From Creative Process to Trans-cultural Process: Integrating Music Therapy with Arts Media in Italian Kindergartens: a Pilot Study.

Claudio Cominardi, Certified Music Therapist  
Lecturer in Music Therapy at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Brescia, Italy  
Email c.cominardi@tiscali.net.it

Abstract  
The integration of immigrant children is a primary problem of the Italian education system. At the same time, the expressive communication of our multimedia and multicultural society is generating new opportunities for understanding between different cultures, which can influence the social lives of these children. This communication is strongly rooted in Western culture by the historical music and art avant-gardes of the 20th Century, which are based not only on common aesthetic patterns, but also on common sense-perceptual elements found innately in every person.

The music therapy project described in this article explored how these music-art languages can become an open model for welcoming, integrating and sharing common languages with children coming from different cultures in public kindergartens, growing new channels of knowledge and communication among multicultural groups. The project also explored how the musical thinking of John Cage, if considered as a cultural bridge between differences, could be inspiring for intercultural music therapy projects.

Keywords: early childhood music, multi-cultural groups, music therapy, simultaneity, analogical languages.

Music, Simultaneity, and Integration: Towards a Culture of Transformation

In a contemporary society driven by multimedia and multiculturalism, most of our communications travel in one prevalent way: simultaneously (Porcelli, 2005). In real-time we exchange information, objects, feelings and cultures that travel instantly all over the world, eliminating distances, time and cultural filters. In such simultaneity, music comes into all our
interactions as a transversal vehicle of complex language networks, leading to the coexistence of different cultures and social identifications, comparisons and exchanges.

Considering the classical definition of anthropology of music, which is the study of music in its own context (Merriam, 1983), music acquires multifunctional tasks reflecting the many ways the human societies entrust to it (Nettl, 1983). Thus, music can be influenced, as well as influencing social roles in their contexts, developing dynamically cultural patterns (Magrini, 2002). Today we are witnessing a rapid and continuous transformation of social contexts in which human living is evolving, so we should reconsider the entire anthropology as a science of flows, weavings and dynamics between cultures (Disoteo, 2001). Potentially, studying today’s music cultures should mean learning their meeting points and consequent transformations (Disoteo, 2001). In this way, musical languages can act as mediators of integration whereas they can build interactions and meeting grounds that open and enhance human knowledge models, and most importantly, redesign communication patterns (Cominardi, 2008).

In my music therapy work in childhood integration in Italian kindergartens, I am interested in the complex nature of immigrant children’s experiences, and in how their needs should be considered from an environmental point of view before their educational needs can be successfully addressed. When children with different languages, religious and social traditions, appearances, colours, clothes, and smells, are introduced into a new and sometimes incompatible environment, an efficient means of communication must be developed in order for education to follow. The elements of effective communication processes may lie in the sensory-perspective elements which are the foundation for the whole of human nonverbal, preverbal and verbal communication (Damasio & Geshwind, 1984; Skousen, Lonsdale, & Parkinson, 2002; Patel, 2008). These elements have built the expressive and cultural languages of our contemporary world, and are the principle vehicles of simultaneity in all of our communication patterns. Music mirrors the simultaneity of our contemporary life, crossing through every communication and leading to enhanced sensory perception. For this reason it is not only the ideal response to the plurality of languages within an educational context, but an ideal proposal to accompany them on their way of cultural meetings and transformation. Furthermore, children have an extraordinary capacity for creativity with which they can communicate despite their complex cultural differences.
The National and Local Context

In 2012, the number of foreign residents in Italy was 6.5% of the total population, or about 3.8 million people. Of these, 37% is concentrated in the northern regions of the country (Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont & Romagna) because of their strong industrial development. The region of Lombardy has the greatest number (26.5%) mainly concentrated in the provinces of Milan, Brescia and Bergamo. Brescia, in particular, has more than 202,000 immigrant residents, or about 13% of the local population. They come mainly from Romania, Morocco, Albania, India, Pakistan, Senegal, Ukraine, Moldova, and Ghana, though a number of other countries are also represented. As a result, in the city of Brescia the presence of immigrant children in kindergartens often exceeds 20%, while through the rest of the province it can vary from 13% to 17% (ISTAT, 2013).

The Brescia community tends to be highly sensitive about the number of immigrant residents, who often come from very poor circumstances and whose incompatibility in their new environment often leads to social and behavioural problems. Feelings of racism and prejudice have developed not only in the local community, but also in the immigrant one. Despite the severe economic crisis that Italy is currently experiencing, numerous educational projects have been instituted in the schools, which attempt to address citizenship, language and social integration. On the other hand, music therapy is almost never included in school programs since it is not an officially recognized service by the Italian government, nor a curriculum offered in Italian universities.

Most Italian musical projects for trans-culturalism are based on knowledge and interaction between different cultural, anthropological, and aesthetic music models, in order to promote openness, remove prejudices, and share common values (Covri & Patricelli, 2005; Disoteo, 2006). While artistic projects are mostly ethnic, based on commonalities and differences between local and global arts, they usually sharing the same aims as music projects (Bevilacqua, 2001). As these paradigms are both valuable, it seems that young children could be best empowered by using their own creative strengths and abilities to interact with their new environment and to discover their common, simultaneous contexts which then can be transformed as an educational resource for integration.
Music, Sensorial Dimensions and Analogical Languages

Beyond sharing social communication between cultures, music also has the ability to create communication between different expressive media and to interact with extra-musical languages. In fact, music links to all the languages involved in body movements, postures and gestures, facial expressions, voice inflections, rhythm and pulse of spoken words, and all the bodily expressions and communication signs active in every human interaction, which are named Analogical Languages (Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, & Jackson, 1971). As the “perception of like relational patterns across different contexts” (Gentner & Colhoun, 2010, pg. 35), every analogical communication is “the process of establishing a structural alignment between two represented situations and then projecting inferences” (Gentner & Colhoun, 2010, pg. 36). Thus, analogy is located in every kind of non-verbal communication, as well as culture and artistic language and space/time structures of cognitive learning (Cominardi, 2013).

As a brief example, consider the differences between listening to a high-pitched and a low-pitched sound: the high-pitched sound often corresponds to perceptions of light colours and of bodily sensations and movements perceived as small, light, cold and angular, fast and narrow, and so on. On the other hand, the low-pitched sound is usually associated with dark colours, large, round and hot sensations, slow and widened movements etc. (Dogana, 1988). Furthermore, sound/musical stimuli, and its space/time structuring relative to melody and rhythm, is perceived as sensory experience by the brain regardless of further cognitive and intellectual processing (Berger, 2002; Thaut, 2005). Their shapes, meanings, relationships and languages occur despite cultural and behavioural filters, creating the sensory paradigm as the base of the cultural dimension of human living.

Cultural Openings from Integrated Languages of 20th Century’s Western Music-Art

Observing the deep changes happening inside anthropology through musical behaviours and their human relations, Anthony Seeger highlighted the role of music not only as a construction of meanings, but also in relationship with the movement (Seeger, 1993). Consequently he proposed a music/kinetic approach to anthropology, based on the concept of performance (Seeger, 1993) as a building process of meanings and social evolutions. From another perspective, Daniel Stern described in Vitality Affect theory (Stern, 1987) how the emotional and affective dimensions reside in space/time elements of interpersonal communication, wherein structured events create dynamic movements.
European music-art of early 20th Century anticipated, interacted and organically developed within these concepts, leading to what is the foundation of our contemporary art culture. The connection between the music of Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951) and the paintings of Wasilij Kandinskij (1866-1944) was instrumental in instigating this development. While Schönberg was opening up new, inner psychic dimensions of music by freeing dissonance from the traditional concept of harmony, Kandinskij was creating a new abstract and onyric language (relating to dreams) in fine art by freeing the shape from the bonds of nature in his painting. Together, they shared the concept of “polychrome music” (Schönberg, 2002). At the same time, Paul Klee (1879-1940) introduced the concept of temporality in painting. His paintings are evolutions of moving surfaces, shapes and colours to be read as if they were parts of a music score in which the horizontal movements mark the passage of time, and the vertical combinations mark space relations. In Klee’s works, painting and music come together into a single concept of “pictoral polyphony” (Klee, 2004; Boulez, 2004).

But the most radical revolution in music belongs to John Cage (1912-1992), who reconceptualised music not as an accomplished result or product, but as a creative process that is free to develop by the unpredictability of events in the precise moment at which they happen. Musical time for Cage was an experience in which each element is able to change and redesign its own course, creating a continual transformation of the present called “time zero” (Porzio, 1995). In time zero, every expressive aspect can meet and interact with each other, allowing opportunities for the integration of extra-musical languages with music in which the musical expressions of all modalities are shared and simultaneously become a metaphor for our contemporary era. This is also the key with which Cage revolutionized the traditional concept of Western academic music and opened new meetings with Non-Western cultures towards a universal concept of “unison of differences” (Cage & Kostelanetz, 1987).

Applying Cage’s time zero to transcultural communication, then, leads to communications which purposely share the common elements of their diverse origins within relationships that are free from the constraints of pre-existing models. This is also the challenge of the project described below.
The Project

The Context

The project took place in two kindergartens of Brescia, working with 65 five year old children which included 14 immigrant children from various countries. These 14 children had general problems related to integration, sometimes with significant difficulties in behaviour and in relationships with peers and teachers. The evaluations were carried out by the children’s classroom teachers using apposite evaluation forms that included a qualitative assessment of five behavioural and learning areas. This project focused specifically on the two areas of relationship and expressive autonomy.

The children were divided into four generally homogenous groups. They then participated in weekly group sessions between October, 2012 and April, 2013. The main goals of the project were as follows: a) to develop relationship integration within each group; b) to increase individual expressive autonomy and self-esteem; c) to decrease prejudice and increase appreciation for diversity; and, d) to gain benefit from integrated expressive language experiences. Due to the specificity of this approach and its techniques, the classroom teachers were given a special training course to increase their understanding of music, sensory integration and analogical languages prior to the commencement of the children’s group sessions.

The Setting

The sessions took place in the main hall of the respective schools where the children regularly gathered to play, and where they were allowed to interact freely in their environmental context. The hall also provided a space that was large and clear in order to allow for movement. Orff and ethnic musical instruments (like maracas, cabasas, rainsticks, bongos, and more) were used, especially those that could be played while moving, as were art supplies (large sheets of paper and wax pastels) and environmentally appropriate play furnishings (slides, benches, castles, etc.).

The Music Process

The foundation for this project was entirely based on the analogical integration of sound, movement and colour, without any recorded music or aesthetical music accompaniment. In fact, the children made music only through their explorations, expressed emotions and
relationships, through their spontaneous creativity, and narratives built through their gestures, movements and symbolic representations (Bannan & Woodward, 2010; Malloch, 1999).

The main strategy utilised was creative improvisation in all three of these modalities in order to achieve the following integrative objectives: a) increasing interpersonal knowledge among peers; b) developing dialogical processes; c) sharing of expressive languages; and 4) complementary teaching.

Sound-musical improvisation. In sound-musical improvisation, the children were encouraged to explore the musical instruments without the constraints of specific directives. The absence of externally imposed structures or models allowed them to discover completely new and free ways of communicating through the instruments, letting every individual improvisation grow a performing identity which interacted with each other within a concept of performance of relationship (Stige, 2002). The musical interactions that resulted were metaphors for, and actually mirrored the new interpersonal relationships that were beginning to form.

Graphic-pictoral improvisation. Using large sheets of paper on the floor, the children coloured – even scribbled – with wax pastels, exploring the communicative nature of colour and graphics without concern for aesthetic judgment. These drawings reflected the same sensory-perceptual and relational features that were explored in the sound-musical improvisations, and put them into a concrete form, somewhat like a “written” abstract score.

Motor-environmental improvisation. The children were encouraged to physically move in creative and expressive ways, allowing the same exploration of the relationships in the previous improvisations. These relationships then were experienced and internalised in space/time dimensions.

It was important that the teachers directed and encouraged the children to freely explore and interact without any judgment and without imposing any type of aesthetic influence, and that they intervened to minimise any conflicts that might arise from normal, daily interactions. These group explorations created new communication channels for promoting in an inner sharing of roles and relationships which could form a foundation for the development of shared, aesthetic languages.
The Synaesthetic Shift

The connections of sound/movement, movement/colour, and colour/sound within the improvisatory explorations provided the basis for the development of analogical language.

The relationships between music and the other expressive media were calibrated by the sound parameters of timbre, pitch, intensity and duration. These sound parameters were experienced as synaesthetic dimensions, with: timbre reflecting shape, chromaticity and personality; pitch reflecting spatial relationships between sensory polarities and coordinated motor skills; intensity reflecting dynamics and emotional content; and, duration establishing orders, sequences and variations within an absolutely musical meaning. As a very brief example, the child drew a scribble, observed its qualities and chromatic movements. Then, using instruments and movement, the child interpreted the drawing in a space/time dimension, integrating a meaning in which every expressive element became musical, whereas the musical elements of every analogical media were shared (Cominardi, 2008). These new avenues of communication allowed children to listen and to understand one another despite their diversities, creating the foundation for trans-cultural exchange.

Integrative Music Score

The materials that emerged from these sessions composed the group’s new communicative heritage. They were recorded in concrete form to provide a “score” or representational graphic that could then be “played” by the group as their own integrated language.

In this “score” the kinetic elements of such expressive actions were represented by colours, dynamic shapes and graphic symbols, then drawn into particular “music spaces” and read as “expressive times”. Simultaneously, emotional subjects could interface with a musical basis as if they reflected Stern’s vitality affects within the dynamic form of spontaneous music in music therapy improvisation (Pavlicevic, 2003), acting a performance wherein both the musical and extra-musical languages could be performed.

Similar to Klee’s surfaces, these spaces followed each other, their timing flowing horizontally while vertically integrating their simultaneity, alternating between actions and pauses, expressions and listening. Like Kandinskij’s colour-shapes, they vibrated by sound, movement, colour and all of the dynamics that children have created themselves. Like Cage’s time zero, their nature was revealed in the simultaneity of listening, sharing, belonging to each
other, in a new meeting ground of personalities that belonged solely to the children themselves. As the performers, they were also their own audience with no separation inside their narratives, while feelings, gestures and movements, were shared in a redesigning time of co-creation of present moments (Stern, 2005)

There were several techniques for composing and playing integrative music scores. Usually they were composed on large sheets and assembled on a wall, in order to be read from left to right using different time conductions like rhythm pulses, or apposite visual indications. They could also be transformed in motor-environmental paths converting the musical spaces into other environmental places, such as the school courtyard, or the park, leading to further enhanced experiences. By playing their languages and skills, the children also contributed to identify their group as a medium of help (Elefant, 2010), when dealing with their own concerns.

The music that poured out was an integration of languages that children have completely redesigned through the inner sharing of their identities, according to the contemporary living of their social contexts.

Results and Discussion

During creative improvisations, these groups of children discovered common elements of expression resulting from their own actions. The non-judgmental approach allowed an openness to new knowledge and interactions based on creativity as a common foundation, leading to a more fluid channelling and harmonious integration of different languages. The assessment of this approach by the school teachers, reached through examination of the children’s drawings, individual interviews, group activities, role-playing games and observation in free times, resulted in a qualitative evaluation summarised as follows:

1. A significant increase in expressive autonomy and creativity in all the children, thanks to an alternative approach of media and languages that opened new communications
2. An increase of knowledge among children which reduced prejudices and facilitated group inclusion (the immigrant children clearly improved their relationship with peers, and reduced their inhibition to the teachers, also increasing verbal expression.)
3. A reduction of anxiety in extrovert children who were able to communicate their needs more effectively without being in competition with others
4. An equivalent reduction of anxiety in more introverted children who were able to assert themselves in the group.
At this time we do not know how the effects of this project can influence the children’s behaviour outside their own kindergarten contexts. Also we are currently not able to provide continuity from this project into primary school and other social places. Nevertheless, we pursue the challenge of extending this approach to other educational and social contexts in the future. Additionally, the concept that music is fundamental in these situations is not commonly accepted, but it is instead characterised as the arts and aesthetics have been for the past 100 years. Our modern cultures, however, have moved into a multimedia and trans-cultural era. Within this more unpredictable and complex communicative environment, might music therapy not have a significant role to play?

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References


