

FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S SKILLS OF IMROVISATION AND COMPOSITION AT SOL-FA LESSONS

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Abstract. *A lot of music researchers consider musical improvisation and composition to be a mutually supplementing processes (Alperson, 1984; Sloboda, 1988; Sarath, 1996). Improvisation actively stimulates the development of children's creative abilities. It stirs the imagination, develops musical ear, emotional receptivity, and the skill of embodying images into new consonances, musical colors (Azzara, 2008; Solis & Nettle, 2009; Burton & Taggart, 2011). During the process of improvisation learners spontaneously express their musical ideas and interact with musical content, while during the process of composition it is possible to stop, to think everything over, to correct something and change it. Improvising and composing at sol-fa lessons are classified as kinds of creative music making.*

This paper is concerned with the analysis of the types of creative tasks at group classes on sol-fa, as well as with the comparison of different approaches to and methods of the formation and development of creative skills in improvisation and composition in the initial stage.

Research aim: to determine and characterize the specific features of using improvisation and composition at sol-fa lessons in the initial stage.

Research methods: the analysis of pedagogical experience, the comparison of contemporary methodologies for teaching improvisation and composition.

Key words: *composition, improvisation, musicking, skills, sol-fa,*

Introduction

Teaching skills of composing and improvising music is one of the most effective means for developing children's musical thinking and the whole complex of their musical abilities. During such lessons learners start hearing music in a differentiated way, and they learn not merely to reproduce the given melodies, but "to play" with intonation complexes, build definite forms from them, e. g. to get to the very core of the emergence of musical art. Skills of improvising and composing music should be taught as early as possible, since these kinds of musical activity help children to show which of the taught musical conceptions they perceive and understand.

J.H. Wiggins (Wiggins, 1994) has singled out four reasons why children should be taught to compose music:

1. Children have congenital creativity.
2. Composing music can support children to become proud of their musicality.
3. Composition is an excellent tool to teach musical concepts and to reinforce the preexisting ones.
4. The analysis of children's compositions offers teachers insights in developing understandings of musical concepts.

A learner who is making music is open to a spiritual communication. And in this factor lies the deepest sense of systemic and purposeful music lessons, which provide learners with a perfect method for self-actualization as well as for getting to know the world around them. The development of a creative ability to freely express one's own musical thoughts is the task of a teacher of any specialization.

The contemporary research gives quite a lot of attention to assessing improvisation and various approaches to involving students in composing music (Kaschub, 1997; Hickey, 2012; Randles & Stringham, 2013; Azzara, 2015; Azzara & Snell, 2016). P. Webster (Webster, 1990) analyzes literature on assessing creative thinking in music. S.C. Shewan (Shewan, 2002) has described possibilities of teaching students from a school curriculum which makes available composing for all students taught according to instrumental music program. However, the issues of improvisation and composition at sol-fa lessons have been studied insufficiently and therefore remain open to discussion and are topical.

Research aim: to determine and characterize the specific features of improvisation and composition, and their use during sol-fa lessons at the initial stage.

Research object: the process of forming and developing creative skills at sol-fa.

Research methods: the analysis of pedagogical experience, the comparison of contemporary methodologies for teaching improvisation and composition.

Improvisation and Composition in Music

Many music researchers consider musical improvisation and composition to be mutually supplementing processes (Alperson, 1984; Sloboda, 1988; Sarath, 1996). This statement is based on the assumption that composition and improvisation are both creative processes (Kiehn, 2003).

The process of composing music allows for thinking over, developing and changing the final variant of the created piece, while the process of improvisation presumes spontaneity and there is no time as such for thinking it over (Kratus, 2012). Nevertheless, improvisation (from Latin *improvises* – unexpected, sudden,

unforeseen) is created in the regime of a real time and does not offer the opportunity to repeat or correct something, therefore it has never been written down as a composition. G. Tsyipin defines musical improvisation as a form of a productive artistic activity resulting in a new composition (Tsyipin, 2003).

A lot of researchers (Azzara, 2008; Solis & Nettl, 2009; Burton & Taggart, 2011) assert that we all come into the world as improvisers. Improvisation underlies the communication between humans, e. g. in a conversational speech, in the language of movements, colors, sounds, and therefore it is more typical of a human than an activity done according to a previously prepared program. The spontaneous perception of the world around us so typical of children, and their vivid imagination – are a fertile soil for the development of their natural ability to improvise. Improvisation actively stimulates the development of children's creative abilities. It stirs the imagination, develops musical ear, emotional receptivity, and the skill of embodying images into new consonances, musical colors.

At the same time, improvisation can be the first step made towards the process of composing, since it allows to accumulate the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities for composing. The impetus for composing and a musical compositional form are typical of both composition and improvisation.

Creative Tasks at Sol-Fa Lessons

Improvisation and composition of music at sol-fa lessons are attributed to creative types of music making. C. Small (Small, 1998) considers that musicking is any activity that relates to music. In this paper the term *musicking* is applied to the creative types of activity – improvisation and composition.

The contemporary music pedagogy distinguishes different forms of a creative musicking at group lessons on sol-fa. They are:

- different kinds of one-voice vocal improvisation: singing up to a tonic, improvising a reply phrase, improvising a melody fragment (the end or the omitted bars);
- improvising a melody on the given rhythm pattern;
- improvising a melody on the given poetical text;
- composing a rhythmic accompaniment to a melody;
- genre transformations of a theme;
- composing a melody in a definite genre, character by using the given means of expression;
- composing variations on the given theme;
- composing a melody on the interval or chord under study;
- choosing accompaniment for a melody.

We recommend to do creative tasks during the lesson at first. A teacher has to explain every task in detail and to give one's own examples. The melodies offered to children have to be analyzed, since a collective discussion of compositions is very useful.

Vocal Improvisation

Both the children who can sing well and children whose intoning is poor, and who cannot properly control their voice willing improvise vocally.

When improvising vocally, a learner feels relaxed, he does not have to imitate the singing of others, which often is not quite easy to do. When singing his own melody, a child is not afraid to sing it incorrectly and thus demonstrate his ineptitude.

Composing of musical replies and singing up to a tonic help a teacher to check how a learner has acquired the concept of a tonic. Exercises where in the offered melody learners have to finish singing the last sound – a tonic will help to reinforce the initial perception about a tonic (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). It is desirable that this melody should be unknown to learners.



Figure 1 A fragment from music by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi



Figure 2 A fragment from music by Franz Peter Schubert

It is desirable that exercises where a learner has to finish singing the final sound or a final bar should be done several times, so that the learners could more consciously learn to finish the melody with a tonic. Exercises gain a more creative character at the moment when learners are offered to complete composing the last phrase: they have to find no less than two-three different melodic endings (See Figure 3).



Figure 3 Exercises for completing to compose a melody up to a tonic

When improvisation of different ends has been finished, it would be interesting for learners to hear the original variant. Attention will be focused on the fact that every time different melodic “roads”, as a rule, lead to one and the same sound – a tonic.

Vocal improvisation allows a teacher to hear every child individually, which is essential at sol-fa group lessons.

Improvisation on the given rhythmic pattern or on the chosen theme is done by vocalizing (without note names). By way of beating rhythm, learners can be offered to choose texts of their favorite poems for composing melodies in a duple-time or in a triple-time.

Work on *improvisation on a definite intonation* is very interesting. At first, learners have to acquire separate intonations (semi-tone, perfect fourth, intonation of the fifth – V-I degrees, intonation of a triad etc.) well. Then they are offered to sing a melody which begins with the given intonation (e. g. with a perfect fourth). Gradually, upon acquiring intonation, learners compose melodies (by vocalizing) in which the given intonation may be at the beginning, middle or end of the melody. Besides, the melody must be in the major or minor key and must have a clear structure.

Composing Melodies in the Given Musical Genre

Vocal improvisation can be practiced on the examples of the basic musical genres included in the curriculum – a march, dances (polka and waltz) and songs. The best melodies have to be varied by using the simplest means of variation – change of a mode, measure, time, register, bowing, and also by imparting to them features of one or another genre. Learners don't find it difficult to select their own rhythmic accompaniment to such improvisations on the percussion instrument.

Learning of musical repertoire creates the basis for learners' understanding the content, and structure (beginning, middle, and end) of their own musical improvisation. The accumulation of analysis-based knowledge lays the foundation for the creation of different rhythmic patterns and sequences, for the understanding of a discord and resolving a harmony within the context of the whole.

When learning a musical repertoire, learners have to understand and creatively use different harmonic, rhythmic and expressive elements of music language. By learning melodic, rhythmic and harmonic “formulas” and phrases of different genres, learners fill up their “moneyboxes”. All this is aimed at enabling learners to use their musical stock in future for creating their own compositions. When improvising and composing, learners include in themselves constantly extending musical repertoire, creating, in addition, their own musical themes.

Christopher D. Azzara and Alden H. Snell (Azzara & Snell, 2016) consider that improvisation must take the central place in the educational process and must become more important in the curriculum of music. On the basis of a research survey, these authors single out six elements – repertoire, vocabulary, intuition, reason, reflection, and examples which contribute to a whole and comprehensive creative process, which, in turn, inspires spontaneous and meaningful music making. At acquainting learners with a musical repertoire, these authors recommend learning solo improvisation and excerpts by ear. *Through use of their intuition and reason, students can learn to create and improvise music spontaneously* (Azzara & Snell, 2016, 10).

During the process of improvisation learners spontaneously express their musical ideas and consciously interact with musical content. Improvisational exercises are used for creating musical materials which lead to composition. Christopher D. Azzara maintains that *improvisation means that an individual has internalized a music vocabulary and is able to understand and to express musical ideas spontaneously, in the moment of performance* (Azzara, 2002, 172).

Composing Simple Variations on the Given Theme

Learners are given a small and simple melody and they are asked to write a variation on this theme. By transmitting their experience of analyzing artistic musical pieces to a composition, learners define the character (possibly a genre), mode and time of the melody. When intervals are studied, to reveal their typical intonation-expressive potentials, a teacher can offer themes on the given interval or a subsequent composing of melody variants by using the intervals studied.

Any change in the character of pitch, rhythm, register, bowing, timbre, time and dynamics can serve as a means for varying a musical material. Different types and kinds of figuration are means of variation (see Fig. 4):

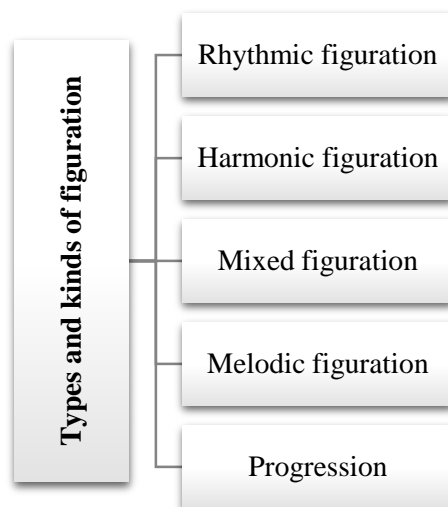


Figure 4 Types and kinds of figuration

- rhythmic figuration – frequent repetition of sounds, intervals and chords on one pitch;
- harmonic figuration – arpeggio motion upwards, downwards or wave-like along the sounds of one harmony;
- progression – motion of chords upwards, downwards, wave-like on the basis of a definite harmony;
- melodic figuration – scale-like and trill-like motion on the basis of one harmony;
- mixed figuration – a combination of different figurations.

Composing the accompaniment for a melody

The skills of choosing the accompaniment will enhance the formation of self-dependence, awaken learners' need for music making and will teach them to use their knowledge in practice. It would be advisable to start teaching learners how to select the accompaniment only after they have gained some experience and skills of playing the piano with both hands. Before that, work should be confined to playing melodies of the taught songs with one hand from different sounds. This form of work develops ear, memory, teaches them a keyboard, and is a preparatory stage for learning to select the accompaniment. Then work can be continued by acquainting the learners with the simplest accompaniment on the suspended tonic-fifth. The harmonic base of song melodies in most cases is simple and uniform. Its structure is often based on a chain of recurring pieces (i. e. chains of repeated chords). When listening and analyzing the offered melody together with learners, it is essential to determine the moment of the change of the first consonance, and then, changing by turns the simple chords in the tonality (T - S - D), select the appropriate one. The learner must gradually enlarge the "vocabulary" of harmonic melodies, and they must be reinforced in different variants and combinations.

Composing original melodies

Teaching the basics of musical composition can be started at any age and by applying different work forms. The main thing is learners' need to create. Creative tasks should be done step by step, avoiding too great diversity of musical expressive means and artistic images.

The course of *Solfeggio* envisages also tasks in composition. Learners use initial knowledge of sol-fa (sound, writing down notes, intervals, chords, melody – structure etc.) and music making (sheet reading, to finish composing phrases, sentences, selection by ear, a. o. kinds). The knowledge of musical expressive means, of regularities in expressing a musical idea in both speech and melody, of the balance within the created phrase is reinforced and systematized.

The major task in composition is to learn how to construct musical themes, melodies. The basis for a composition is the “image” – a mood, picture, literary text, one’s own situation, favorite toys, animals. For this image, means of expression and the plot of development are selected and the form is established. The principle of constructing on the given theme is also applied. For example, the theme “A triad” or “Symmetry”, composing or constructing a melody, and then finding a name, image for the sounding. The best samples are written down.

Working with learners on compositions, G. Schatkovsky (Shatkovsky, 1986) singles out five rules for creating musical pieces of any genre:

- 1) A minimum of means – a maximum of expressiveness (beauty and sense are the main things).
- 2) Unity of rhythm: any beautiful melody is constructed in a way that one rhythmic pattern – a core – passes through it.
- 3) Unity of intonation: as a rule, the theme “grows out” of one intonation “core”.
- 4) Recurrence of a musical construction: motifs, phrases, sentences which the theme consists of recur either without any changes or with some changes in the pitch or rhythm (variation and sequences).
- 5) Originality of a melody: it must have some special feature, some specific character.

A tripartite form is the easiest one to write a composition in. From learning to establish the form of musical pieces, the learners know that the changes in the character of music relate to changes in expressive means of music, therefore, at giving first tasks, it is necessary to establish the changes in one of them: genre, mode, and tempo.

Everything that the learner knows and hears must find its practical application. It stimulates the interest in the taught material and enhances comprehension of the language of music.

Conclusion

- Undoubtedly, lessons in improvisation and composition are very important for educating and teaching in the sol-fa class. They are oriented towards the development of learners’ musical-creative skills, of their musical-imaginative fancy, musical thinking and towards exploring the process of composing music.
- In sol-fa lessons at the initial stage, the following types of creative tasks can be used: vocal improvisation, improvisation on the given rhythmic pattern or on the chosen theme, improvisation on a definite intonation, composing melodies in the given musical genre, composing simple variations on the

given theme, composing the accompaniment for a melody and composing original melodies.

- Lessons in composition allow studying music much deeper and broader, to much subtler feel the specificity of musical expressiveness, clearer understand the content of musical pieces, and they provide the opportunity for a creative development based on creating musical images and composing music.

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