

Demonstration: Music Teaching without Words

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ABSTRACT: The content of this demonstration reflects all six of the Symposium themes, especially 5 (Musical arts and social cognition) and 6 (The parallel development of musical arts and the mind). It presents an approach to pedagogy motivated by the view that verbalisation of musical concepts can fail to communicate their meaning or purpose, whereas a means of conveying musical ideas without language may offer a superior medium for creative and social music education. It aims to develop internal hearing, gestural expressivity and socially sensitive musical exchange.

This experimental musical practice has grown out of a sequence of research and development projects devised over the last ten years to improve aural awareness and musical sensitivity through group participation. The signing and pedagogical systems of Guido d'Arezzo, Dalcroze and Kodály have been extended through the application of procedures drawing on information theory, semiotics and digital control systems in eliciting a naturalistic human communication that exploits social intelligence and kinaesthesia.

The Demonstration will involve participants in responding through musical co-ordination to a scaffolding of musical procedures that will allow creative and expressive leadership opportunities. Thus the practices involved will conform to the attributes of a language that it permits both perceptive and productive properties. In teaching music musically, the medium is the message.

Introduction and Objectives

The session will be devised to allow participants to respond to the demonstrator's tuition in Harmony Signing, an innovative pedagogy that exploits the neural connections between vocalisation and gesture to permit real-time development of musical experience and creative expression.

The session uses no verbal language, either written or spoken, nor employs music notation. Participants will be encouraged to respond to musical gestures and sung stimuli. As confidence is gained, they will be given the opportunity to lead activities: Harmony Signing operates, as does any language, as much in active use (production) as it does in response (perception). It is this that permits the development of creativity and self-expression.

The session represents an experiment in which demonstrator and participants communicate solely through music. This approach permits the language of music to operate irrespective of the mother tongue of those involved: an appropriate concept for a session at an international conference concerned with music. During the final few minutes, we will re-enter the everyday world of spoken language in order to evaluate the

experience, and to allow participants to pose questions to the demonstrator.

Background to the development of Harmony Signing

This workshop has grown out of a sequence of research and development projects ([see Bibliography](#)) devised over the last ten years to improve aural awareness and musical sensitivity through group participation. The principle strand in this initiative has been the new form of vocally-based pedagogy given the name Harmony Signing. As Harmony Signing has been taught and extended in a variety of educational contexts, it has become increasingly clear that its combination of gestural communication and vocal participation can render verbal description and analysis unnecessary. The workshop thus represents a public experiment in which a variety of simple and increasingly advanced musical concepts will be experienced and exchanged without the use of verbal communication, notation or traditional instruction.

Why teach music non-verbally?

Current research into brain function ([reviewed in Bannan 2004](#)) illustrates that there are major differences between the processing of speech and music. Given that language is our dominant means of communication and representation in everyday life, there may be advantages in decoupling its hegemony over other mental functions from the means we employ as teachers to exchange information, especially where we are trying to develop musical thinking. Keith Swanwick ([1999](#)) argues that we should 'Teach Music Musically', but it is clear that the language of music itself is often abandoned in favour of communicating about music in verbal discourse. Experimentation during the process of researching and developing Harmony Signing and related projects has illustrated that certain concepts make no sense to some participants when discussed verbally, but that the same people can handle them instinctively and expressively when they are introduced within a continuous musical discourse.

That this should be so should not surprise us. Music educators since Guido d'Arezzo have stressed the pedagogical value of physical representation and movement linked to vocal participation. This tradition, including the work of Sarah Glover, John Curwen, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Zoltan Kodály, has left us a rich legacy of practice with which to establish new variants appropriate to the musical concerns and philosophies of our age. Chief amongst current trends are the inclusion of improvisation and composition in the music curriculum; and the use of computers and other digital equipment in both education and daily life.

Yet a centrally-planned curriculum, written as it is in legalistic terms expressed in language, does not itself represent what children learn. It offers an entitlement to experiences it can only describe metaphorically – whether in language or a form of mathematics. In describing, for instance, tasks aimed at eliciting students' engagement with creativity, it cannot provide meaningful impressions of the consequences – and should not attempt to. If we wish students genuinely to express themselves, we have to provide the means for them to surprise us. It is beyond the capacity of a planned curriculum to capture this level of unpredictability.

Harmony Signing was, then, developed with an intention partly to clarify, partly to subvert and transcend, the creative and theoretical assumptions embraced by traditional pedagogy which spoken and written instruction seem ill-designed to express. Its aims are

to bring a social, instinctive response to music back to the centre of classroom activity, and to do so in a way in which a sequence of stages can link simple initial participation that acts as a firm and effective foundation to ever more daring and complex musical processes.

This focus on progression was a specific stimulus to the project. While published tutors for instrumental and vocal development have long set out pathways whereby students move through graded steps from beginner to virtuoso, no such resources have illustrated the means by which functions such as musical creativity or aural awareness can be developed over time. As a consequence of this vacuum in the pedagogical literature, theoretical concepts have tended to fall back on the language of the instrumentalist tradition, without care to cultural appropriateness, relevance to musical style, or expressive potential. Musical theory all too easily amounts to a museum of spare parts left over from the compositions of long-dead musicians whose music is not part of students' repertoire. Even where it may be, musical understanding often lags behind digital competence.

Lest it seem as if I undervalue the music of the past, it needs stressing that Harmony Signing is able to open up its processes and structures in a fresh and engaging manner. Just as it permits participants to create new connections, it can also be employed to revisit what is already known and provide expressive links to existing music. The important thing is that the new and the traditional subsist on a level playing-field. This is highly significant where students can find it hard to think outside unfavourable comparisons with music that is already recognised. The means by which instrumentalists engage with existing music – in the training of breath, lips and fingers – can fix patterns of response that inhibit free invention. Harmony Signing, through initially eschewing notation and instruments, allows what the mind's ear hears to be tried out immediately with cooperative participants.

Neither is Harmony Signing antipathetic to information technology: it just translates ideas taken from the architecture of computers and electronic games back into procedures that can be achieved with voice and movement. Children brought up with the redundancies and recursions of computer games and mobile 'phones find little confusion in the clear framework of experiences on which the pedagogy is based. Harmony Signing is recognisable to them as 'unplugged music technology'.

Much classroom music teaching is carried out via group work. Yet relatively little pedagogical thinking has been applied to the nature of music-making in groups, least of all where members may be attempting to express new musical ideas at odds with those of their companions. If the medium of resolution is to be language, one wonders how much is lost – how many flights of musical imagination are terminated by the frustration of being unable to share them via the medium of words. Harmony Signing sets out to provide a means by which students can take turns to express their ideas fully by employing the group to resonate with their musical intentions.

Finally, one would add that Harmony Signing bestows on music pedagogy an additional learning style, able to complement verbal description and definition, musical imitation and the reading of notation. The gestural complement of group singing accesses musical processing in a manner that can give rise to uninterrupted musical concentration. As a means of simultaneously developing musicianship, sensitivity, confidence and creativity, this innovative pedagogy has much to offer in an increasingly sedentary world dominated by words and images.

How will this be achieved in the Demonstration?

The workshop introduces the elements of Harmony Signing, including those derived from Curwen and Kodály, and sets out to involve participants in leading and performing a sequence of task which endow experience of a variety of musical concepts and structures. Verbal communication is avoided, and participants are respectfully requested to avoid talking or thinking in words while they engage in the session. Some time for re-entering the everyday world of language is reserved at the end to allow for questions and evaluation.

Description of the programme of activities devised for the Workshop

The principal aim of this approach is to make music together. How far one gets in this depends on a number of factors. These procedures are ideally developed over time, a few minutes in each lesson, rather than in one enriched session. Harmony Signing operates in many ways like a language, allowing musical syntax to be stored, retrieved and modified. Like a language, it is best acquired gradually. But in the time available, it is hoped that the following musical principles and procedures will be covered:

Tonality: the primary triads

A trio of gestures represents the Tonic, Subdominant and Dominant triads. Voice-leading responses to the signing allow participants to locate a part in textures which embrace movement between the primary triads, thus establishing stable tonality.

Inversion

The gesture for inverting chords is introduced, firstly on the Tonic and then on the other primary triads.

Melody

This is introduced in two ways:

- (i) Through 'liberating' individual parts from the voice-leading patterns practised previously;
- (ii) Adding a fourth, freely-melodic part, signed employing Kodály procedures.

Polyphony

This is initiated through employing Kodály hand signs in two parts.

Suspension

This can be experienced first through 2-part Kodály technique; and secondly, following on from the procedures practised above, through combining melody with Harmony Signing in a manner that incorporates prepared and resolved dissonance.

Enharmony

Enharmony (the means by which pitches can be shared between different chords as 'pivot' or 'anchor' notes) in a basic form is present in the voice-leading procedures by which the primary triads were introduced. At this stage, more elaborate procedures for colouring progressions can be introduced.

Modulation

Modulation is introduced through the idea of 'dragging' new keys to the Tonic position, and 're-setting' the related Subdominant and Dominant relationships so that the new tonality is secured.

Major/Minor alternation

Turning the primary triads from major to minor is introduced.

The secondary triads

Deriving the secondary triads from the primary is developed, extending the available harmonisation of each degree of the scale. Each secondary triad is the relative of its primary equivalent: I – VI; IV – II; V – III. In each case, only the new note that represents the root is required to turn the primary triad into the secondary – and always through its rising by one whole tone. This is reflected in the sign and movement involved.

Free signed composition with the group

Musical structures made possible by everything learnt so far can now be attempted. Harmony Signing can play a part in the teaching of composition and improvisation as well as aural development and music theory.

Conclusion

Harmony Signing has already been successfully trialled with mixed-language groups in schools workshops. A musical encounter allowing group participation where language is no barrier would seem especially appropriate at an international conference.

Publications about Harmony Signing and the action research procedures adopted to develop the technique are cited in the bibliography.

Bibliography

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