

AN APPROACH TO MUSIC TEACHER AS MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST

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SUMMARY. The necessity and possibilities of music teachers to acquire skills of playing several musical instruments is discussed in the current article. The advantages and challenges of multi-instrumentalists' practice are analysed. The authors strive to determine the peculiarities of music teachers – multi-instrumentalists' activities and the advantages of such kind of teachers in comparison with conventionally trained ones. The essential competences of music teachers trained to handle several musical instruments were distinguished and their work possibilities discussed. The analysis allowed to discern several advantages of music teacher multi-instrumentalist, such as ability to organize different ensembles in which they are able to play the necessary instrument or temporary replace one of the instruments; high competence to explain peculiarities and character of different musical instruments of symphony orchestra in their music lessons; advanced skills in writing arrangements or composing music for ensembles and soloists.

Keywords: musical instruments, multi-instrumentalist, pedagogy, music teacher, music teacher education.

Introduction

The goal of the current article is to discuss relevance and possibilities of expanding music teachers' competences by acquiring skills of performing on several instruments. Thus *the subject of the research* is the expediency of applying the multi-instrumentalist practice in music teacher activities. The

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phenomenon of musicians which play several instruments is widely known in the sphere of performers but the research works on this subject are scanty, and the application possibilities of multi-instrumentalist skills in music education seems almost altogether unexplored. Yet the authors of the current article are convinced that music teachers trained as multi-instrumentalists can significantly expand the scope of their pedagogical activities in comprehensive as well as in specialized music schools. It can be presumed that the competences in playing several instruments are highly supportive of developing musical skills and abilities of students. This article presents an analysis of the peculiarities of multi-instrumentalist phenomenon in general and the possibilities of application of multi-instrumentalists' competences in music education institutions in particular.

The method of the research is based on analysis of different sources, primarily personal web sites of multi-instrumentalists and those which contain interviews with multi-instrumentalists. The analysis of scholar research works was limited because of the lack of such sources.

The concept of multi-instrumentalist

The phenomenon of multi-instrumentalists is known from early times. There are extant documents which testimony that medieval musicians had to play several instruments in order to be successful in musical market of the time³. The practice of playing several instruments by one person is also wide-spread all over the world in our days. Therefore, of interest is the fact that music dictionaries, such as *Dolmetsch* online Dictionary⁴ and others do not include the term "multi-instrumentalist" or any derivative. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*⁵ briefly explains the term *multi-instrumentalist* as a *musician who plays two or more instruments*. Few other dictionaries which mention the term disclose its meaning equally reservedly. An exception is *The Free Dictionary by Farlex*⁶ which also states that *multi-instrumentalist* is a *musician who plays two or more musical instruments* and even affirms that such musician plays them *at a professional level*. Further this dictionary presents fairly comprehensive characteristic, also a history of multi-

³ Rhodes, Stephen L. *The Medieval Wind Band. A History of the Wind Band*, 2007, <https://ww2.lipscomb.edu/windbandhistory/>.

⁴ "Music Dictionary". *Dolmetsch Online, Music Theory & History Online*, <https://www.dolmetsch.com/musictheorydefs.htm>.

⁵ *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multi-instrumentalist>.

⁶ "Multiinstrumentalist". *The Free Dictionary by Farlex*, 2013, <https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/multi-instrumentalist>

instrumentalist practices in different areas of musical art. However, the web site admits that the article is copied from Wikipedia (a page which was last time edited on the 13th of October, 2019) without any interference of editors of the dictionary and thus it cannot assure accuracy of the mentioned article.

Thus the definition of multi-instrumentalist as a person who plays two or more musical instruments is widely known and presumably can be accepted for usage in everyday practice as well as in scholar research. But some other characteristics of multi-instrumentalists presented in different sources remain questionable. The assumption that playing skills of multi-instrumentalists are “at a professional level” regarding all instruments is negotiable because of several reasons. First of all, it would be difficult to identify the exact point from which the level of a musician should be treated as professional, especially considering specificities of different music areas. It is likely that because of different professional demands the performers of, for instance, pop and rock music much more often become multi-instrumentalists than performers of art music and jazz. It is more reasonable to consider that one instrument out of those the musician plays should be regarded as the main professional instrument of a particular player, meanwhile others are played on a different level of accomplishment (supposedly higher than level of beginners; perhaps as well-trained amateurs). The question of different accomplishment of player on different instruments will be discussed in the next chapter.

Another problematic issue is the nature of instruments played by multi-instrumentalists. Playing two or more closely related instruments is often named as “doubling” (e. g. see in the same *The Free Dictionary by Farlex*). For instance, training programmes of flute players regularly include playing piccolo beside the main instrument flute; similarly, can be regarded playing several types of saxophones or oboe and English horn. Such musicians are able to acquire necessary skills of handling these instruments much more quickly and easy than, for instance, skills of playing guitar and keyboards (although if asked musicians-doublers usually present multiple arguments to prove that two apparently similar instruments in fact are significantly different...). Therefore, doubling is more common practice and adds less variety to the activities of players in comparison with practice of multi-instrumentalists who play instruments of different nature. Of course, a certain intermediate “twilight zone”, in which the type of multi-instrumentalism is questionable, can be distinguished: e. g. playing different sizes and kinds of violin family instruments, different brass instruments, or clarinet and saxophone. The latter doubling practice was common earlier in many countries especially in time when saxophone had not yet become a usual professional instrument (e. g. Soviet Union). On the other hand, in some

sources⁷ the name “doubler” is used actually as a synonym alongside with the term “multi-instrumentalist”, thus it is applied to unquestionably multi-instrumentalist practices, i. e. when a performer plays radically different instruments. It seems that universal classification, terminology and assessment of level of multi-instrumentalists is still not completely settled. In this article we are inclined to name musicians as multi-instrumentalists if they play two or more instruments of different type (e. g. trumpet and bass guitar).

Advantages and limitations of multi-instrumentalism

Reasons why a person becomes multi-instrumentalist are various. The desire for freedom in making music and strive for variety in expression are among the most important. Nick Drakakis⁸, Alon Cooper⁹ Fredrik Nielsen¹⁰ and other musicians in their websites disclose key features of multi-instrumentalist phenomenon. Some of their observations seem important for disclosing the reasons of becoming multi-instrumentalist, also for identification of advantages and limitations of this activity.

As it was mentioned, the opinion that multi-instrumentalists play equally professionally on all instruments exist, however many multi-instrumentalists affirm that it is impossible to reach equally high proficiency in playing the main instrument and the subsidiary ones. The level of professional accomplishment in playing any instrument is actually unlimited therefore in practice a time spent for the subsidiary instrument could be spent for deepening skills in playing the main instrument. But the musicians’ choice depends of their goals, preferences, and inherent musical abilities. There are prominent performers who are able to play two or even more different instruments on a level which is undoubtedly professional¹¹. But even the highest level professionals admit that the most important challenge in their work is to keep themselves in shape on all instruments they play.

⁷ Boyle, Patrick. “Double Down Multiple Instruments Means More Opportunities.” *Canadian Musician*, Vol. 37, Issue 5, Sep/Oct 2015, pp. 42–46.

⁸ Drakakis, Nick. “Confessions of a Multi-instrumentalist.” *Pine Productions*, 2018, <https://www.pineproduction.com/pine-blog/2018/12/12/confessions-of-a-multi-instrumentalist>.

⁹ Cooper, Alon. “Multi-Instrumentalist – 12 Reasons You Want to Become a Multi-instrumentalist.” *Going Multi-instrumental!* May 6, 2016, <https://guitarsongsmasters.com/multi-instrumentalist-benefits/>.

¹⁰ Nielsen, Frederik. *The Pros and Cons of Being a Multi-Instrumentalist*, 2019, <https://www.roadiemusic.com/blog/the-pros-and-cons-of-being-a-multi-instrumentalist/>

¹¹ Boyle, Patrick. “Double Down Multiple Instruments Means More Opportunities.” *Canadian Musician*, Vol. 37, Issue 5, Sep/Oct 2015, pp. 42–46.

The incentive for musicians to master several different instruments appears because of different occasions. Very often a mere curiosity induces the acquiring of information about the construction, playing principles and other secrets of a new instrument. The advantage of such curiosity is manifold: it helps to acquaint with instrument and to use this knowledge not only by playing it but also in arranging and orchestrating musical pieces. The musician who strives to enhance the knowledge about instruments because of gaining better competences of arranger/composer certainly does not need to be very highly trained to play all instruments. But a certain level of playing technique enable them to play all or at least some of instrumental parts while recording their arrangements, compositions and other musical works without necessity to hire other musicians. German multi-instrumentalist Stephan Micus is one of the conspicuous examples of musician who play multitudes of different world folk instruments, combines them in his compositions and records all parts himself¹².

An important question for future multi-instrumentalist is: which time is the most suitable to begin learning to play second (third, fourth) instrument? Outgivings of musicians (Drakakis¹³, *Canadian Multi-instrumentalist*¹⁴) reveal the general opinion that a person first of all should acquire firm and qualified professional education and sufficiently high skills of playing one main instrument and only afterwards include practicing on another instrument into their schedule.

The influence of playing one instrument on playing other instruments definitely exists and it is most likely positive: playing many instruments enhances both deeper understanding of music and developing playing technique.

“This is truly like a domino that makes you better all-around musician in a way a single instrument just can’t. I can say that every instrument I have started playing gave me a skills boost for all the other instruments as well”¹⁵.

¹² Kelman, John. “Stephan Micus: Solitary Pursuits.” *All About Jazz*, 2015, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/stephan-micus-solitary-pursuits-stephan-micus-by-john-kelman.php>.

¹³ Drakakis, Nick. “Confessions of a Multi-instrumentalist.” *Pine Productions*, 2018, <https://www.pineproduction.com/pine-blog/2018/12/12/confessions-of-a-multi-instrumentalist>.

¹⁴ “Canadian Multi-instrumentalist Performs on Both Sides of the Border”. *Upbeat*, April 2018, p. 22.

¹⁵ Cooper, Alon. “Multi Instrumentalist – 12 Reasons You Want to Become a Multi-instrumentalist.” *Going Multi-instrumental!* May 6, 2016, <https://guitarsongsmasters.com/multi-instrumentalist-benefits/>.

Handling several instruments also helps to listen to the music more profoundly and conceive it more professionally¹⁶. In general, an attitude towards becoming a multi-instrumentalist can be formulated as follows: “Mastering more than one instrument will make you a much more versatile musician”¹⁷.

However, it is questionable if playing several instruments help to develop playing technique: fingering and other individual peculiarities of various instruments differ, thus in some cases the technique of one instrument probably can even interfere with the technique of another one. But in general it is most likely that multi-instrumentalist approach makes a musician more flexible in playing all instruments¹⁸. For example, in her article on the *Meriam music* web site Esther Murimi¹⁹ presents her arguments about the benefit of the combinatory learning to play both guitar and piano. Nevertheless, the question of positive or negative impact of the technique of one instrument on the technique of another one is negotiable.

There is an assumption that the ability to play several different instruments presupposes the ergonomic changes of particular muscles and muscle areas thus allowing the adaptation of joints and muscles to different character of strain. Yet the researchers²⁰ have proved that playing different instruments does not diminish (more likely it even increases) the possibilities of the development of musculoskeletal complaints.

Among the disadvantages of being multi-instrumentalists most important are: learning a new instrument requires a lot of time; problems in distribution of the time committed to one or another instrument (“you forego the opportunity to become a virtuoso in one single instrument”²¹); already mentioned possibility of confusing technique when instruments are changed (“Some players have trouble changing their mindset from one instrument to another”²²); finally acquiring instruments is a costly occupation.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nielsen, Frederik. *The Pros and Cons of Being a Multi-Instrumentalist*, 2019, <https://www.roadiemusic.com/blog/the-pros-and-cons-of-being-a-multi-instrumentalist/>.

¹⁸ Cooper, Alon, op. cit.

¹⁹ Murimi, Esther. “The Relationship between the Guitar and the Piano.” *Meriam Music*, 2017, <https://www.meriammusic.com/school-of-music/piano-lessons/relationship-between-guitar-and-piano/>.

²⁰ Woldendorp, Kees H.; Boonstra, Anne M.; Arendzen, J. Hans; and Reneman, Michiel F. “Variation in occupational exposure associated with musculoskeletal complaints: a cross-sectional study among professional basists.” *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 91(2): 2017, pp. 215–223, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5797213/>

²¹ Nielsen, Frederik. *The Pros and Cons of Being a Multi-Instrumentalist*, 2019, <https://www.roadiemusic.com/blog/the-pros-and-cons-of-being-a-multi-instrumentalist/>

²² Ibid.

Music teacher as multi-instrumentalist

*The activities of music teacher encompass a lot of different functions. Music teachers not only deliver their lessons but also organize musical events at their school, lead groups of non-formal music education, communicate with the participants of the educational process. Music teacher analyze the environment of school musical and general cultural life, constantly develop professional knowledge and competences, participates in cultural life of the society*²³.

It seems that enumeration of these competences remind the activity of multi-instrumentalist: playing different instruments in order to implement several kinds of activities.

Contemporary situation in education and society in general is very dynamic and rapidly changing, therefore the problem of attracting schoolchildren by suggesting various types of activity became a challenge for pedagogues. Multi-instrumental abilities of music teacher open many opportunities to engage pupils in unusual activities. The application of such abilities can be actualized in music lessons and in a very broad range of non-formal musical education activities in all stages of person's development from pre-school age till adults. However, the number of teachers who can demonstrate their skills in handling several instruments is not large. Also the variety of instruments which music teachers learn to play in teacher education institutions is most often limited.

In higher education institutions future *music teachers for comprehensive schools* often learn to play several instruments but often only on an elementary level. For example, in Šiauliai University, Lithuania (2019 data) music teacher bachelor study programme include an extensive piano course (this discipline is studied in seven out of eight semesters), short course of accordion, acquaintance with a set of Lithuanian folk instruments and with Orff instruments. Students also can choose two semesters of optional guitar course. Future *instrument teachers for specialized music schools* in music academies and conservatoires usually learn to play one instrument on a professional level and also have a course of the second instrument, but this course occupy much less attention and time than the main instrument course. Therefore, their occupation as multi-instrumentalists in most cases depends on a free choice of musicians.

²³ Lasauskienė, Jolanta. *Muzikos mokytojo veikla ir kompetencijos. Mokslo studija (Activities and competences of music teacher. Research study)*. Vilnius: Vilniaus pedagoginio universiteto leidykla, 2010.

Piano occupies a special place in many music teacher study programmes. It is the most common secondary instrument of wind, percussion and string players in music education institutions. And although it is difficult to expect that saxophonist or trombonist would play piano on a high near-professional level, piano skills are nevertheless useful in several fields. Important advantages of this multi-voice instrument include a possibility to use it as a mean for understanding the general structure of music, its theoretical aspects (especially harmony), as well as for creating arrangements, transcriptions and composing music. For music teachers of comprehensive schools piano is most often the main (sometimes the only one) instrument. Yet they often lack knowledge of string and wind instruments. Thus music teachers which are able to handle several instruments of different nature appear more prepared for the multitude of activities which they can encounter in their work. Unfortunately, the possibility to choose another musical instrument as optional in many music education institutions is restricted mostly because of rigid study programmes and financial limitations. Further we present several advantages of music teacher as multi-instrumentalist.

1. Teachers multi-instrumentalists have opportunities to increase their workload (and simultaneously their salary) by teaching several instrumental classes in specialized music schools. Regardless the level of playing their second or third instrument such teachers are usually able to deliver sufficient knowledge and skills for their students as well as to demonstrate playing instruments themselves.

2. Teachers multi-instrumentalists in both music and comprehensive schools can organize different ensembles in which they are able to play the necessary instrument or temporarily replace one of the instruments which player is absent in a rehearsal or even concert.

3. Teachers multi-instrumentalists in comprehensive schools are usually more competent to explain peculiarities and character of different musical instruments of symphony orchestra, wind band and instrumental chamber ensembles for schoolchildren in their music lessons than teachers who play only piano.

4. Teachers multi-instrumentalists in both music and comprehensive schools are usually more skilled in writing arrangements or composing music for ensembles and soloists than conventionally trained teachers; they deeply consider the possibilities of each instrument and each player; their scores are usually written more idiomatically than those created by teachers who are not acquainted with instruments. Although theoretical knowledge of instruments is generally sufficient for making arrangements, multi-instrumentalist practice enhances such knowledge to much higher level.

Generalization

The contemporary music education practice would win a lot if it could use the possibilities of teachers who can play several instruments and can teach playing them. Therefore, further research (in physiology, psychology, pedagogy) carried out in different countries would be necessary to disclose the current situation and delineate future possibilities of this practice. The results of such research could help to solve numerous problems in this field, e. g. to evaluate and prefigure the necessity, general principles, and training methods of multi-instrumentalist performers and multi-instrumentalist pedagogues.

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