

## **Paths to music creation in piano lessons for children**

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### **Abstract**

This text<sup>8</sup> presents a report on a pedagogical experience in music education, specifically in piano lessons for children. Firstly, I provide some information about the context in which these lessons took place. Since the focus here is on creative practices, it goes on to the commented exhibition of improvisations and compositions made by children. From these examples, I report on the creative processes and the considerations of pedagogical practice in dialogue with authors from music education and childhood studies areas. The main objectives are to contribute to understanding the particularities of musical development in childhood in piano lessons and to the appreciation of the children's creations as a fundamental factor in their learning processes.

**Keywords** creative practices; childhood; piano lessons

### **Introduction**

The instrument class in childhood poses a challenge for the educator. In a way, It is a specific course focused on learning the particular skills of a certain instrument, its technique, and repertoire. However, it is necessary to proceed in a way that also promotes global development, avoiding a strong specialization that would be more appropriate in a professional environment. The balance between the specific and the global is something that instrument teachers should seek, especially when working with children.

The central objective of the lessons — to get children to play an instrument, in this case, the piano, can be achieved in several ways. Swanwick (2001) alerts us that playing an instrument is a complex action that someone cannot approach using only a method or a book, page by page. The author also argues that musical knowledge, even in instrument courses, is built in a multifaceted way by solfège, listening, group practice, participation in social situations such as rehearsals and presentations, etc. I emphasize that, with children, this multifaceted character should also contemplate the interaction with other artistic languages, the imagination, and children's cultures.

This text focuses on one of the branches of a multifaceted approach: creative practices. Based on examples of piano pieces created by children, I intend to explore some ideas about music and education in childhood in dialogue with other authors.

### **1. The context**

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The present report deals with piano lessons given by me to children from six to nine years old during the 2010s in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. The classes were not based on a single teaching method or thought of as training for the exclusive formation of pianists. I always tried to adopt a hybrid approach that would meet the interests and needs of each child and start from their curiosity. The general objectives were the development of general abilities, such as the improvement of musical and environmental listening, the manipulation and exploration of different sound sources with a view to expressive results, the progressive precision in the execution and identification of rhythms and pitches, the growing mastery of vocabulary and conventional codes, the experimentation with graphics, the expansion of the repertoire, etc. All this took place with particular skills development in pianistic practice, in a constant construction of intimacy with this instrument. The repertoire included pieces from several piano teaching books, as well arrangements made by me of popular and folk songs, movie and game scores, and the creations that students make themselves — the latter being the object of this rapport.

Throughout the examples, I will point out the background of each child. In general, all children were part of middle-class families from Campinas, São Paulo, and attended private schools, where they had collective music classes as part of the school curriculum. They had piano lessons at home, except for the first one, Carolina, who started her piano course in a private cultural center and whose composition I will present in the following.

## **2. *Encontração***

In one of her first classes, Carolina arrived at the cultural center saying she had invented a piece. Although we had done some improvisation activities together, there was no direction to create something outside the class. I didn't ask her to do that, as she did not yet have a piano at home, and her contact with the instrument occurred exclusively during the lessons. Our meetings were weekly and one hour long.

Carolina was only six years old and, in class, she played on a standard upright acoustic piano — therefore quite big compared to her body. When she told me that she had invented a piece, I asked her to show it. She then said it was a piece to be played as a duo and gave me the guidelines to play it with her. We would start, each at one extremity of the piano, and continue towards the center of the instrument, to finish in the middle region — hence the title *Encontração*, a variation of the word encounter in Portuguese. We tried it out a few times and decided to define the piece's closure with clusters.

Carolina's piece is a kind of guided improvisation, a performance script, since the notes and durations are not precisely defined. This script was performed repeatedly in the following weeks, integrating the repertoire of the classes, and one of her first performances can be heard here: [Encontração](#).

Repeating this creation several times provided the exercise of attentive listening and the interaction precisely through sound production in the performance as a duo; the speed with which the two pianists traversed the keyboard was not predetermined in the piece and varied with each performance. Because it was a very open composition, other elements also changed throughout the new repetitions, such as dynamics, articulation, the occurrence of rhythmic patterns, etc., including our position at the keyboard, as we alternated in the bass and treble extremities. Throughout the weeks, we worked on numerous technical and expressive aspects of Carolina's creation. And as it seemed to be her will when she invented this piece, she could play along the whole length of the large instrument, fully reaching it with her little body.

In the following example, we can observe another attempt to deal with this disproportion between the large dimensions of the instrument and the limitations of the child's body.

### **3. *A guerra do agudo e do grave***

Like the previous one, the piece I am commenting on now is a guided improvisation created by Lian when he was eight. Lian used to take lessons twice a week, and each meeting lasted 40 minutes. He had a profound inclination for free improvisation, so if I didn't propose other activities, he could keep improvising for a long time. His connection with music was intense: our classes started when he was only three years old — as a general music course and, little by little, directed to the piano — and, at the time of the composition commented here, he also attended violin classes, besides the group music classes of the school curriculum. His parents and older brother also attended various music courses.

Throughout his spontaneous activities with the instrument, Lian began to experiment with playing with his arms wide open and leaning over the keyboard to reach the extension as wide as possible. With this posture, he came to the piece titled *A guerra do agudo e do grave* — *The war between treble and bass*, whose recording can be heard here: [A guerra do agudo e do grave](#).

Besides the evident bodily challenge Lian imposed on himself, this musical creation was also born from an interest in the instrument's resources. He had an electric piano with over 140 timbres available, and various effects, such as a pitch wheel, allowing him to play with microtonal glissandi.

The piece does not have precisely defined notes and durations and is based on the idea explained in its title. Lian repeated it a few times over the following months, and in the recording available here, it is possible to hear his first performance. It is also possible to notice that Lian engaged in a melodic exploration before choosing the timbre, and fragments of this earlier section reappear in the piece. However, *A guerra do agudo e do grave* is not precisely a melodic improvisation but something that we could call a very expressive sonorization of the title scene. As can be heard in the recording, Lian gave the title after the performance, so it seems that the creation came from sound research and the corporal relationship that the child was experiencing with the instrument. And all that found echoes in his imagination.

### **4. The instrument as a device**

From the first examples presented, it is possible to address some considerations on musical creation in childhood concerning the particularities of piano teaching. The first aspect that I would like to highlight is the importance of the human and material environment in which children learn. On the one hand, all the cases attest to the importance of openness to free experimentation and appreciation of what children do. I'll explore further the ways and implications of such a pedagogical posture of receptiveness and listening. To reflect on the material environment, I turn to François Delalande's notion of "device".

The characteristics of the objects with which children make music can be decisive for the quality of their involvement. It can take explorations further quantitatively and qualitatively. For Delalande (2017), the conscious pedagogical use of certain materials can enable educators to guide creative processes without imposing paths. Given that different devices favor different conducts, we can give the stimuli we want indirectly and concretely. Moreover, as we only suggest these stimuli, many other paths may prove pertinent in the direct relationship with the devices, including approaches not foreseen by the educator.

In the case of the present report, I highlight the material specificities of the piano. The pieces presented so far — both the previous and the later ones — were created from the concrete manipulation conditions of this instrument, especially by children. The difference between the

children's stature and the extension of the piano is evident as a starting point. In the case of *A guerra do agudo e do grave*, the electric piano's resources are yet another fundamental condition for involvement in the creative process and its final result. In the following pieces, other characteristics of the piano practice will become evident, like the relationship between the two hands and the possibilities of imitation or superposition of melody and accompaniment. Therefore, I reiterate that Delalande's idea of device, which highlights the importance of material conditions in creative and educational processes, can be of great value for teachers to reflect on the many possibilities of each instrument.

### **5. *Brilho da noite e Dois mundos e um melão***

Julia and Carolina are sisters and were, at the time of the creations commented here, six and nine years old, respectively. We met weekly, and the lessons lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes, which included moments of individual and pair work, not only at the piano. They also attended a children's choir and had professional musicians in their family. Both creations emerged in class, in moments I suggested they experiment freely with the piano. As in the previous examples, the relationship with the body is very evident in the creative processes.

In her experimentations, Julia found a sound resulting from a gesture that pleased her and carried her forward. *Brilho da noite* — *Night glow*, is the result of Julia's identification with a sound/gesture pair and its subsequent development and can be heard here: [Brilho da noite](#). The starting musical idea, as is clear from the recording, is a short note followed by a long note, each played with one hand. She repeated, inverted, and varied the gesture throughout the piece, in which resonance also plays an important role. Even though she had no formal knowledge of harmony, Julia had a harmonic intuition and a great intimacy with the instrument developed in repeated improvisation sessions and other activities, which allowed her to play with tension and relaxation when choosing the pitches.

In *Dois mundos e um melão* — *Two worlds and a melon*, Carolina's piece, the possibility of melodic imitation of the right hand by the left one is what the girl explores in the first section. In the second section, this game is substituted by another: the possibility of complementarity between the hands. Both procedures are at the basis of music from diverse cultures and, in this case, constitute the exploration that Carolina undertakes and demonstrates her appropriation of the instrument's topology. The piece, which can be heard here: [Dois mundos e um melão](#), ends with a sort of coda in which the relation between the hands is no longer central.

### **6. Creative practices and the development of musical conducts**

From the examples of *Brilho da noite* and *Dois mundos e um melão* I would like to comment on how creative practices can be occasions of exercise of different musical conducts. I refer once again to the work of François Delalande, as he investigates musical activity from the point of view that one can describe as cross-cultural. Delalande (2019) arrives at the formulation of the musical conducts' theory through the transformation of the question "what is music?" to "what is making music?". The fact that there is a wide variety of results of human action to which we give the name of music and differ considerably can justify this change. Therefore, Delalande looks for something in practice that connects human musical diversity and not specific objects that result from this action.

In his efforts in this direction, making use of both Piagetian theory and contributions from ethnomusicology and aesthetics, as well as years of empirical research, the author defines three types of fundamental musical conducts: exploring, expressing, and constructing. These conducts correlate with the games identified by Piaget in child development, interpreted by Delalande as follows: the sensorial-motor game — the pleasure of the relation between the domain of sound and that of gesture; the symbolic game — the tendency to symbolize with sounds, taking them to new levels of significance or allusion; and the game of rules — the satisfaction in organizing sounds, creating forms, from the most elementary to the most intricate. These musical conducts appear and develop in childhood, and according to the author (2019), are fundamental constituents of what we consider as musical activity throughout life, however diverse the music around the world.

As already exposed, the composition process of *Brilho da noite* starts from Julia's satisfaction with the sonorous result of her gesture on the piano allied to the use of the pedal. Thus, to continue creating the composition consisted of making the gesture many times and experimenting with its variations. It was a satisfaction that came from the body movement and the resulting sound altogether. But there is also an extrapolation of the sensory-motor pleasure since, as Delalande (2019) points out, these games can be concomitant differing only in emphasis. If creating a piece is an example of organizational conduct, listening to Julia's expressive performance and the title she gave to it attest to her exercise in the symbolic domain.

In *Dois mundos e um melão*, on the other hand, the game of rules seems to be in great prominence. What moves the composition is precisely the possibility of first creating echoes in different octaves and then complementary phrases. The exploration is linked to the two hands positioning on the keyboard and gives rise to the creation of the two first parts of the piece. The existence of a coda also suggests that Carolina works the form at a macro level, and her organizational thought goes beyond the internal games of the sections.

The change in the question operated by Delalande, which takes the focus off the works and throws light on the action of those who make music, can help us to understand creative practices in a new light. Instead of emphasizing only the analysis of the works composed by children, it opens up the possibility of analyzing the development of musicality through the observed musical conducts. A pedagogical posture that is attentive to these musical conducts and promotes their enrichment is what I defend from the examples exposed here.

## **6. Listening and languages**

The paths of the creative processes are many and, above all, unpredictable. However, the educator who recognizes its importance and tries to stimulate his students can make some steps. I believe that two productive steps are: (a) thinking of the instrument as a device, encouraging the exploration of its particularities, and (b) recognizing the different musical conducts that constitute childhood development to treat the musical phenomenon with the due complexity.

In this sense, it is fundamental that the educator is open and attentive and listens to the children. In this sense, I evoke the idea of dual listening developed by Sandra Cunha (2014). It is a posture of double listening because, on the one hand, there is a commitment to a careful appreciation of everything that children play and sing, that is, a qualitative appreciation of their sound and musical production. On the other hand, listening is not

restricted to the musical field but implies a global commitment to the children and what they express and bring to the educational spaces. I emphasize here that such a posture depends on a relationship of trust between educators and students, and that creative processes are privileged opportunities for more meaningful contact with children to discover their ideas, interests, and needs. Especially concerning music ideas (Brito, 2007), in the practice of creation are shown those whose direct verbalization may escape adults and children but that are realized, in fact, in original music performance.

The guidance of creative practices implies a special responsibility for the educator. In another of her works, Sandra Cunha (2021) differentiates expressive and artistic languages. She seeks to discern the two terms arguing that, through several actions — such as playing, running, talking, crying, fable-making, etc., children express what they feel and what they know and through these actions, we follow the improvement and expansion of their knowledge and skills. According to Cunha (2021, p. 80), these would be expressive languages of children. Although they are also expressive, artistic languages are different "because they have structuring principles that constitute and govern them", namely, syntax, form, and discourse.

I will not dwell here on the author's deepening regarding these terms, but I evoke such differentiation between expressive and artistic languages attempting to highlight the educator's role. Guiding creative processes and welcoming children's curiosity should be together with a proper pedagogical responsibility, i.e., commitment to work to promote children's development. I think of the moments of improvisation and composition as rich learning opportunities in which children exercise their expressive capacity and, at the same time, build musical knowledge.

## **6. *Nevasca***

The last example is called *Nevasca* — *Snowstorm*. It was composed by Lívia when she was nine years old and can be heard here: [Nevasca](#). The creative process of this piece started when Lívia played a sequence of three notes with her left hand and liked it. So we started exploring this little sequence, repeating and varying it, changing octaves, changing dynamics, tempo, etc.

Lívia was beginning to learn music theory more formally, so she knew some intervals, scales, and concepts of dissonance, consonance, etc. Like her older sister, she had been taking piano lessons for about three years — I was her second teacher —, so she also had a developed harmonic intuition. In constant dialogue, I made her realize that what she was creating gravitated around the note E and that she should try to understand how she could create tension, suspension, reiteration, rest, etc. She should experiment attentively and consciously with her choice of pitch and in other aspects such as rhythm, dynamics, tempo, etc.

This creative process lasted a few weeks, during which I asked Lívia to work independently. She would make her sketches and written notes and show them to me, and from there, we could progress in our classes. Thus, the creative process was also an opportunity for Lívia to deepen her mastery of conventional notation and develop autonomy.

## **6. Final considerations**

Drawing on extensive material gathered from observations of children, Delalande (2017) asserts that sound exploration is something they do even when no adults are watching or

guiding them. But the continuation and quality of exploration depend on both the material environment and human relationships. Then, it is up to the educators to lead children to more rich sound explorations, promoting their musical development. The report presented here points to the possibility that the instrument class, more specifically, the piano class, is also an occasion for learning progress that starts from exploration.

The examples brought here could indeed be multiplied. They do not attest to an extraordinary inclination of these children. They are possible results of a pedagogical practice open to student participation and based on a vision of music as a complex and plural human activity.

One of the main characteristics of creative processes is that, when we start, we never know precisely what the result will be. Therefore, I do not seek to determine a single path for music creation in piano lessons because the creative activity has as a characteristic exactly dealing with the unheard. To conclude, I mention the "methodological imagination" advocated by Sarmiento (2007) when he defends a scientific practice that listens attentively to children and does not reduce them to stereotypes centered on adult visions. An openness to imagine different ways of producing knowledge in dialogue with children, either in the field of research or in the teaching exercise, is what I sought to encourage with this pedagogical experience report.

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