, 2002, p. 18). It is not, therefore, a method or a practical guide for music education, but rather a philosophy that guides what is central and what is peripheral, however, necessary, and which lacks a balance between the 5 topics proposed in the practices of teaching (FRANÇA; SWANWICK, 2002, p. 18).

In this model, the letter C refers to *Composition* (composition/creation), thus, creating promotes students’ engagement with the “elements of musical discourse in a critical and constructive way, making judgments and making decisions” (SWANWICK apud FRANÇA; SWANWICK, 2002, p. 8).

Koellreutter, musician-educator “has always defended as the main factor the need for the presence of the “creative spirit”, a vital principle in the necessary environment for artistic teaching” (BRITO, 2011, p. 32). According to Teca Alencar de Brito, the professor recommended that the process of musical education must emphasize creativity instead of the standardization imposed by

rigid curricula, and that for this we must

rely on methodological principles that favor the relationship between knowledge (in its various areas), society, the individual, stimulating, and not hindering, the creative being that lives in each of us (BRITO, 2011, p. 33).

Other pedagogues such as Paynter, Schafer, Orff, Willems, among others, also value creativity in the process of musical education, a fact that can be seen in their methodological proposals for teaching. However, the arguments discussed so far provide enough support for us to understand what the learning process permeated by creativity is about in relation to the perspective of this research regarding piano teaching.

CREATIVITY IN PIANO TEACHING: PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

Possibly some of the proposals I discuss in this text are already known and applied in the teaching practices of many piano teachers in music conservatories around the world. However, what I propose is to change the perspective of looking at them, understanding them in their creative potential. This can be extended to a global bias of the teaching of instruments processes, that is, the stimulus to the creativity of the students, but also of the teachers. As knowledge mediation agents, educators can, in their teaching routine, challenge themselves to enhance their everyday practices in order to contemplate the creative and inventive exercise. Reinvent yourself, always considering your context of action, as well as the multifaceted context and the social and cultural demand of your target audience in current times.

PIANISTIC INITIATION AND TEACHING BY IMITATION

The teaching methodology by imitation consists of learning the instrument through the repetition of models, preferably by the teacher. The pieces are learned little by little, part by part, always starting from the reference offered to the student. However, this methodology is often not approached in its broad sense, and has been limited to the performative approach, due to the ease with which, in the first classes, the student can play something, which is undoubtedly very important and motivating. However, students must repeat not only the notes and rhythm of a work, but the gestures, sonority, dynamics, tempos, among other technical and expressive elements that, as mentioned earlier, must be made possible by the teacher as the best model., the mirror for the student.

This didactic procedure is based on learning the mother tongue. According to Suzuki “all children in the world are educated by a perfect method: by their mother tongue. Why not use this method for other talents as well?” (SUZUKI, 1994, p. 12). But what does that mean? Well, we learn to speak, communicate, since we were born, by constant observation of the words and sounds we are exposed to on a daily basis. Gradually with cognitive development, we begin to “experiment” with the reproduction of these sounds until at a certain point we are able to communicate in fact. Only then after some prior mastery of the language do we go to school to learn its structures, grammar and concepts.

Shifting this philosophy to music, it is possible to understand that imitation has the same objective. First, we learn to play ⁵the instrument and only then, later, theorize and understand structural/conceptual rules of musical elements. In my opinion, it is one of the ways that we have in the literature to promote

⁵ To play here refers to a more intimate relationship with the instrument, without technical level judgment and “performative perfection”. Play music expressively, however simple it may be.

the teaching of music by making music in all its aspects, as Swanwick proposes: teaching music musically because, as a human activity, “it is a rich form of discourse” (SWANWICK, 2003, p. 116).

For the learning process by imitation to happen more optimally, it is important that students have prior knowledge of the works with which they are going to work. Thus, the teacher, in addition to playing the piece, must establish an analysis of it, in terms of form, parts, character, through dialogue and questions that encourage them to think about it. Another promising point is to provide videos of the pieces that can be recorded by the educator, preferably with the keyboard viewed from above (camera angle) so that learners can more than just see the work (position of hands, notes and fingerings) hear and feel familiarize yourself with it before learning it. It is important to emphasize that parallel to this imitative work, the work of initiation to conventional reading can take place. Starting from the reading of graphics, relative reading, such as the staff of one, two or three lines, until we reach the traditional absolute reading.

Within teaching by imitation, improvisation is strongly encouraged. Students must start to improvise freely, with the black or white keys. The “question and answer” game is a relevant learning device in this sense. The teacher plays a phrase (question) and the student performs his improvisation (answer). This exercise, in addition to stimulating creativity, allows him to seek ways to structure, organize his thoughts and express them through his creations. They also help in the development of notions of metrics, tempo, dynamics, as the guidance must guide you to create something that “fits” with what was touched by the teacher. All these improvisation activities must have a harmonic accompaniment so that the student feels like he is making music. Little by little, the skimpy improvisations give way

6 Considering the reference piece (learned by imitation) as part A.

to bolder and more complex exercises, which must always be encouraged and mediated (whenever necessary).

The exercise of improvising allows students to build a repertoire of technical and musical elements and then move on to the next stage, composition. From the songs learned, piano students must be encouraged to compose small works, which can be a variation for the theme of a song, its B part ⁶, among other possibilities. For this, he needs to exercise critical thinking, make decisions about how to structure rhythmic, melodic, dynamic, fingering elements, and therefore the teacher’s mediation becomes essential. As these practices unfold in piano lessons, students can compose works “from scratch”, that is, having as a starting point the ideas that sound in their heads. Fact that for this he needs to have skills and theoretical knowledge at his disposal.

It is in this sense that I advocate that this methodological proposal can be worked with students of all levels and ages. Here we have space, for example, for this work to be done with music of the students’ personal taste or else folkloric music and local culture, always respecting their limitations, expectations and objectives of their training.

CREATIVITY IN EARLY PIANO TEACHING

The classical piano literature has a vast written repertoire that brings information that guides the instrumentalist in his interpretation. They guide, therefore, in my view, they must not be considered as unquestionable rules to be followed. There are teachers/pianists who advocate “doing exclusively what is written in the score”. This, however, can limit the process, make it inflexible and without room for creativity. Therefore, I understand it as necessary for students to become aware of the idiomatic and aesthetic characteristics of each

era/style/composer so that they can critically build their interpretation from the beginning, respecting, of course, writing and aesthetics, but without ceasing to contribute with their own ideas, reflections and opinions. In this sense, I suggest the work based on *urtext editions*, with the composer's original writing. Revised editions, although they aim to make teaching more didactic, bring the vision of a reviewer who suggests facilitating aspects such as fingerings, dynamics, tempos, but which are not necessarily suitable for all piano students.

With regard to technical exercises such as scales, arpeggios and chords, or small studies such as those by Czerny⁷, the stimulation of creativity can be achieved by performing rhythmic variations for the melody, changing the disposition of the notes of a chord, transposing to other tonalities, or even the creation of a new exercise that includes the same elements worked on in the reference study. All this must be discussed with the student, mediated and guided by the educator so that they can build something together in a critical and creative way.

These same strategies can be addressed in the student's repertoire. Create rhythmic and melodic variations to the theme of a sonatina or baroque dance, for example, experiment with other articulations, other dynamics. In the case of a Classical work, the same sonatina, it is possible to try to structure the accompaniment (like the *d'Albert* bass)⁸ in chords and create a rhythm for them. Another possibility is to determine the stretch of greatest difficulty for the student and turn it into a technical exercise in order to overcome the presented limitation. Thus, we have a collaborative construction between teacher

and student. I once worked on creating the prelude in C major by JS Bach from volume 01 of the well-tempered harpsichord with a student. I asked her to turn the notes into blocks of chords. She did and then I improvised a melody over these chords she played. Then I suggested that she create a melody for these chords at home and the result was promising!

I emphasize, the intention is not to demean the tradition of classical piano teaching nor to question its value. But to point out that strategies like these applied as exercises, point out that even the piano in its erudite aspect is open to encouraging creativity. This way, among the many global benefits that creativity makes possible, it is possible to estimate positive reflexes including in the interpretation and performance of students in their studied repertoire.

CREATIVITY IN POPULAR PIANO TEACHING

Popular music – that is, music that is not erudite – has gained space in the field of formal education, including universities, both as training and as a topic for research in the area. This fact can be corroborated in the conservatory *locus* of this investigation by the change in the profile of students perceived from a few years ago. Currently, it is common to come across people who seek the institution to learn to play the music they like, as a *hobby*, entertainment or personal fulfillment, and therefore do not envisage a professional career in music. Thus, the school has expanded its horizons by valuing and contemplating popular music in its teaching plan. This means that the study programs of the different instruments have implemented this genre as part of legitimate musical training through

7 Specifically, the collection "60 small studies for piano" – Barroso Neto, for being widely used in piano education in general.

8 Term that refers to a structural form of harmonic accompaniments for melodic lines of works, quite evident in compositions from the Classical period, such as sonatas and sonatas, for example. The notes of the chords are structured in a rhythmic ostinato (usually eighth and sixteenth notes) in which two notes are interspersed with a third that repeats. Example, on the G major chord: rhythmic pattern of eighth or sixteenth notes in the following sequence – G - D - B - D; G - D - B - D.

curricular parameters.

Lucy Green (2002) talks about the importance of popular musicians' informal learning processes as promising tools if extended to formal education, and among other aspects, points out learning by imitating pop music recordings⁹ as a strongly practiced methodology, which requires training, and constant dedication, in addition to active listening. In the words of the author "the learning technique most used by popular musicians, already well known and described in several literatures, is the imitation, by ear, of recordings" and adds that "at the very least, listening and imitating requires a high level of attention and a auditory intention" (GREEN, 2000, p. 70).

This is, therefore, one of the strategies that I have approached in my teaching practice on the popular piano. The students "hear" the songs of their personal taste – which is not a good or bad value judgment here – and together, during the classes, we build a piano arrangement for them. There are situations in which we take a score as a reference to guide creation. However, these scores are not always accurate in rhythmic and melodic terms, they do not completely decode what the work expresses, and therefore, the contribution of the student is fundamental. This is because he understands the piece well, he is intimate with it for hearing it several times in his daily life. In other cases, the creations are free, that is, they depart from what they have as technical mastery of the instrument and aesthetic knowledge of the work/style to compose their orchestration. That's why playing by ear is relevant and effective, because "hearing-based imitation allows us to pay attention to many musical elements that traditional notation cannot rigorously codify. This is the case of timbre, *dirt*, *groove*, *feeling*, rhythmic flexibility, pitch mismatch and many other aspects" (GREEN, 2000, p. 73).

⁹ Read "play by ear".

In addition, the creation of the arrangement itself allows the student to engage more and more with his own learning, motivate him, challenge him, in addition to awakening the passion and pleasure provided by playing what he has created, important facts highlighted by Green (2000). In the performance sphere, I have noticed a better resourcefulness and confidence in my students with whom I work in this process.

If, on the one hand, a large part of popular music scores are not reliable in all musical elements with precision in a reliable writing, on the other hand, there are today in popular piano literature works written/arranged for the instrument of good quality, among them, the collection "Cancioneiro Jobim – arrangements for piano" (2004), written and revised by Paulo Jobim. Working with (well) written arrangements is important as it allows students to exercise reading and understanding conventional musical spelling. In this sense, I suggest that first these works be studied as they are written, I use the term "very square" with my students. After the piece "being in the fingers" with its rhythmic, melodic, strumming and dynamic elements well appropriated by them, it's time to actually transform it into music, and that's where creativity comes into play.

As these are well-known works by students, I encourage them to try to build their interpretation by exploring nuances of agogic, rhythmic flexibility, *rubatos* or *accelerando*, small rhythmic-melodic variations, which in fact make sound what they have as a reference in their ear. This *feeling* that we call popular music is only possible through listening, through the proximity that the instrumentalist has with the music/style in question, and it is the basis of creative freedom for music to happen aesthetically characterized.

Tour Collura (2013; 2019; 2020), an important professor in the field of popular

piano in Brazil, systematized aspects of learning the instrument in¹⁰ teaching methods. In these methods he uses, in exercises for motor coordination and independence of the hands, the application of Brazilian rhythm patterns as an accompaniment to melodies from erudite studies known as Hannon *number 1*. This opens doors for us to be inspired and encourage our students to follow the same perspective. In this case, it is possible to choose some other erudite technical study, such as the *Czerny* cited above, so that they apply some worked Brazilian rhythmic pattern. In addition to technical development, expressiveness can be encouraged by creating dynamics, articulations, among other elements. Therefore, we as mediators must guide, but not show how it is done, or write the score. It is important to let the student explore and experience the possibilities until he reaches the goal.

CONSIDERATIONS OF THIS JOURNEY

The main objective of this text was to share some pedagogical strategies that I have tried in my teaching practice by using creative processes as one of the guiding principles of piano learning. Far from establishing a method or model to be followed, the intention is to encourage the reader to critically reflect on their teaching practices and inspire new and other possibilities permeated by the creative aspect of piano lessons.

What I have been able to observe so far in this experimental investigation process is that the stimulus to creativity in the classes I teach has provided my students with better musical, performative, expressive and, of course, creative ease. Initially shy, the improvisations and creations were developed and, over time, what once seemed like a challenge, became playful, fun, also promoting greater

engagement of students with their own learning of the instrument.

Stimulating creativity in students, in addition to embodying music education in a more comprehensive way, which transposes technical-instrumental performance as a synonym for effective education, implies considerably positive effects both when making music and in the various areas of human life. In other words, training based on reflection and criticality for actions to be taken, whether in music or in life!

Therefore, we teachers need to encourage a creative, critical and reflective environment about the elements with which students support their learning. This is done through creative musical experiences that favor, in addition to creativity, the development of autonomy over the learning process itself. Musical autonomy, democratizing, but also transforming the world to which any of us, in our different contexts, incorporate ourselves.

10 They are: Piano bossa nova (2013); The Brazilian piano: progressive method (2019); Brazilian rhythms and grooves for the piano (2020).

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