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## **Flows between improvisation, perception and spatiality as creative tools: report of two teaching experiments in music**

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### **Abstract**

In undergraduate music courses, considering all its ramifications, activities related to creation and improvisation still represent a small portion within the disciplines offered at most music programs. Thinking about music courses as an environment in which music education should enable students to creatively exercise this language – producing music rather than only reproduce a certain repertoire – how to involve music students in immersive and meaningful experiences based on studied materials of art expression? To that end, two professors from different Brazilian institutions share and compare two initiatives carried out with the aim of reflecting on the cognitive potential of improvisation, perception and body/spatiality relations as tools for the development of creativity in the scope of music programs.

*Keywords:* music education, improvisation, perception, creativity.

### **Flujos entre la improvisación, la percepción y la espacialidad como herramientas creativas: informe de dos experimentos didácticos en música**

#### **Resumen**

En los cursos de música de pregrado, considerando todas sus ramificaciones, las actividades relacionadas con la creación y la improvisación aún representan una pequeña porción dentro de las disciplinas que se ofrecen en la mayoría de los programas de música. Pensando en los cursos de música como un entorno en el que la educación musical debería permitir a los estudiantes ejercitar creativamente este lenguaje, produciendo música en lugar de solo reproducir un determinado repertorio, ¿cómo involucrar a los estudiantes de música en experiencias inmersivas y significativas basadas en materiales estudiados de expresión artística? Para ello, dos profesores de diferentes instituciones brasileñas comparten y comparan dos iniciativas realizadas con el objetivo de reflexionar sobre el potencial cognitivo de la improvisación, la percepción y las relaciones cuerpo / espacialidad como herramientas para el desarrollo de la creatividad en el ámbito de los programas musicales.

*Palabras clave:* educación musical, improvisación, percepción, creatividad.

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## Introduction

The configuration of the curricula of most of the higher music courses in Brazil is inserted in a perspective that aims mainly at learning a series of skills related to a pre-established and crystallized musical knowledge. Many of these courses aim to develop skills to learn in the most detailed way possible – mainly focused on the reproduction of a determined repertoire – music materials representative of a restricted historical period belonging to the field of European classical music. In most music programs, the option is to address the European repertoire from the period of the so-called common practice – which goes from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century, from the Baroque to Romanticism – and transmit the theories (counterpoint, harmony, analysis etc.) theories and forms of specific notation from that same period. This type of approach is based on the colonialist assumptions of European superiority and the universality of Western music theory. In this “epistemicide” operation of cultural imposition (Santos, 2009, p.233), popular, traditional and local cultures are ignored. Also ignored is the fact that repertoire is dynamic and is constantly expanding in contact with the complex context from which it emanates, and that is built in the practice and at the experience of making music. Starting from this general panorama, we present the basis of two experiments made by two professors from two different Brazilian institutions in which actions were driven in relation to musical perception and improvisation, establishing a connection bridge from the feedback and flow from one to the other.

## Improvisation, perception and spatiality

In Ear training classes, thinking broadly about music perception (observing that “music perception” is how “ear training” classes are called in Brazil), much is discussed about its musical repertoire, pointing to the need of expanding existing materials (Bhering, 2003) and involving creative practices such as music improvisation in ear training and other perceptual processes (Costa, 2008). There are also studies that point to cognition and musical perception in processes in which spatiality and bodily exchanges with a given environment have a crucial role as a mediator of knowledge (Gibson, 1979; Varela, Thompson, & Rosh, 2001), especially involving rhythmic aspects (Fridman, & Manzolli, 2016). In the curriculum of undergraduate music courses, Ear training classes are commonly designed to work on auditory acuity, develop fluency in musical reading, study scalar and rhythmic structures, among other materials of music expression. However, even including other music besides the traditional Eurocentric repertoire, activities such as creation or improvisation are not very common in this type of study. Music improvisation, on the other hand, requires a specific approach in relation to the construction of knowledge and musical practice.

From a broad point of view, it can be said that improvisation always takes place here and now, and can be based on a radically constructivist attitude. This attitude should be based on empirical, creative and experimental practice (usually collective and interactive) and on the assumption that musical creation (action and thought) is an activity that must be experienced and accessible to everyone (Costa, 2016). In this sense, improvisation can be thought of in its pedagogical dimensions, as a tool for the construction of knowledge, listening and to build the skills that underlie and enable a musical practice. In a context that favors creativity, the development of musical perception related to ear training courses as well must therefore be integrated into educational processes as a constituent element. The way in which individuals construct their perception conditions the structuring of their musical thought. Thus, music perception seen as part of the cognition process can be gradually configured and built by an effective contact with musical making (listening, playing, creating and interpreting). From this point of view, in a pedagogical and educational scope, the possible exchanges and insertions between perception and music improvisation can be a privileged means to promote this type of strategy. In the

experiments described here, the main concerns were thinking about music as artistic creations located historically, geographically and in full movement in learning spaces. In this context, in order to enable the musician to practice music, music education must be proposed as a cognitive process resulting from an active relationship between the musician with repertoire and music creation. Creation here is therefore considered as a significant resource in that it can give rise to a gradual configuration of brain operations and structures that interconnect simultaneously, and that form the basis for the increasingly complex functioning of musical thought. This music thinking collectively constructed in an environment of respect for differences, not hierarchized and not dominated by supposedly universal paradigms dynamically integrates social diversity, local and personal cultural components brought by all participants of the initiatives described as follows.

### *Experiment 1. Creative Laboratory in Ear Training*

At this experiment Ear training courses are considered as a music perception activity in a broad way, thinking its use as a means that favors not only self-perception, but also the relationship and interaction with other people through diversity of music materials. Here we wanted to create situations that involved music students in an immersive and meaningful experience not only for learning purposes, and also give new meanings to music materials when inserted in daily spaces. The initial action, within one of the Ear training semesters, was to leave the classroom, experimenting the use of expressive materials we were studying at the time – such as scalar and rhythmic structures from different cultures – to make small interventions in the external spaces at central campus of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. This first experience resulted in a huge sound intervention at the UFRGS Campus with the whole group, in order to feel first spatial relationships exploring different environments commonly used by the students.

After this initial experience, we proposed them to divide into smaller groups and explore the Campus spaces, choosing places for a sound intervention using materials from which we were studying to create the sound of that special place. The students carried out creative projects such as song creations, improvisation proposals and other types of sound interventions, which we shared in audio and video registers at the end of our course. Places such as staircases, elevators, external spaces were all contemplated with sound interventions based on materials developed by students throughout this course.



Figure 1. Prof. Ana Fridman with students at the University Campus in Porto Alegre, Fridman, 2019.



### *Experiment 2. Free Improvisation Laboratory*

The proposal called *LabErrante*, focused on the practice of free improvisation assumed the constitution of a small group (from 6 to 10 musicians), of varied instrumental formation and that functioned as a kind of laboratory for the development of the practice, reflective and theoretical activities foreseen in the project. In rehearsals of three hours per week, divided into performances and reflective sessions on the result of the performances, we had as a starting point the theoretical bases of the practice of free improvisation (Costa, 2016). These reflections in form of conversations and theoretical expositions, could occur both before and after the performances, so that the practice immediately led to discussions on the various related subjects, such as creation, listening, interaction, solfeggio, music perception, consistency and structuring of the sound flow, musical time, relationships between composition and improvisation and concepts of silence and noise. It is worth mentioning that other resources were used during the project, such as filming and recording performances, reading texts that support reflections, presentation of audiovisual materials related to the theme (performances by Brazilian and foreign improvisers), interviews with musicians, individual and collective reports on each other's impressions (during performances), records in other artistic languages (visual arts, dance etc.), elaboration of collective creative projects developed by the group and so on. We also count two hours a week to read texts related to the pedagogical and philosophical objectives of the projects developed. The group improved improvisation environments as the practice provided reflections on various related subjects and the practical part of the rehearsals was completed with discussions resulting from performances, reading of texts, and participation in listening sessions.



*Figure 2. Prof. Rogério Costa and Orquestra Errante (free improvisation group) in São Paulo, Costa, 2019.*

### **Conclusions**

Follows a general result of the two proposals, also pointing to the subsequent discussion between the two teachers, tracing a flow of possible dialogues between music perception and music improvisation. The *Creative Laboratory in Ear Training* indicated a deeper incorporation of the studied materials, in addition to bringing creative and poetic perspective to what was studied in class creating memory spaces

of sound and presence for the students. We also found that this type of experience continues to arouse the interest of undergraduate students in Music and promoted valuable exchanges of music materials among various programs offered, such as Composition, Music Education and Popular Music at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. The *Free Improvisation Laboratory* brought over a period of twelve months a deep and comprehensive musical and social reflection. First there was the deconstruction of the words “wrong”, “ugly sound” or “noise”, because within the proposal of free improvisation any and every music idea has its importance and its contribution to artistic construction. Free improvisation here is used as a tool to fully explore the creative potential of individuals, allowing them to create their own sound discourses. In general, the two initiatives proved to be active spaces for experimentation and discussion of themes that can be taken to different areas of music making, such as performance, music production, music education, composition, among others. The sound repertoire in the two proposals was expanded in the number of possibilities of operations between them. This increase in the imaging and exploration capacities of different spaces and initiatives proved to be effective for making creative, original and experimental music, increasing listening and interaction skills of the participants involved in both experiments.

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