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Integration of improvisation in violin lessons: Why and how to build an accessible and efficient didactic tool

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Integrating into teaching pedagogical activities that encourage young violin players' decisional latitude, such as improvisation, appears to be a relevant way to lessen the constraints inherent to their psychosocial learning context. However, improvisation is almost absent from Western classical instrumental teaching and particularly from violin teaching. Moreover, pedagogical or didactical materials that offer a progressive approach to the teaching of improvisation in the context of Western classical music are rare and unsuited to the context of individual violin teaching. Our research aims at filling this gap by designing a didactical tool to help teachers integrate improvisation into their individual classes in the first three years of learning. This article describes the methodological approach we used to design a didactical tool that would meet the needs of both teachers and researchers.

Keywords: improvisation; violin; teaching-learning context; didactic tool; decisional latitude

The teaching of Western classical violin offered in individual classes is often done in a highly constraining psychosocial learning context (Persson 1995). The teaching strategies that are utilized leave very little decisional latitude to the student (Persson 1995). According to a model by Karasek and Theorell (1990), a work environment demanding great psychological involvement and leaving little decisional latitude is likely to result in physical and psychological tensions. These problems plague a vast majority of musicians (Berque and Gray 2003, Fjellman-Wiklund *et al.* 2003) and may originate in their early learning years (Burkholder and Brandfonbrener 2004). Although the causes of the beginning and of the continuation of these tension problems may be associated to various factors, they often take root in the psychosocial

constraints related to the work or learning environment (Flor *et al.* 1985; quoted by Berque and Gray 2003).

In addition, a work environment that is psychologically demanding and allows great decisional latitude promotes motivation and learning (Karasek and Theorell 1990). Consequently, integrating creative pedagogical activities that encourage young violin players' decisional latitude appears to be a pertinent alternative. Improvisation catches our attention because it naturally solicits the student's decision at every moment (Azzara 2002). Moreover, integrating improvisation in musical and instrumental training promotes the comprehension and the acquisition of musical concepts and structures (Azzara 1992, McPherson 1993, Montano 1983, Wilson 1971; all cited by Azzara, 2002).

However, improvisation is almost absent from Western classical instrumental teaching (Azzara 2002, Bitz 1998, Burrows 2004) and particularly from violin teaching (Biesenbender 2001, Riveire 1997). Several researchers stress the necessity of informing teaching musicians of the benefits of improvisation in their teaching and of providing them with adequate improvisation materials (Azzara 1999, Bitz 1999, Della Pietra and Campbell 1995, Jørgensen 1998, Riveire 1998). Unfortunately, pedagogical or didactical materials that offer a progressive approach to the teaching of improvisation in the context of Western classical music are rare and unsuited to the context of individual violin teaching. Our research aims to fill this gap by designing a didactical tool to help teachers integrate improvisation into their individual classes in the first three years of learning.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

The goal of this study is to elaborate a didactic tool that facilitates the integration of improvisation into violin teaching. This tool will allow teachers to familiarize themselves with improvisation and use it as a relevant teaching strategy.

Elaboration of a didactical tool: Methodology

Designing a didactical tool requires a specific methodology called "development research." Van Der Maren (2003) breaks it down into four stages: (1) market analysis, (2) object analysis, (3) preparation, and (4) development. This is the methodological model followed in our present research project.

Market analysis

Market analysis corresponds to the analysis of the needs related to a problematic situation: a gap is observed and can be filled by developing a tool. So as to ensure the relevance and efficacy of this tool, we must ask ourselves: who is it for? What objective does it serve? In what context will it be used? This stage allows one to identify the specifications that determine the functions of the materials being designed.

The tool we are developing aims to help violin teachers integrate notions of improvisation into their individual lessons. The teachers will be able to consult it to acquire the basic theory of improvisation, to think up strategies to integrate improvisation into their lessons, to progressively build up their students' improvisation skills, and to acquire strategies to guide the students' learning. Some constraints must be taken into consideration during the elaboration of this tool, such as the teachers' lack of experience with improvisation, the lack of time available during lessons, and teaching habits that ought to be respected.

Object analysis

Object analysis constitutes the theoretical part of development research. First, the contents, structure, and presentation of the database used to design the materials have to be completed. The conceptualization of the tool in order to elaborate a model then follows. The database used as a theoretical framework to design this tool is composed of the following elements: (1) the principles related to the creative musical thought process from Webster's model (1990, 2002); (2) certain improvisation teaching principles and strategies by Azzara and Grunow (2006) and Kratus (1991); (3) the technical objectives of three violin programs from schools recognized by the *Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec* (Canada); and (4) the principles of Rolland's (1959) and Szilvay's (1977) pedagogical approach of violin.

Preparation

Once the tool has been modeled, the third phase is the construction of the prototype. According to Van der Maren (1995), it is important to elaborate several different versions of the tool. The most appropriate version is determined according to its optimal satisfaction of the specifications, its feasibility, and the use of it made by its potential users. It is then important to investigate how feasible the proposed tasks are, and whether we should add information or modify the material or educational environment in order for

the tool to be used. The chosen version will then serve to build the prototype that will be tested on a target population sample.

Development

The last tool development stage begins with the testing of the prototype. So as to avoid overexploiting resources (time, money, students, or teachers), Van Der Maren suggests to start with an evaluative chain of clinical tests. The prototype is subjected to a series of "adaptive-interactive" tests based on Stolovitch's *Learner Verification and Revision* (1982; quoted by Van Der Maren 1995), first applied to one subject, then, after other tests and modifications, to the other subjects. When the control chain collects little or no suggestions for improvement, the testing prototype becomes the final prototype.

Our approach corresponds to a type of development research called "collaborative". We will undertake demand analysis and preparation in collaboration with three teachers to ensure that the research object reflects the music teachers' concerns, constraints, and priorities. The prototype will then be validated in a teaching context with a selection of their 7 to 11 year-old students.

IMPLICATIONS

The methodology summarized here will allow us to develop a solidly designed didactical tool. This tool will permit the integration of improvisation into individual violin teaching, thus contributing to leaving more decisional latitude to the student in his or her instrumental learning. Besides, this "collaborative" development research approach promotes the confrontations of ideas drawn from theory and practice and contributes to the building of bridges between the communities of researchers and teachers.

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