

## ***Do conto ao concurso: Collective songwriting with children from 8 to 10 years old***

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**Abstract** This paper describes a project of collective songwriting with children from 8 to 10 years old, in the group class of a music school, in Portugal. The project was developed in 2014 throughout the last two trimesters of the school year. Four songs inspired by existing childrens' stories resulted from the activity, three of them composed together in the classroom. The performance of the songs included the instrumental accompaniment which was played by students from the class. The reflection about justifications and implications of this kind of project in the context of music education is made after analysing the processes and the results. The discussion connects this project with relevant practices involving active methods and creation, and involves considerations about the multidisciplinary approach involving literature and music.

**Keywords** music education; collective songwriting; creativity; active methods; literature and music

### **Introduction**

*Do conto ao concurso* was the name of the concert that presented four songs conceived through a process of collective composition. Each song (music and lyrics) was created from existing stories for children. This work was developed in the Academia de Música de Espinho, Portugal, in 2014, with students from 8 to 10 years old attending group class in music. Each class had a 45 minute duration, once a week and this project happened during the second and third trimesters of the school year. The group was constituted of 41 children and the classroom was equipped with a piano and a board. Besides the group class, these students attended instrument classes and music theory as part as the same curriculum.

The project begun with the composition of three songs which were performed publicly in the end of the second trimester. The school's directors enjoyed it so much that they proposed a repeat performance in a concert that gathered these songs and individual performances of students who were prize winners in the school's annual competition, during the third trimester. This concert was the one called *Do conto ao concurso*<sup>21</sup>. For this reason, a fourth song was added, but its composition went through a different process. Once the whole project ended, it was possible for me, as a teacher, to look back and analyse the processes and the results.

This article presents a description of the activities that resulted in the composition of the lyrics and the music of the four songs and a note about the arrangements. In the discussion, I bring forward questions and reflections about the implications and justifications of this project.

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<sup>21</sup>From tale to competition.

## 1. The beginning

I had started to work with these children from the start of the school year, in september 2013. In the very first trimester they already showed enjoyment in creating together in classroom. We had been working mostly on question-answer activities, using both rhythmic patterns and short melodies with voice and body percussion. Using this kind of material we created a song about autumn, but my role as a composer was much bigger than the student's, once I joined the ideas alone at home and brought them the song already finished. In this second trimester I decided to put more effort into collective songwriting.

The primary goals of this creative work were: to promote an experience of musical creation; to stimulate collective work; to put children to play their own music; and to establish a relation between music and literature. The extent of playing their own music should not only involve singing the songs but also playing them with their own instruments, something that I rarely had seen in group classes of this age. For this reason, I took the responsibility of writing the arrangements, but the students should decide who would play each song.

## 2. Creating the lyrics

The students embraced the theme and started to bring stories from home. Everyone voted for their favourite stories and three were initially chosen. Coincidentally, all of the chosen stories were fables, two attributed to Aesop – *The fox and the stork* and *The boy who cried wolf* – and one attributed to Charles Perrault – *Little red riding hood*.

After voting, it was time to split into smaller groups and work on the lyrics. The first part of this work was made by two groups, each of them working on *The fox and the stork* and *The boy who cried wolf*. It was surprising how fast children started to write verses in their notebooks. The group who wrote lyrics for this second fable, which in portuguese is called *Pedro e o Lobo*, finished the poem in less than twenty minutes almost without help. The other group took the ideas home and brought the poem finished in the next class. Both of the poems had to suffer few adjustments before they were already easy to put in music.

The third poem, written for *Little red riding hood*, was made through an entirely different process. I suggested a challenge: they should write verses telling the story with lowering number of syllables. The objective was to influence the music writing by creating a different metric than already existed in *The fox and the stork*, a song that was already composed by the time we started to work on the lyrics of *Little red riding hood*. The beginning of the poem *The fox and the stork* (which music was repeated in the rest of the strophes) has a very constant pace of syllables:

*E-ra u-ma vez* (5 syllables)  
*U-ma ra-po-sa* (5 syllables)  
*Que u-ma ce-go-nha* (6 syllables)  
*Que-ri-a en-ga-nar* (6 syllables)  
*Ser-viu a so-pa* (5 syllables)  
*Num pra-to ra-so* (5 syllables)  
*E con-vi-dou-a* (5 syllables)  
*Pa-ra jan-tar* (4 syllables)

This resulted in a musical division where each verse corresponds to one bar:

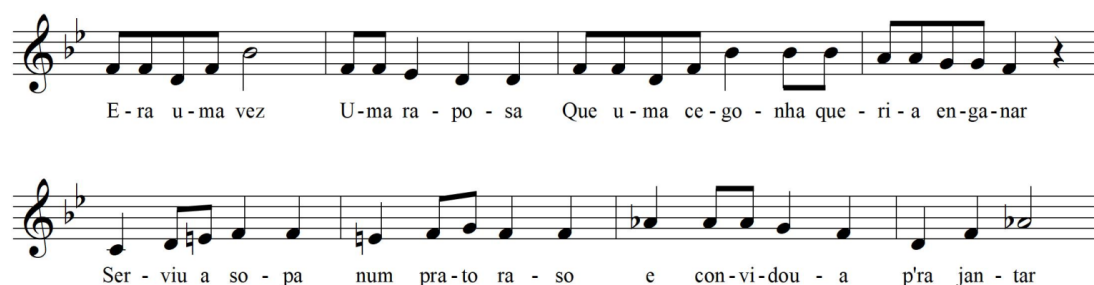


Figure 1. First strophe of *The fox and the stork* song.

I wanted to provoke a different pace for this new song, *Little red riding hood*. For this activity, the class was divided in very small groups of not more than 5 children. The groups should tell the story as resumed as possible, writing sentences with equal or lower number of syllables as the sentence before. They worked on the verses and sometimes struggled on syllable counting. This was also something that I felt it should be worthy to develop as the activity had this multidisciplinary character, although we had no connection with regular school. In the same day, we agreed on the first strophe and put music to it:

*Vai ca-pu-chi-nho ver-me-lho* (8 syllables)

*Le-var bo-li-nhos à a-vó* (8 syllables)

*En-con-tra um lo-bo* (6 syllables)

*Pe-lo pas-sei-o* (5 syllables)

*E e-le fin-ge* (5 syllables)

*Ser bom* (2 syllables)

As the music was established, the rest of the lyrics were simply a mix of verses of the groups with no concern with syllable counting, but only with fitting the music. Some parts of the songs, as the chorus of this one, were added later when we started to rehearse and it felt that there was something missing.

The last song, *The ant and the grasshopper*<sup>22</sup>, was created only because of the invitation of the school to present the songs in the concert-ceremony *Do conto ao concurso*. We needed to extend the repertoire and we had few classes to rehearse and prepare a new song. For this reason, I asked the students to write poems about this fable that was already familiar to them. They did it at home and I used their ideas to put the lyrics together. This was not exactly an example of collaborative songwriting since I joined lyrics, wrote the melody and arrangement alone due to the lack of time. Even though, it was interesting to find that some children that did not participate so actively in lyrics writing at the beginning of the project were now prompt to bring something this time.

### 3. Composing music together

By the time we had some lyrics and we needed to give melodies to it, the children were not so comfortable. I started from the most direct way of composing by simply asking: how can we sing this verse? The first times resulted in absolute silence. It is not possible now for me to understand if the difficulty was to have musical ideas or simply expressing it by singing. But after the silence it was obvious I had to change strategy.

<sup>22</sup>In portuguese, the tradition is to tell the story substituting the *grasshopper* for the *cicada*.

### 3.1. *The fox and the stork*

First, we took small phrases of *The fox and the stork* poem. I decided to focus on the rhythmic possibilities of some words or groups of words, like “*raposa*” (“fox”) or “*queria enganar*” (“wanted to fool”). The students should think about how they could pronounce the text while clapping the rhythm of it. Through this exercise they begun to acknowledge that the same word could have different rhythms.

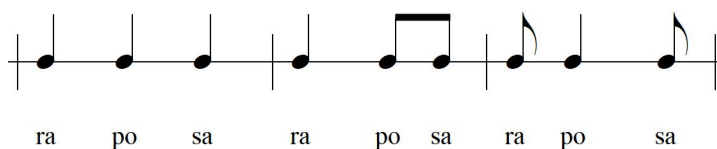


Figure 2. Examples of different rhythms to the word “*raposa*”.

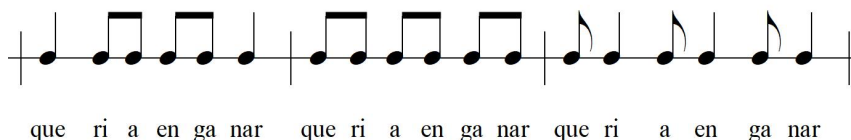


Figure 3. Examples of different rhythms to the words “*queria enganar*”.

After adding rhythm to these short motives we did the same with bigger sentences from the beginning of the poem. It became easier and easier for the children to start to think musically and, at some point, one of them started to sing what we adopted as the melody for the first verses:

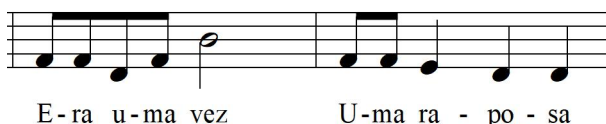


Figure 4. First verses of *The fox and the stork* song.

Having this first melody made the composing process flow, but sometimes everyone blocked and nobody was able to suggest how to continue the song. When this happened, I used two main strategies: to work with randomness or to divide the class in small groups and get back to rhythmic creation before thinking about the melodies. The second strategy was already described, the difference now was that the results appeared faster because each group had a different part of the poem to define the rhythm. Furthermore, the bar division had been already settled from what had been composed, so there was a pulse and a rhythmic sensation that came from the beginning of the song.

The randomness exercises proved to be fun and engaging since the students that were not so active felt more comfortable to participate. They worked like games. Sometimes, I would ask the children to pick their instruments and play random notes that we then tried to join with the precedent melodies. Other times I simply asked them to say the names of random notes that I could play on the piano for everybody to listen. The same game could be made

with relating the chromatic scale with numbers from 1 to 12. The positive or negative reaction of the class to a sequence of notes played on top of the rhythms created in groups defined whether a new part of the song would be approved or disapproved. Naturally, sometimes I would have to adjust the tone so it would become either possible to sing or easily joined with the rest of the tune.

### 3.2. *The boy who cried wolf*

The poem for the *The boy who cried wolf* had been written so fast that I assumed that the students really liked that tale and would have fun composing the music for it. But I would not expect that when getting back to the first activity – which was asking everybody to spontaneously sing something for each line – a student would quickly respond with this melody:



E - ra'u-ma vez um me - ni-no men-ti-ro - so

Figure 5. First verse of *The boy who cried wolf* song.

Right after, another student looked at the lyrics written on the board and sung the second verse with the same music. Even though I was not confident of how tuned this melody would sound when the choir sung all together, the idea came so naturally that I let them keep it. The rest of the collective composition brought many other ideas that could lead to a difficult execution and I tried to change them to make it easier. This occurred by picking mostly the rhythmic suggestions and some notes that the students sang at the beginning or in the end of the verses, plus the musical direction. In this sense, the collective spirit of this composition is mostly revealed on the ambiance of the song, which was actually what made it completely different from the song composed before.

There was a line that a boy truly shouted when proposing how to sing it and we incorporated it between the melodies. This line says: "The wolf! The wolf! It will attack us!". In the final performance this shout was attributed to him as a solo.

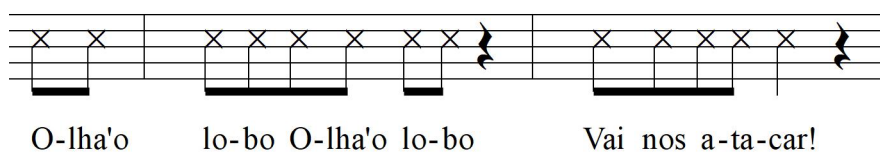


Figure 6. Shouted part of *The boy who cried wolf* song.

### 3.3. *Little red riding hood*

As mentioned before, this song was composed from the first strophe, after defining lyrics and melody. We built the rest of the song based on the music for that strophe, fitting parts of the lyrics written in small groups, as described in the section 2. The process of composing *Little red riding hood* was probably the most collaborative since the students felt more comfortable to try and sing their ideas in front of the colleagues. It took one class of 45 minutes to finish the song, but when I was dealing with the arrangement I felt that we needed a chorus. The

next class we added it, which may explain why it came out in a different time signature (3/4 instead of 6/8).

Ca - pu - chi - nho    Ca - pu - chi - nho    Em que'é que    te fos - te me - ter?

Tem cui - da - do    com o lo - bo    Não ou - vis - te a mãe di - zer?

Figure 7. Chorus of *Little red riding hood* song.

#### 4. The arrangements

One of the objectives was that some students could play the instrumental accompaniment of the songs. This was an uncommon practice at Academia de Música de Espinho with group classes of this level, so I knew it should be a challenge. On the other hand, some children were eager to have this experience of playing their instruments while the colleagues were singing. The engagement of the players was fundamental since we didn't have much time to practice and rehearse. I needed the students to ask their instrument teachers to help them and change things whenever it would be necessary and they did so.

By the time I started to write the arrangements, I noticed that there were so many pianists in class that piano would be used a lot, particularly because many of the pianists were keen to have the accompanying role. The first arrangement was for *The boy who cried wolf* and I only used piano, to be played by two students. The main difficulty was keeping the notes repeated in tempo, which was something worthy to study in group class context. This arrangement included a cluster in the shouted part, which made it easier than I initially wrote.

E - ra'u-ma vez um me -

Figure 8. Beginning of *The boy who cried wolf* song: piano part was divided by two players.

lo-bo O-lha'o lo-bo Vai nos a-ta-car!

Figure 9. Shouted part of *The boy who cried wolf* song: notes written before changing to a cluster in the piano.

The following arrangements had the main preoccupation of respecting the children's desires to play. This is why *The fox and the stork* used flute:

Voice: Ser-viu a so-pa num pra-to ra-so e con-vi-dou-a p'ra jan-tar Es-ta'é a'his-tó-ria da ra-po-sa'e da ce-go-nha

Flute

Piano

Figure 10. Excerpt of *The fox and the stork* song.

*Little red riding hood* used two violins, cello, harp and piano:

Vai Ca-pu-chi-nho Ver-me-lho Le-var bo-li-nhos à-a-  
Indi-ca'à me-ni-na'um a-ta-lho E'e-la vai sem'i-ma-gi-

pizz.

Figure 11. Excerpt of *Little red riding hood* song. The harp part is the same as the right hand of the piano.

Finally, in *The ant and the grasshopper* I wanted to put guitar for two reasons. Firstly, because the guitarist who played the part was one of the winners of the school's annual competition. As this song was made specially for this occasion, it seemed adequate to put him to play also with his group class. Secondly, because the fable tells the story of a character (the grasshopper or the cicada) who spends the day playing the guitar. For this second reason, I gave the guitarist a small solo before the chorus. Initially, this arrangement also had violin, viola and piano, but there was not enough time to rehearse with everyone, so it ended only with guitar and piano.

The image shows a musical score excerpt. The top system consists of two staves: the upper staff is empty, and the lower staff contains a guitar solo with a series of chords. The bottom system consists of two staves with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "Can - ta'a ci - ga - rra'a to - car a gui - ta - rra". The piano accompaniment consists of a simple bass line.

Figure 12. Excerpt of *The ant and the grasshopper* song: guitar solo followed by the beginning of the chorus.

## 5. Discussion

In spite of the pleasure and satisfaction of having developed this project in Academia de Música de Espinho, along with these 41 kids, it took me several years to analyse it and to reflect about the implications and justifications of it. Many different questions may arise from this pedagogical proposal, its processes and its results but, because of my job in Federal University of São João del Rei, these reflections fit now in the context of training future teachers who are working towards their degree in music.

### 5.1. How is this project related to the changes and evolutions of musical education?

It was only from the 20th century on that the active methods developed themselves inside the practices of music education. Until then, teaching music meant training the instrumentalist as a “reproducer of a repertoire linked to a musical tradition, from concepts deeply rooted in the question of talent and musical genius”<sup>23</sup> (Figueiredo, 2012, p.85). The active methods allow the student to have direct musical experiences, and not merely theoretical or disconnected with a practical activity. Examples of them are the ones developed by Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, Zoltán Kodály, Carl Orff e Shinichi Suzuki, all of which have in common the valuing of experience before formal learning and also collective learning (Figueiredo, 2012; Valiengo, 2005).

Later in the 20th century other music education proposals emerged, keeping the “active” or “living” character of learning, but exploring more and more the potential of creativity and

<sup>23</sup>“reprodutor de um repertório vinculado a uma tradição musical, a partir de concepções fortemente arraigadas na questão do talento e do gênio musical”.



exploration of sounds. Here we will find names like John Paynter, Murray Schafer and Hans-Joachim Koellreutter (Valiengo, 2005). All of them reject the need of a method to teach music and believe that it is important to avoid music from the past. The intention of these musicians and pedagogues is to give children the opportunity to learn music musically.

I have to say, in the end, I think that all that matters in music education is that what we do is musical. I don't care what it is. I would applaud whatever was happening in a classroom provided that it actually involved children in musical experience. (Paynter apud Mills, 2007, p. 9)

The practices of Koellreutter supported this idea of Paynter by waging in the improvisation as part of music learning:

Creative processes have always occupied a very important place in the koellreutterian pedagogical proposal, which had improvisation as a master spring agent, at once, of livings and processes of raising consciousness of musical and human issues. Thus, he suggested that all improvisation games developed and presented to the students, created with or by them, would favour the exercise of various musical aspects and, at the same time, issues related to the development of self-discipline, tolerance, respect, ability and willingness to create, to reflect, to question, to experiment, etc.<sup>24</sup> (Brito, 2015, p. 17)

We have to acknowledge that these perspectives on music education, focused on group learning and somehow multidisciplinary, are not new anymore. Even so, this discipline of group class is still almost exclusively directed towards the learning of preexisting repertoire with no space for active listening or creation. It is something that I have been observing not only in the context in which this project was developed – inside an artistic school, in Portugal – but also in projects in regular schools with children that are not being trained to eventually become professional musicians, either in Portugal or in Brazil.

The reasons for the maintenance of traditional teaching strategies, avoiding creative activities, may be understood when we think about the teachers' prior instruction. Let's open our reflections to music education as a whole, both in regular and artistic schools. There are mostly two types of teachers. Firstly, the ones that simply did not have formal music education. As far as I observed, it happens mostly in regular schools, but also in some private artistic schools. Then, we have the teachers that studied music in the traditional way, focusing on instrumental abilities and music theory. These can find jobs in the artistic schools, like the conservatories or universities of music, but as there is no room for everyone, they also have to teach in regular schools. While the first group may struggle with lack of instrumental skills or deep knowledge in theory, the second group tends to have difficulties with collective and creative approaches because that is not how they have learned music.

I am an example of someone that had a musical training totally directed to the instrument (violin) and my experiences with creation and improvisation begun as an adult, merely because of my personal interest. It means that I find a personal enjoyment on sharing these

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<sup>24</sup>“Os processos criativos sempre ocuparam um lugar muito importante na proposta pedagógica koellreutteriana, que tinha a improvisação como mola mestra agenciadora, a um só tempo, de vivências e processos de conscientização de questões musicais e humanas. Assim sendo, ele sugeria que todos os jogos de improvisação desenvolvidos e apresentados aos alunos, criados com eles ou por eles, favorecessem o exercício de aspectos musicais diversos e, ao mesmo tempo, questões ligadas ao desenvolvimento da autodisciplina, da tolerância, do respeito, da capacidade e disposição para criar, para refletir, para questionar, para experimentar, etc.”

experiences with my students. But why should this mean that this project of collective songwriting is more important or valid than putting children to sing written repertoire? When debating the law changes for music education in Brazilian schools, Maura Penna (2006) gives us an insight about a dichotomy that can happen if we choose to follow one way or the other. She explains that there are two different conceptions on fundamentals of music education: the essentialist, which gives emphasis to the music own knowledge and the contextualist, which is more concentrated on the processes and overall training of individuals (idem, p. 37).

Is there any right or wrong then? I do not believe so. But this insight, along with the reflection about this and other creative projects in group music classes, shows me that the most important is to be always aware of children's needs. Considering that, I base my approaches on principles that other music pedagogues have reported:

- Viviane Beineke suggested that a teacher should be a sensitive critic in classroom, "helping the students to also reflect about their musical practices"<sup>25</sup> (Beineke apud Beineke, 2009, p. 54);
- Hans-Joachim Koellreutter repeated that we should not teach students what they can learn alone (Brito, 2015, p. 19);
- Murray Schafer proposed that: "There are no more teachers. There is just a community of learners" (Schafer, 2011, p. 265).

These principles justify why I decided to develop a project of collective songwriting within this group class, but also why I suggested the children to play the accompaniments. If it's not a simple task to be in a small room with 41 children and rehearse a choir, it becomes a much more turbulent job when some of them have to rehearse individually because they are playing an instrument. It requires a lot more energy to keep the class organized, but also demands a lot more concentration of the whole group. Moreover, as the ones that played really wanted to do it, it promoted bigger engagement from them.

## 5.2. Why have students write their own poems in a music class?

To answer to this question, perhaps we should start to ask: why not? But in fact there is a great number of researchers that give us more plausible answers. To start, there is the discussion about the functions of literature, which can be focused in poetry:

The function of poetry and, of course, of literary art in general is not to promote linguistic mastery but, through language, to enable the recipient to distance himself critically from the reality it [poetry] exposes to consciousness. Therefore, poetry has an important role in the development of the child's personality, since it allows the child's communication with reality, enables the investigation of the real, broadening the understanding and the experience of the world through the word.<sup>26</sup> (Gonçalves, 2009, p. 5).

Gonçalves talks here about the symbolic character of poetry, which is also present in music and, of course, can be explored and investigated in everyday life too. But since in the context of music education we have the opportunity to gather a group of children in a classroom and give another dimension to this explorations and investigations in music, we

<sup>25</sup>"auxiliando os alunos a também refletirem sobre as suas práticas musicais"

<sup>26</sup>"A função da poesia e, naturalmente, da arte literária em geral, não é promover o domínio lingüístico, mas, por meio da linguagem, possibilitar ao receptor um distanciamento crítico da realidade que ela lhe expõe à consciência. Por isso, a poesia tem uma importante função no desenvolvimento da personalidade infantil, uma vez que ela permite a comunicação da criança com a realidade, possibilita a investigação do real, ampliando o entendimento e a experiência de mundo através da palavra."

also have the opportunity to make them develop other symbolic languages – in this case, the poetry. The children in this class were asked to read stories, to think about their meanings, to rewrite them as poems and to compose music for those poems. This multidisciplinary approach allows “the child to interact with various types of texts in a ludic and pleasurable way, making them more significant”<sup>27</sup> (Góes, 2009, p. 40).

Besides the functions or meanings of the written word, there is the activity of collective writing that assumes different pedagogical roles. On one hand, the children are being invited to communicate, negotiate, express their ideas to the colleagues and try social skills. On the other hand, it is their chance to reflect about written words and how they are related to what is said (ibidem). The act of saying a phrase out loud is different from simply writing, which would easily occur if the children were left to do the activity alone. They can hear the sound of what they say and possibly anticipate how it can be sung.

In addition, the choice of poetry instead of prose happened in this project only to make easier the composing part, since, as Schafer wrote, “most of prose, for instance, doesn't sing” (2011, p. 227). There is a natural musicality in the organization of a poem, which has to do with rhymes, strophes division, or metric syllables. This concept is better explained by the author Lucas Freitas de Souza:

The rhythm in the poem, like music, cannot exist outside a given notion of temporality. Without this trait of temporality, the performative trait of poetry that reveals its inclination for the musical is greatly reduced, even if one considers the experiments of modern music, since music exists in time, even subverting norms and rhythmic patterns.<sup>28</sup> (Souza, 2016, p. 3)

### **5.3. Should we, as teachers, use more creative activities in music education?**

Yes! I cannot find another answer to this question. All the authors referred before stressed the importance of it and yet the act of create, whether it is improvising or writing new music, is still a secondary task inside music education spaces. When composing, students are called to express themselves in the symbolic universe that music represents. Their “musical ideas can be transformed, assuming new expressive levels and meanings, articulating then their intellectual and affective life”<sup>29</sup> (França and Swanwick, 2002, p. 10).

To develop composition inside a classroom is also a way to do something different – to give the student something that they probably would not find or try alone. We keep forgetting that music making is more than performing. In a study about musical comprehension, Cecília França (2000) concluded that music students tended to show higher levels of comprehension while composing than performing their instruments. They could compose consistent and even bold music, but not expressing the same kind of looseness when playing the instrument. The reason appointed was that these children were too worried about technical issues when playing and more focused in musical speech when composing. This study shows that it is important to diversify tasks and activities in all music classes and

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<sup>27</sup>“a criança interaja com diversos tipos de textos de forma lúdica e prazerosa, tornando-os então mais significativos.”

<sup>28</sup>“O ritmo no poema, assim como a música, não pode existir fora de uma dada noção de temporalidade. Sem este traço de temporalidade, o traço performático da poesia que revela sua inclinação para o musical se reduz consideravelmente, mesmo se se considerar os experimentos da música moderna, pois a música existe no tempo, mesmo subvertendo normas e padrões rítmicos.”

<sup>29</sup>“idéias musicais podem ser transformadas, assumindo novos níveis expressivos e significados, articulando assim sua vida intelectual e afetiva.”

proves that “music education traditionally tends to favour musical appreciation and performance”<sup>30</sup> (Beineke, 2009, p. 42) and not creation (or composition).

A curious observation that I cannot leave aside is that the last song that was added, *The ant and the grasshopper*, did not work so well in the concert. Of course we could justify it by the fact that it was much less rehearsed than the other songs that had been performed in public weeks before *Do conto ao concurso*. But it is impossible to disconnect the weakness of its performance from the fact that this song was actually composed by myself, and not even the lyrics were written collectively. Would the break of the collective songwriting dynamic, that we had worked for the whole second trimester, have affected the children's relationship to that song? New experiences and studies would have to be carried.

In the end, research and experiences like this project point out the need to always keep rethinking and reinventing pedagogical approaches in music education, gathering knowledge and information from the past in order to build learnings into the future. As Schafer (2011, p. 265) tells us: “The first practical step in any educational reform is to take it”.

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<sup>30</sup>“a educação musical tende, tradicionalmente, a favorecer atividades de apreciação e execução musicais.”

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