

The piano repertoire preparation: A research method as a potential tool for reflective instrumental practice

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This paper presents a qualitative research method that was constructed to investigate how undergraduate piano students at different stages of their academic education prepared their repertoire during an academic semester. Three undergraduate piano students—a first semester, fifth semester, and eighth semester students—were followed during an academic semester using a phenomenological approach. For each of the three case studies, three data collection stages took place: the presentation interview, the observation of the repertoire under preparation, and finally, the observation of the student's recall of his own study process. Four complementary research techniques were employed: the semi-structured interview, observation of the performance of the music pieces, a non-structured interview about the repertoire under preparation, and a recall stimulated interview, in which the student reflected about his own performance recorded in video and audio in the previous sections. During the data collection, the methodology gave the undergraduate piano students the opportunity to develop reflective thinking. Instrumental and verbal testimonies have shown that the interviews afforded the students moments to show their thoughts and actions about their piano repertoire preparation. The students acted as active agents in their piano practice, demonstrating awareness of their weaknesses and strengths through self-knowledge.

Keywords: piano practice; musical knowledge; reflective thinking; qualitative research; repertoire

The literature has discussed progress made in instrumental practice research toward the understanding of concepts related to practice and the resources frequently used in instrumental practice contexts (see Williamon 2004).

There is a consensus in the literature that instrumental practice depends on the nature and context of the task, as well as on the interests and engagements of the student (see Barry and Hallam 2002, Gabrielssohn 2003).

According to Elliot (2005), students must reflect critically on the various levels of meaning in the musical works that they are interpreting and performing before, during, and after they make and listen to their music. Nevertheless, most of the research in instrumental practice has neglected to highlight critical and reflexive approaches toward epistemological issues that students may face in daily musical practice. In formal education, undergraduate instrument students are supposed to prepare a repertoire containing works from different styles within a given time, and they are to interpret the score while taking into account stylistic aspects, without losing creativity within narrow constraints. As Burnard (2006) pointed out, we should develop reflexive thinking more effectively in our professional practice, taking into account the potential for the use of this thinking in processes as a source of professional agency. Reflection involves forms of thinking that include: (1) continuous evaluation of beliefs, assumptions, and hypotheses (Burnard 2006), (2) nurturing of opportunities for intersubjective interactions, and (3) interdependent reflexive thinking to illuminate creative thought and action as a condition of the creative process.

In Brazil, the academic formation of undergraduate instrumental (piano) students comprises eight semesters. In each semester, the student must prepare repertoire composed of about three to five pieces by composers from different periods or styles. The present study took into account that undergraduate students present an epistemic relationship with the systematized experiences and with the normative patterns within the tradition of the occidental classical music, and this musical knowledge influences their practice through the preparation of their piano repertoire. The present paper is intended to contribute to instrumental teaching and learning by presenting a method constructed to investigate musical knowledge, which in turn is shown to be a potential tool for encouraging students to adopt critical and reflexive approaches toward their own practice.

METHOD

Participants

Three undergraduate students from the same institution (out of a total of 30 volunteers belonging to three universities in the south of Brazil) were selected: a first semester, a fifth semester, and an eighth semester student.

Materials

The students' piano repertoire in preparation during an academic semester was examined, under a phenomenological perspective.

Procedure

In this research, phenomenology was employed as a philosophical methodological principle for the construction of the object. According to Bowman (1998), the phenomenological method focuses on the experience. The phenomenological fundamentals represent an aperture toward the delimitation of the problem and the tools to set boundaries for data collection and analysis. The research was constructed in a qualitative interpretative approach, considering the following principles (Schawandt 1994):

- human action is considered significant and intentional
- the ethical vis-à-vis respect for the participants, as well as fidelity toward the student's own life experience
- the epistemological perspective that emphasizes the contribution of human subjectivity to knowledge

The collecting procedures involved four research techniques: the semi-structured interview, observation of the recorded performances (aimed at revealing some indices of tacit knowledge mobilized by the student that were not verbalized but could be demonstrated in the performance), a non-structured interview about the repertoire under preparation, and a recall stimulated interview, in which each student reflected on his own performances recorded on video and audio in the previous sections.

The observation of the repertoire under preparation was carried out during a university semester in which the collecting sessions took place every 2.5 weeks, with a total of four or five meetings. Interviews combining verbal testimonies and instrumental performances could be favorable for understanding how the repertoire was prepared during an academic semester, as well as for revealing consistent clues of mobilized musical knowledge during the preparation. These meetings aimed at monitoring and observing the preparation of the repertoire, reported by the student himself. The observation of the repertoire was carried out by combining two research techniques: a non-structured interview about preparation and practice and the observation of the performance of the musical pieces. In the non-structured interview, the questions came from information reported by the student, without imposing determined questions that did not deal with his personal experience at that

moment. This attitude was based on phenomenology as a philosophical method. In the final part of the research, the stimulated recall interviews were conducted, focusing on the performances recorded during the previous sections. This stimulated interview at the end of the semester was used to avoid influencing the student during the repertoire preparation.

RESULTS

During the interviews, answers to questions regarding musical comprehension (verbal and instrumental) of the works under preparation revealed that some facts were tacit in nature. Often, while explaining our thinking (tacit), we identify and articulate several aspects in order to feel understood. In these situations, some ideas, perspectives, and thinking that remain latent up to that moment arise as possibilities for further reflections and decisions. This situation occurred during the interviews, when the communication and explanation of the student's own decisions, doubts, and certitudes to the researcher promoted moments of reflection. This happened, for instance, in the first interview of the fifth semester student, and he himself confirmed, by the end of the collecting period, one of our suspicions (NB. according to the fifth semester student, having to explain aspects of the repertoire preparation caused him to reflect after each interview):

Reporting to someone prompted me to think more. And by verbalizing, new possibilities arose, which I continued to think about after the interviews.... I thought on the things I said, if it was right or not...or if I should explore that idea more.

Along with the data collection, several other occasions demonstrated that the interviews, since they implied moments of reporting their repertoire preparation, functioned as a catalyst for reflection upon students' strategies, their problems, and their conquests. Listed below are some excerpts from the students' comments.

The first semester student regretted his approach toward Bach's Fugue in the first recall stimulated interview. He said:

This Fugue! I prepared the first page for almost four months... In the exam, it was clear that the first page was good, and the others were inferior to the first one...! This would be unacceptable now! I need to read the whole piece, even though I cannot play it well. But I have to read it completely, to realize: Here I will need to spend much time!

The fifth semester student mentioned:

I am realizing something now. Something that is becoming visible.... We have much accumulated knowledge. How many pieces we have studied, how many records we have listened to, read about music, and many think we have inside the mind, and often, we do not use all this knowledge in our favor. Because the first time we open a score, we already have an idea, but we do not chase it...or simply, diverge in the direction of other questions, such as those which are technical, which are secondary.

The cases also provided some other interesting testimonials. The first semester student in the third recall stimulated interview mentioned:

For me, it is always worthy to show for other people what I am doing. And in this way, recording, it became worthier. Now I can watch.... I think that this self-critic is very important. It helps! Sometimes it is more efficient than any other thing.

The fifth semester student, during the third recall stimulated interview commented:

During the preparation, it was interesting, because it forced me to think more about the works.... Now, watching the video, I could have a retrospective vision...of my process.... It was very interesting.... I have already begun to modify something.... One aspect that became very strong for me...is this stuff with timing, to which I have to be more devoted.

The eighth semester student, in the second recall stimulated interview said:

At the beginning, I had a little dread. I thought it might consume much time and attention. But thereafter...I felt wonderful...to be able to watch myself from far away and from that distance, acquire more clearness...regarding the ideas, the video...even in listening to me.

DISCUSSION

According to these testimonials, the employed methodology provided opportunities for undergraduate students to develop reflective thinking. The strategies employed during data collection were shown to act potentially as

effective tools for instrumental teaching and learning, since they allow the students to expose their thoughts and actions regarding preparation in order to value their own musical experience. During the process of data collection, piano undergraduate interviewees were active agents in their preparation and demonstrated awareness about their weaknesses and strengths in music self-knowledge. Fostering situations, in which the student may be given room to question and to reflect upon his/her own process and products may be a valuable strategy in instrumental teaching. Videos of the students' performance may provide opportunity for the piano teacher and student to reflect upon the instrumental practice and performance.

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