

INTEGRATING THE PREPARATION FOR AN EDUCATIONAL CONCERT INTO THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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SUMMARY. We present our experience with designing and implementing the preparation of a class of fifth-grade students prior to attending an educational concert within the requirements of the official school curriculum. Based on the scientific evidence regarding preference and familiarity with music, the rationale for the lesson plans was to increase the familiarity of the students with the music they would hear in the concert through a variety of activities which met with requirement of the set curriculum. We present key points from our lesson plans as well as the reaction of the students to the lessons. With a background in both music education and mediation, we planned the lessons and created our own materials for the preparation, based on: a) analysis of the repertoire of the educational concert by a woodwind quintet; b) analysis of the requirement of the school curriculum of the Romanian Ministry of Education in the subject Musical education for schools teaching in Hungarian language; c) analysis of some resource materials for teachers, prepared by symphony orchestras for concerts with similar repertoire.

Keywords: music education in schools, educational concerts, familiarity

Introduction

The goal of any form of music education is to arouse students' interest for various aspects of music, expand their cultural horizon and shape their musical taste. Music education as a school subject follows a set curriculum. Educational concerts for children and young people are most welcome

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extracurricular activities fostering receptiveness and cultivating an appreciation for classical music. In the last decades, professional orchestras and chamber groups have devoted an increasing part of their activities to educational work and the offerings for schools have significantly increased. The importance of these concerts cannot be emphasized enough, as they give all youngsters the chance to access and experience a live concert, regardless of their family background.

Importance of pre-concert preparation

More and more music educators recognize the necessity to prepare the students before attending a concert. Some organizers of concerts for school, especially symphony orchestras, provide educational resources to help teachers prepare the students prior to the concert: *Teacher's Guides* including lesson plans, playlists, occasionally even booklets for students². Oftentimes they also conduct workshop for teachers, where the materials are presented and discussed.

Studies have shown that the older the children get, the more their preference for popular and rock music comes along with the avoidance of "art music". This is also connected with the omnipresence of popular music and the total lack of familiarity with classical music. Yet Susan Halam notes that "where 'classical' music is presented outside the concert hall, for instance in advertisements, television programs, film or sporting contexts, it is not only accepted but becomes part of popular culture", advancing the hypothesis that this might be caused by the music being "allowed to become familiar".³ Familiarity "may also account for the effectiveness of advertising jingles, as it may explain the appeal of some highly repetitive music."⁴

The influence of familiarity on music preference has been studied for more than a century. Since Meyer's seminal article from 1903⁵, studies of the various aspects of music preferences and of their relationship to familiarity abound. It has also been proven that musical preferences can be influenced.

² Chicago Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic Toronto Symphony Orchestra to name just a few.

³ Hallam, Susan (2013). Familiarity in music education. In Elaine King & Helen M. Prior (eds.) *Music and Familiarity. Listening, musicology and performance*. London: Ashgate, pp. 197-214, p. 199.

⁴ Peretz, Isabelle, Danielle Gaudrea & Anne-Marie Bonnel (1998). Exposure effects on music preference and recognition. *Memory & Cognition*, 26 (5) pp. 884-902, p. 884.

⁵ Meyer, Max (1903). Experimental studies in the psychology of music. *American Journal of Psychology*, 14, pp. 456-478.

Leif Finnäs⁶ and Kevin Droe⁷ evaluated the state of knowledge on the topic in 1989 and 2006 respectively, and emphasized the possibility of influencing the preference of children and the role teachers can play in the process.

The overall conclusion of research is that to increase preference for an unknown style or work of music, familiarity with it has to be increased. “Familiarity is the single most important predictor for liking of music independent of genre, timbre, structure, complexity, and other factors”⁸ One of the most common strategies to increase familiarity is repeated listening. Numerous studies give evidence that the “mere exposure effect”, a term coined by Robert Zajonc⁹, “is a pervasive phenomenon in music”¹⁰.

Our study

This paper presents the first part of a study aimed at investigating the effect of pre-concert preparation on the experience of students attending an educational concert. Teachers wanting to thoroughly prepare their students for a concert during the music classes face the dilemma of figuring out how to accommodate concert preparation and school curriculum. As a music teacher in middle school (rural environment), I prepared a class of fifth-grade students over seven weeks, during the one period of 50 minutes per week allocated to music education in the school timetable. Based on my experience in music mediation, I designed lesson plans for my fifth-grade students (about 10-11 years old) which integrate the preparation for the concert with the requirements of the school curriculum. After the concert, I will compare the reactions of these students to the control group consisting of the sixth-grade students, whom I taught the regular school curriculum, without any preparation for the concert. In the following, I present the plan for the seven lessons, as well as the immediate reactions of the students.

⁶ Finnäs, Leif (1989). How can musical preferences be modified? A research review. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 102, pp. 1-58.

⁷ Droe, Kevin (2006). Music preference and music education: A review of literature. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*. 24 (2), pp. 23-32.

⁸ Madison, Guy & Gunilla Schiöde (2017). Repeated Listening Increases the Liking for Music Regardless of Its Complexity: Implications for the Appreciation and Aesthetics of Music. *Frontiers in neuroscience*. Vol 11, 147, p. 11.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/neuroscience/articles/10.3389/fnins.2017.00147/full>

⁹ Zajonc, Robert B. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology Monographs*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Part 2, pp. 1-28.

¹⁰ Peretz, op. cit. p. 884.

Preparation of teaching materials

The rationale for the lesson plans was to give the students the opportunity to become familiar with the repertoire they will hear during the concert, while teaching according to the set curriculum. This was achieved with self-designed participatory activities based on the requirements of the curriculum, to be performed to audio excerpts from the concert repertoire. The variety of the activities ensured that the students were repeatedly listening to the music without getting bored. We based our lesson plans on:

- a) the analysis of the repertoire of the educational concert
- b) the analysis of the requirement of the school curriculum of the Romanian Ministry of Education in the subject Musical education for schools teaching in Hungarian language
- c) the analysis of examples resource materials for teachers, prepared by symphony orchestras for concerts with similar repertoire.

Repertoire. Our focus was exclusively on the music of movements of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* to be performed in the educational concert in an arrangement for woodwind quintet: *Promenade, Il vecchio castello, Bydlo, Ballet of unhatched chicks, Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle, Baba Yaga, The Great Gate of Kiew*. Despite the explicit programmatic character of Mussorgsky's cycle, the educational concert uses excerpts to illustrate another story. This is a legitimate twist, as proven by Leonard Bernstein in one of his famous Young People's Concerts intitled "What does music mean"¹¹. In class there was no mention of any programmatic connection. The movements have some of the musical characteristics that have proven to be causes for liking by children, among which clearly defined meter and rhythm was the most important for designing the activities in accordance with the curriculum. The arrangement for woodwind quintet provided the opportunity to introduce the students to the various instruments. We also used some audio excerpts of the original version for piano.

School curriculum. The school curriculum is competency-centered, listing general and specific competencies, as well as detailed content requirements. A thorough knowledge of the curriculum made it possible to design lesson plans that smoothly integrate its requirements into the preparatory

¹¹ Bernstein, Leonard *What does music mean?* Young People's Concerts. Television transcript, 1958.
<https://leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/what-does-music-mean>

material for the concerts rather than keeping them separate. I covered the following parts of the curriculum: informal discussions about the intellectual and emotional content of musical works (see lessons 1-6), practicing steady pulse (see lessons 1,2,4,7), mathematical relationships between different durations of note values (see lessons 1,2), note values and rhythmic types (see lessons 1-4), rhythm exercises in various meters (see lessons 1-4,7), conducting gestures (see lessons 1-2,4,7), rhythm and melodic ostinato (see lessons 1,2,4,7), simple rhythm exercises (see lessons 1-4,7), exercises aiding the coordination of melody and rhythmic accompaniment (see lessons 1-4,7), creativity-enhancing exercises (see lessons 3,5,7), instrument timbres (see lessons 5-7), memorizing and singing musical themes (see lessons 6-7), identical and contrasting sections, similarity and variation (see lesson 3), recognizing distinctive details of frequently heard musical works (see lesson 7).

Examples of resource materials for teachers. Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* in arrangements for symphony orchestra are a favorite for educational concerts. We were able to analyze several educational resources prepared by the orchestras to assist teachers in preparing their students prior to the concert. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra celebrated its 100 years jubilee with a series of concerts for children, of which the last (March 2019) was featuring excerpts from Mussorgsky's cycle. The teachers attending the performances for schools were provided with a *Teacher's Guide* as well as the *Kidsbook*. For their January 2024 *Young People's Concert for Schools* under the motto *Fantasy and Imagination*, featuring Mussorgsky's cycle, the New York Philharmonic prepared extensive resource materials for teachers. The repertoire of the educational concert *Birds We Have Known*, presented by the Victoria Symphony (Canada) in February 2024, included Mussorgsky's *Ballet of the unhatched chicks*. The brief lesson plan for the movement, created by award-winning Orff specialist Marcelline Moody is arguably the most interesting in terms of the musical participatory activities it proposes.

Preparation of teaching materials

For the lessons we prepared our own teaching materials. These included audio excerpts from the repertoire of the concert (some in both the arrangement for quintet and the original for piano) preceded by a click (louder for the first beat of each bar). Some tempi were manipulated electronically – slightly slowed down to address the abilities of the students for certain activities. We were fortunate to have access to some audio examples of excerpts

performed by single instruments, which had been previously recorded by fellow musicians. We also designed simple scores with graphic notation showing the rhythm of selected excerpts.

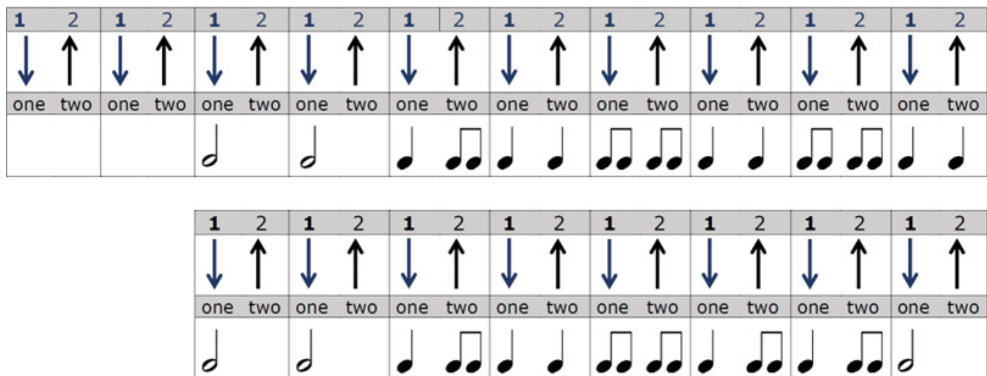
Lessons 1-7

The following is a description of the seven classes during which I prepared the students for the concert.

Lesson 1. The class began with a comparative listening activity. Students listened to the movements *Baba Yaga* and *The Great Gate of Kiev*. The students had no problem identifying the contrasting tempo of the two pieces. Most students associated *Baba Yaga* with film music, describing it with adjectives like “horrifying”, “scary”, and “mafia-like” and termed its affective character as “agitated”. *The Great Gate of Kiev* was described as “festive”, “elegant”. The next step was a discussion about the pulse of the music, explained by association to the heartbeat. After listening to the movements again, the students’ task was to find the steady pulse and tap it on the table. Following this, we introduced the concepts of meter, beats and bars, time signatures, and revised the note values learned in elementary school (half, quarter, eighth). This was followed by a practical activity to reinforce the 2/4 meter. Having determined that *The Great Gate of Kiev* should be counted in 2/4, we practiced counting in twos and then conducting in two with the audio example.

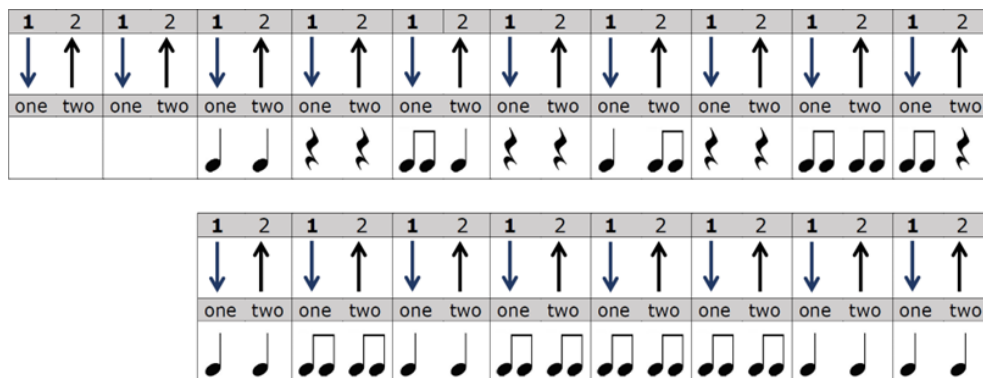
Lesson 2. The lesson was devoted to meter, rhythm, and tempo, with activities using the two movements from the previous lesson. As a new concept we introduced the quarter rest.

Figure 1



Mussorgsky: *The Great Gate of Kiev*, bars 1-16, graphic score of rhythm

Figure 2



Mussorgsky: *Baba Yaga*, bars 1-16, graphic score of rhythm

The Great Gate of Kiev and *Baba Yaga* are both binary meter, but in contrasting in tempo. The graphic scores for the first 16 bars of each movement indicate the meter, the movement of the conductor's hand, and the rhythmic notation of the excerpt. Note that the original cut common time (*alla breve*) of *The Great Gate of Kiev* was transcribed in 2/4. The audio excerpts, preceded by two bars of click which are setting the tempo and the meter. This is reflected in the score by the two "bars for nothing".

Lesson 3. We listened to two fast movements and compared their mood: *Baba Yaga*, known from the preceding lesson, and *Ballet of unhatched chicks*. The students noted that although both movements have similar fast tempi, their characters differ. They noted that the *Ballet* is light and joyful, even suggesting that it sounds like birds flying. Verbalizing the music characteristics that influence the difference proved to be difficult for the students.

The class listened to the movement again, to find the steady pulse, each in their unique way: some conducted in 2/4, while others clapped or drummed different rhythms on the desks. However, when the transition from section A to the contrasting section B of the movement occurred, the students' movements changed: they became smaller and more delicate. We acknowledged that the piece is built from multiple sections, without further explaining the formal structure of musical works. The students remarked that the music would be boring if it didn't have various sections.

For the following rhythmic exercise, the class was divided into two teams, which alternatively modelled the different rhythmic pattern of the A section of the piece using rhythmic tapping. At the end of the lesson, we watched an animated video of the *Ballet of unhatched chicks*.

Lesson 4. Similarly to the previous lesson, the class compared the mood of two movement: *The Great Gate of Kiev* and *Bydlo*, both in slow tempo. The students characterized the mood of the *Bydlo* movement as sad, funereal, military and royal, as if the king were entering the castle with bad news, acknowledging that works with similar tempos can have completely different characters. We introduced the 4/4 meter and enforced it with a rhythmical participatory activity to an audio excerpt from *Bydlo* (with the original eighth of the movement as a beat). The students played the ostinato accompaniment using various patterns of Orff body percussion sounds. This was followed by conducting to the audio excerpt. Despite the preference children have for music in fast tempo¹², the focus on different aspects kept the repeated listening to a slow movement (four times) engaging for the students.

We then listened to *Il vecchio castello* and discussed its character, which the students described as “a scene from a movie” or “the main theme of a series”. At the end of the class, the students requested to listen again to the fast movements, as they had grown fond of them.

Lesson 5. The first part of the lesson began with listening to music excerpt from previous lessons, verbally summarizing the mood of each piece. After listening to a new piece, *Goldberg and Schmuyle*, we acknowledged that two contrasting characters can appear within the same movement and that they can communicate with each other in a musical dialogue. The students described Goldberg as sad, stealthy, action-movie-like, with some considering him as exotic or Egyptian. Schmuyle’s character immediately captured their liking, saying his music sounded pleasant and dance-like.

The next task was to describe the two characters in a few sentences to be written in 10 minutes while listening several times to movement. They could relate the characters to known figures or create their own interpretations. All the student willingly shared their opinions – an indicator for the trusting atmosphere in our music classes, where they feel safe expressing their thoughts. In the following activity, the students brought the characters to life through free movement to the music.

Listening to audio recordings of the themes associated with the two characters on single instruments allowed us to talk about timbre. The students saw pictures of the oboe and bassoon; only two of them identified the oboe, while the words “bassoon” was completely unknown. We concluded with listening again to the whole movement with closed eyes and focusing solely on the music.

¹² LeBlanc, Albert et al. Tempo preferences of different age music listeners. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 36 (3), 1988, pp. 156-168.

LeBlanc, Albert, and Richard Cote. Effects of tempo and performing medium on children's music preference. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 31, 1983, pp. 57-66.

Lesson 6. After a review of the movement exercises for *Goldberg and Schmuyle*, we listened to a new movement: *Promenade*. The script of the educational concert uses the promenade theme to introduce the instruments of the woodwind quintet. Recordings of the theme on piano and woodwind quintet, as well as on each of the instruments alone was an excellent resource for preparing the students for the concert.

For a singing activity, I had provided a text to the theme. The translation of the Hungarian words is: "The quintet consists of oboe, flute, bassoon, horn, and clarinet, all together in the quintet".

Lesson 7. The last lesson, taking place on the day before attending the educational concert, was planned as a review. Thanks to the small size of the class, we could embark together on a journey with stops at various stations, at which the students revisited the music of Mussorgsky's pieces by performing each time a different activity. While moving from one station to the other, the students were singing their *Promenade* song. The observation of the way the students engaged in the activities was an opportunity to assess their progress with the curriculum as well as their familiarity with the music. After completing the journey, the students could express their own impressions. The announcement of the upcoming concert in the Cultural Center of the village was received with great enthusiasm.

Conclusions

Even though the study will continue after both the students who have been prepared and the control group have attended the educational concert, a few conclusions can be already drawn. The most important for teachers who want to prepare their students prior to attending a concert is the awareness that it is possible to integrate the preparation with the school curriculum, which should apply to most educational concert programs.

The students' reaction to excerpts of classical music with which they are unfamiliar was most enlightening. It confirmed our belief that if the music is presented through different tasks and activities, the students are not unwilling to engage with it. The variety of activities made it possible to have the students repeatedly listening to the same musical excerpts. When students who have arrived for of an afternoon class (2:00 to 3:00 pm) tired and not very energetic, leave the class humming a theme from a piece of classical music, this should give hope not only to their teacher, but to all teachers and musicians working towards arousing young people's interest and love for classical music.

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