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LEARNING FROM ORFF INSTRUMENTS

Giovanni Piazza

Conservatorio de Roma

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In recent years in Italy in the musical education field there has been an ever wider methodological divide between the approach to the musical experience in general and the approach to the traditional music system.

While the first of these two didactic areas is ever more directed towards creative games, the second has generally been unable to free itself from substantially academic techniques. As if to say: children, creativity is like playing a game, but Music with a capital M is hard work.

The following examples indicate the possibility to venture into the traditional area in a purely game form using "manipulation" procedures of Orff instruments, undoubtedly legitimate vehicles of formalized musical experience. These procedures not only offer a very tactile familiarity with the notes, but also leads to recognition in a very concrete, empirical way of some of the basic structures of our music system.

The re-invented instrument

We all know it's not easy for a child to relate to an established instrument, *as it should be*.

With this in mind, we present Orff instruments *as they should not be* or rather, dismantled.

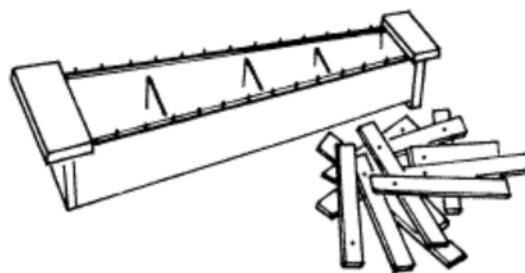


fig. 1

This transforms the severe look of the scale into the more friendly looking components of a kit spread out on the floor, like Lego pieces ready to be assembled creatively. The results can be quite unexpected:

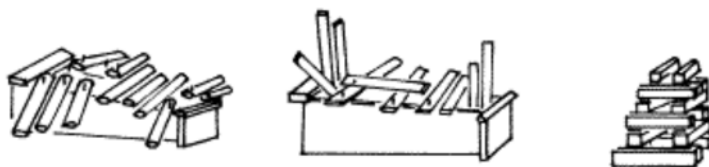


fig. 2

Now the children improvise short *pieces* on these *invented* instruments, preferably in pairs. Two children for each instrument helps overcome shyness and stimulates mutual creativity. What happens at this stage deserves close attention. It's not musical intuition which guides these improvised explorations in unknown territory. Instead, it's the eye which guides the child's hand to the instrument's most striking and unusual configurations. Rhythmic intuition supports and scans the beat of the mallet. The ear listens. The sense of aesthetics evaluates the acoustic consequences of the percussive action and encourages repetition or further exploration. The repetition of the *eye-hand-ear* cycle not only builds up experience but also produces recognizable musical and structural elements, all implicit in the instrument's acquired visual appearance and much more evident than they would be by using the conventional undifferentiated scale arrangement of the bars.

This is the methodological starting-point of our experimental journey: to encourage the child to discover what the different "mute" shapes he or she creates on the resonator can become in sound terms through the transformation of a specific non-audio shape into a consequently characterized sound construction.

Since a short article cannot take into account all the recreational and creative stages in the entire process (not to mention those stimulated by the curiosity and inventiveness of individual teachers), I will illustrate only those I consider essential.

"Rhythmic" & "Melodic" sections

In some cases, as the two children improvise, they assume spontaneously the roles of "solo" and "accompaniment".

We highlight these two roles by setting up the instrument in "Rhythmic" and "Melodic" sections.

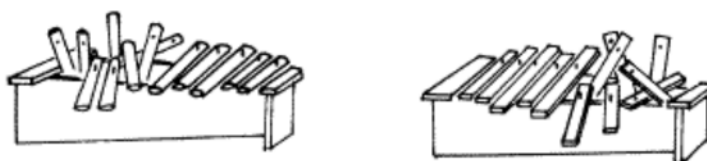


fig.3

Now each player is more focused on his chosen role and has the possibility to experiment more consciously.

Scales and *strange melodies*

Once the concept of melody has been introduced, each child is encouraged to try to play a familiar one by ear after the instrument has been re-assembled as *it should be*. It doesn't take long to discover how difficult this is. And so, let's try another way, placing the bars at random on the resonator, making sure that each one is supported at both ends.

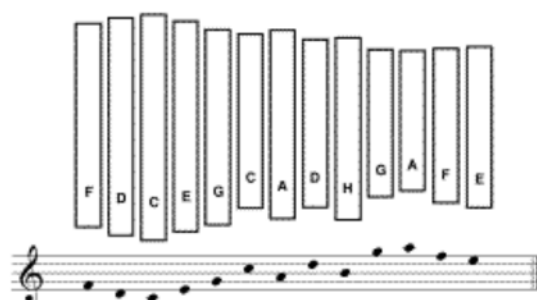


fig. 4

Each child plays his or her sequence "as if it were a scale" (from left to right or vice-versa, with whichever hand he or she prefers and without skipping a note) using an individual sense of timing and expression, producing in this way, *strange melodies* which help to understand what is missing to obtain *real* melodies: rhythm, the immediate or spaced out repetition of specific notes, etc.

The next step is to use the *strange melodies* to create equally strange *counterpoints* by superimposing two at a time, after the small C bar is placed at the right end of the instrument to give a sense of conclusion to the sequence. A nonsense of 13 syllables, as many as the instrument's bars, is used to sustain the synchronism of the two players. It's not impossible for coincidence to produce *bicinia* that are almost "scholastically correct".

A - LA MA - LA PU - TU - GA - LA CIU - RU - ME - LA PUF!

Two staves of music, both labeled 'alto gbsp.'. The top staff has notes corresponding to the syllables 'A - LA MA - LA PU - TU - GA - LA CIU - RU - ME - LA PUF!'. The bottom staff has notes corresponding to the syllables 'A - LA MA - LA PU - TU - GA - LA CIU - RU - ME - LA PUF!'.

fig. 5

This may lead to elementary A-B-A forms consisting in playing the sequence from left to right, from right to left and again from left to right, suitable for accompanying a short dance, a simple mime, etc.



fig. 6

Obviously, the experiment can be extended by including the superimposition of three or more instruments and by using four A-B-A sections in succession, playing first on xylophones, then on metallophones, then on glockenspiels and finally all together.

Double-time perception and octaves

From this point on, the arrangement of the bars evolves more specifically, produced either in an approximate or in a systematic way. In the first case, the arrangement requires the bars on the resonator to be placed according to a random *long-short* order.

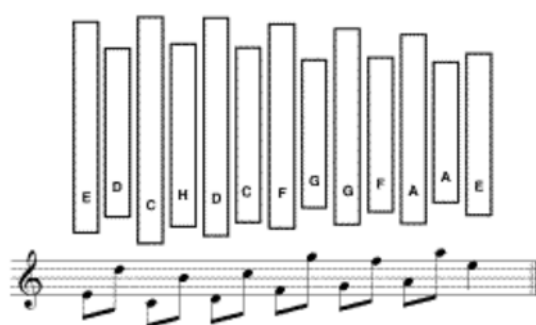


fig. 7

Playing this sequence from left to right obtains a rather primitive melodic profile in well-defined binary metre, which can be transformed into a comic march by playing all the instruments in rhythm and completing the structure with some additional rhythmic elements.



fig. 8

In the second case, the instrument's shape is made more tidy, more *geometric*, by pairing up bars of the same name in order of scale: C-c, D-d etc., with the H on its own at the end.

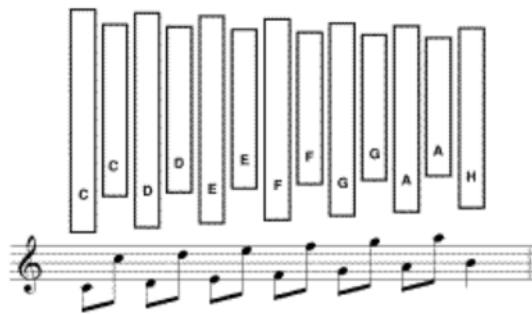


fig. 9

We play the sequence again and our original ragtag and bobtail march becomes, as if by magic, a stirring march for proud Hussars, allowing the child to discover and practice the octave.

Sound and visual waves

Another approach is to set up the bars to produce a convex or concave shape that, once again, can either be approximate or, as in the bottom diagram, *geometric*.

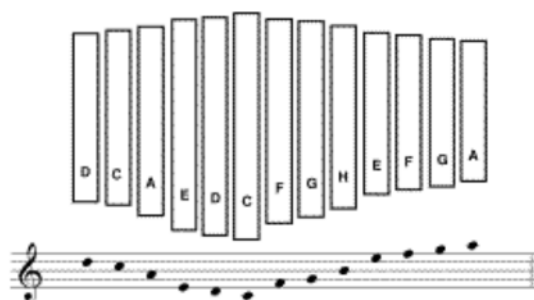


fig. 10/10a

A collective performance of these sequences with optional timing and delicate dynamic nuances creates a *liquid*, flowing musical base: unless it's *wave motion* is disturbed by sudden increases in intensity and speed (glissando).

Triple-time perception and triads

The sequence of *long-short* bars evolves into a *long-medium-short* sequence, resembling a *pipe organ* layout.

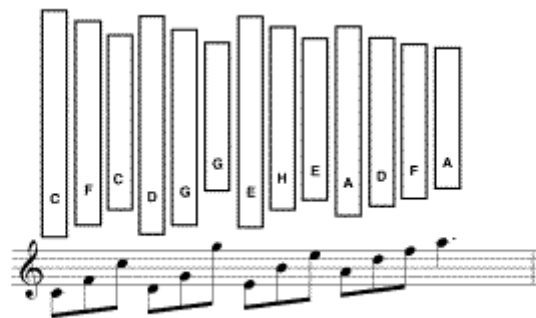


fig. 11

It's now evident that this sequence of bars will produce a triple-time effect: five ternary measures of clusters - a rousing carillon, ideal for accompanying simple improvised dances.

Figure 12 shows a musical score with four staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a sequence of notes: C, F, C, D, G, G, E, H, E, A, D, F, A. Below it are four percussion staves: triang., cymb., claves, and temp.bl. The percussion accompaniment consists of rhythmic patterns: triang. has a series of eighth notes; cymb. has a series of quarter notes; claves has a series of eighth notes; and temp.bl. has a series of quarter notes. The percussion accompaniment is synchronized with the melodic line above.

fig. 12

It's difficult for children to discover on their own the *geometrical* logic of this arrangement and so it's up to the teacher to point it out, at the same time taking the opportunity to introduce the subject of *triads*.

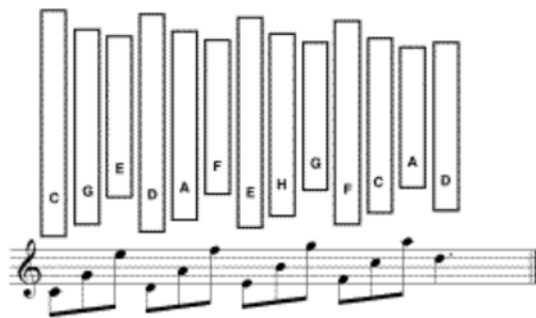


fig. 13

We use the arrangement below to create a vocal and instrumental structure, with three grades of choral difficulty: one, two or three voices, experimenting the superimposition of triple-time instrumental arpeggios played with simultaneous vocal triads.

A musical score for three parts: voice, Orff instr., and timp. The score is divided into three sections, each labeled '2 volte' or '3 volte'. The first section is labeled '2 volte' and features a vocal line with the syllable 'Ah' and a melodic line. The second section is also labeled '2 volte' and features a vocal line with the syllable 'Ah' and a melodic line. The third section is labeled '3 volte' and features a vocal line with the syllable 'Ah' and a melodic line. The Orff instr. part consists of a treble clef staff with a melodic line. The timp. part consists of a bass clef staff with a melodic line. The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, and dynamic markings.

fig. 14

The effect evokes not only typical Orffian procedures, but also the use of parallel harmonies so familiar in modern everyday music.

Conclusion

Our didactic "game" does not end here and it goes without saying that the exercises described above can't be performed consecutively during class activity because of the varying degrees of practical and intellectual difficulty. The principle of transforming mute shapes into sound structures develops with variations in playing gestures that determine modifications in the musical form. Finally, the last stage is the introduction of pentaphonic scales as a reference profile, first in a purely exploratory manner, then with a more rational approach. It is not unreasonable to say that after using our notes for what they are, or rather pieces of wood and iron which resonate, the first obstacles to the necessary rationalization process are largely overcome. At the same time, the child learns progressive playing ability (without resorting to a series of uninspiring exercises) and an elementary knowledge of basic music structures.

Notes

1 This article was originally published in a different version in JaSeSoi Journal 1996 (the magazine of the Orff-Schulwerk Association of Finland) and in Rhythmoi 1997 (the magazine of the Hellenic Orff-Schulwerk Association).

2 Italian is perhaps the only language in the world in which the same word is not used for playing musical instruments (suonare) and playing games (giocare).

3 Most of the illustrations are taken from Musica a scuola con lo strumentario Orff (Music at School with Orff Instruments), Vol. 2. by G. Piazza, published by Amadeus, Mozzecane (VR) 1991.

4 From this point until the assembly of the Orff instruments in their conventional appearance, activity is only possible on instruments with bars (13 if possible) that have only one socket.

5 Some bars resonate less than others because they are not in the right place on the resonator, but this will not concern us at this stage, as we limit ourselves to noting the children's comments.

6 For some time now, I have adopted the following three basic pentaphonic schemes which can be used collectively without any risk of harmonic saturation:



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