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musicoguia@gmail.com

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Music training in decolonial, opened and embodied perspectives: experiments in Counterpoint and Ensemble Practices

Ana Luisa Fridman, Rogerio Luiz Moraes Costa

State University of Sao Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

This article brings proposals of two professors in undergraduate music courses, in continuity with initiatives already presented to CIVAE (Costa, & Fridman, 2020). For this edition of the event, reflections and initiatives within Music Counterpoint and Ensemble Practices will be described, in addition to a creative experience involving a musical interaction between the teachers of these disciplines. The article also raise questions about important aspects to rethink the ongoing curricula in Brazilian universities, such as decolonial and non-hierarchical approaches, which value local culture and current issues, in addition to awakening poetic and immersive states of performance from the appreciation of studies involving corporeality and presence in music education and performance environments.

Keywords: music education, decolonial Initiatives, creative processes, corporeality.

Formación musical en perspectivas decoloniales, abiertas y incorporadas: experimentos en Prácticas de Contrapunto y Ensamble

Resumen

En este artículo describimos las propuestas de dos profesores de cursos de grado de música, en continuidad con las iniciativas ya presentadas a CIVAE (Costa, & Fridman, 2020). Para esta edición del evento, presentamos reflexiones e iniciativas dentro de las disciplinas de Contrapunto y Prácticas de Ensamble, además de una experiencia creativa de interacción musical entre los docentes de estas disciplinas. En el artículo, cuestionamos aspectos que consideramos importantes para repensar los planes de estudio en la práctica en las universidades brasileñas, como los enfoques decoloniales y no jerárquicos, que valoran la cultura local y los problemas actuales, además de despertar estados de actuación poéticos e inmersivos desde la valoración de la corporeidad y presencia en ambientes educativos y de actuación musical.

Palabras clave: educación musical, propuestas decoloniales, procesos creativos, corporeidad.

Introduction

The starting point to build the proposals presented in this article is the observation that music in Brazil was institutionalized from an intense process of colonization. In the field of music education, this implies recognizing that symbolic constructions planted since the colonial invasion made us dispossessed of our own ways of valuing, creating, interpreting, listening, teaching, learning and experiencing music (Queiroz, 2020, pp. 153-154). From this same perspective in relation to music teaching, the curricula of undergraduate courses do not usually consider elements such as corporeality, spatiality, improvisation, interactive environments and other aspects that promote creative interactivity within the scope of their study materials. In studies that deal with states of presence, these find their definition in the resizing of the artist's forces in relation to the environment based on self-awareness and being conscious of the surroundings environment (Jaeger, 2006, p. 122). In this relationship of presence an important point should be related to working on the full mastery of our bodily actions through a network of senses (Pavis, 2001, p.3). In studies and practices involving musical performance, the focus is often directed to states of fluency and mastery of a given musical material, but not necessarily to states that derive from the performer's corporeality and interactions with the environment that surrounds this artist. Thinking about collective creation processes, corporeality and interaction relations fill sensitive spaces within of the performer's own body. This sensitive state of body in connection to the musical instrument in collective interactions builds what is called affected bodies (Stover, 2017, p.34), especially if approached through a non-colonial perspective. Bringing the idea of art as an unstable line in an eternal constructive flow, where "art is knowledge to be built incessantly" (Barbosa, 2008, p.47), the initiatives presented here embrace this open environment of possibilities and inquiries with proposals where local culture and sensitive and alert musical bodies are valued. In the experimental environment proposed, the body is freed from restrictions and technical requirements typical of hegemonic ideas of music and is involved in open collective creative processes that favor new connections. From the exposed problem, some experiences will be reported, even keeping within the traditional curricular structure, in seek to remedy some of the points mentioned, emphasizing the critical and creative dimensions without giving up the specificity within the Counterpoint and Ensemble Practices disciplines that appear in most curricula of undergraduate courses in Music in Brazil.

Methodological proposals and approaches

Decolonial perspectives applied to a Counterpoint course

The first initiative described is based on a recently reformulated syllabus in the Counterpoint discipline of the music department at the University of São Paulo, namely: The objective of the Counterpoint course is to make the student come into contact in a practical, reflective and creative way, with the forms of musical thought that deal with polyphonic textures. From a decolonial and anti-racist perspective and aiming to overcome Eurocentric paradigms, in addition to the repertoire of the so-called "Western classical music", diversified repertoires will be approached and analyzed, such as Brazilian popular music, RAP, Jazz, Rock, Reggae etc. In this discipline polyphony is approached in a broader context of the textural dimension and in its relations with creation, practice and listening, emphasizing the creation of experimental works in which polyphony and counterpoint appear as a resource for composition. Added to this is the objective of providing students with the critical capacity to discuss and evaluate different methodologies of analysis that go beyond strictly musical dimensions.

From this renewed perspective, one of the course proposals: 1. Compose an experimental, contrapuntal exercise of up to five “voices”, lines or layers. The voices or layers must be registered on a portable recorder, cell phone or computer recorder and later edited, processed and assembled in audio editing software. 2. “Voices” can be composed of everyday sounds, sounds of objects, nature, instrumentals, electronics, voices, etc. 3. The sound content of the “voices” can be produced and worked on, both later in the software through collages, additions, subtractions, fragmentations, duplications, cuts, transpositions, processing, etc., and during the recording process. That is, sound materials – figures, gestures, textures, sound objects, characters, musical ideas – can either be short musical ideas worked through repetitions and/or variations, or long textures that unfold over time, slowly transforming.



Figure 1. Costa, 2021, Experiment at Counterpoint Course, Sao Paulo State University

Presence and corporeality in Music Ensemble courses

In this initiative within a Music Ensemble course offered at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, in addition to extending the repertoires to current and non-hierarchical contexts, was proposed the search for a poetic state of performance from an alert, present and sensitive body, which listens and interacts. For this purpose were considered listening situations, including perception and attention, either to foster states of interaction or to address cognition and creative processes. Corporeality, listening and rhythmic materials were the lever to introduce this poetic state to the musicians, treating their musical instruments as an extension of a gestural and sound potential. In this proposal, the musician’s physical interaction with an instrument created a type of relationship where involvement is the initial trigger of an artistic process and collective interaction. The proposal in this initiative involved the following procedures: 1. Gesture exploration with movements or even body sounds, also exploring the space around the instrument as the furniture, walls and other elements before starting to play. 2. Bodily exploration in order to establish a previous relationship with the instrument beyond its usual limits, creating a connection between space, body and musical instrument. 3. Gradual research finding sounds based on rhythmic stimuli and musical patterns such as harmonic cadences, ostinatos, melodies or other materials of musical expression. 4. The register of these experiences by cell phone or other resource that records sound and video. At the end of this proposal, the videos produced were placed in an online repository and then freely combined by the teacher in duos and trios, to be later shown to the students as a result of this experience.



Figure 2. Fridman, 2021, Corporeality and instrument interaction, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul

Final interaction between the teachers of the two courses

After exchanging information about the proposals and methodologies used in the Counterpoint and Collective Practices initiatives, the main issues were related to deepen listening, body relationships with musical instruments, sound environment, collective creation and spatiality. In the context of the proposals described here, the action of collectively producing music in real time put the body in a different situation from the activity of interpreting compositional projects prepared by third parties in deferred time. Closing this cycle of experiences, therefore, the two teachers interact using the ideas shared in each didactic initiative, where each one created two videos/two voices with a pre-defined time, but without previously listening to each other. The videos were only joined at the end, also as an music creation experiment.



Figure 3. Costa, & Fridman, 2021, Creative experiment between the two teachers

Conclusions

The political dimension of the proposals described in this article is evidenced as a counter-hegemonic practice by placing the body in a new perspective, welcoming students into environments of collective interaction, demystifying and re-dimensioning the ideas of instrumental technical excellence and the need to master traditional music theory. The initiatives described contributed to disseminating poetic and immersive states in the experiences carried out, in addition to a perspective that values the here and now, outside colonialist and determinant contexts in relation to the repertoire played in these practices. The sound result is not the most important goal as it is one of the elements in the game. Fundamentally, the main accomplishments were change the relationships with the other, with the outside, with time, with the extra-musical, with life, with the context and with thought itself. These initiatives therefore offered decolonial perspectives in the disciplines of Counterpoint and Ensemble Practice insofar not relying on Eurocentric aesthetics, repertoires, techniques and ideas of music. Such proposals described here aim to establish a network of actions that leads to other questions and future initiatives within decolonial perspectives, with present body and open to the future.

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