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Teaching without a Common Language:
Synchronicities Between the Pedagogies of Music and Second Language Acquisition

Educators seek to create direct and engaging learning experiences that quickly bring students into contact with the material in an organic way. Yet teachers of both music and foreign language may feel that they literally lack a common language in working with their students. Powerful synchronicities exist between music teaching and second language acquisition that can facilitate learning in both disciplines. Drawing on research linking the cognitive processes associated with musical and linguistic learning, this paper explores patterns and structures that unite music and language. The theories and approaches discussed here apply to two groups of college learners – musicians and students of foreign language. The authors draw on over forty years of combined experience in their respective disciplines of music performance and second language acquisition, offering practical methodologies that help students learn without resorting to “translation” – that is, without an intermediary form of expression that filters or dilutes comprehension and ultimate mastery.

Foreign language learning and musical performance share an inherent contradiction: both demand technical accuracy, yet proficient execution requires learners to go beyond technique, and simply do. Music and language are performance arts, in the sense that learners are asked to master skills, and to demonstrate them straightaway. Performance anxiety plagues students of foreign language and music – made worse by the fact that language as well as music, beauty – or intelligibility – really is in the ear of the beholder. Both require an audience. Communication is the goal: the measure of proficiency is *whether*, and *how* the “message” is “received” by the hearer.

Common qualities shared by music and language add to the challenges facing

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teachers and learners. Each is more than the sum of its parts – individual words make up language, but communication is much more than a series of phonemes, just as the impact of a piece of music far exceeds the individual notes of which it is composed. Learning these systems of notes and syllables lays the foundation, yet fluency comes when the student plays the musical phrase or utters the sentence as a whole, within a larger cohesive context. At some point, the student must leave behind the security of symbols on a page, and put these elements into play – all the while keeping form and technique in mind.

What can teachers do to help students make the leap from technique to fluent performance? This is precisely the point at which the music and language can borrow from one another, contributing to their respective methodologies in unexpected ways.

Stephen Krashen, a pivotal thinker in second language acquisition theory, distinguishes between learning (the cognitively based study of rules and structures) and acquisition (the processing of structural principles on an unconscious level) (Krashen, 1989). Activities associated with acquisition expose students to language in the context of communicative situations – a methodology known as the “natural approach”. *Learning* is essentially an intellectual process, while *acquisition* is a holistic, engaging both intellect and emotional affect (Terrell, 1982).

Three components comprise the natural approach, and all of them relate to both musical and linguistic learning: 1) providing students with comprehensible input – contextualized examples of the target language (or music); 2) reducing student anxiety; 3) creating opportunities to communicate.

Research on the Music-Language Link

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Several scientific disciplines point to connections between second language proficiency and musical ability. Music and language are both “human universal[s]” (Slevin & Miyake, 2006) made up of hierarchically organized and sequenced elements. Neuropsychologists have found that regions of the brain responsible for processing language likewise organize musical stimuli (Levitin & Menon, 2003). In children, musical ability has been identified as a predictor of verbal aptitude and reading proficiency (Anvari, Trainor, Woodside & Levy, 2002).

In one a rigorous study testing the musical-ability hypothesis for foreign language acquisition, Slevin and Miyake (2006) correlate musical ability to English proficiency in a group of adult native Japanese speakers. They confirm the existence of the link, concluding that in terms of second language phonology, “individuals who are good at analyzing, discriminating, and remembering musical stimuli are better than other people at accurately perceiving and producing L2 [second language] sounds” (p. 679). They propose that musical ability may help adult learners to overcome the disadvantage of learning a second language later in life.

Music in the Language Classroom

Music advances second language learning by promoting relaxation, creating a positive learning state, and involving different senses to enhance memory and attention (Brewer & Campbell, 1991). It is highly compatible with the communicatively-oriented “natural approach” (Terrell, 1982). Music is the basis for a multi-sensory pedagogy that “can enable students to absorb content with a relaxing and creative vehicle as a catalyst” (Adkins, 1997). Music stimulates memory uniquely, while simultaneously reducing tension in students. Incorporating music into language learning creates an

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“acquisition-rich” classroom (Adkins, 1997), characterized by activities that capitalize on the multiple intelligences students bring to the language learning experience (Gardner, 1993).

Music can serve as both the text and sub-text for language acquisition. It instantly introduces culture – both with a large and small “C”. Introducing music to the language learning environment provides a cultural context for the classroom. This is a clear opportunity to acquaint learners with the target culture through its music.

Singing songs in the target language is a deceptively simple technique that yields results in every aspect of language proficiency. Having students sing along with recorded vocal music boosts language comprehension and production, and, as long as the songs are carefully selected, even college-level learners enjoy it. More than ten years of using this technique have led the authors of this paper to a surprising conclusion: students benefit in concrete ways from singing along with the recordings even when songs are not directly related to vocabulary presented in class. What matters is that students sing the particular song on multiple occasions. Other researchers report using song lyrics to teach reading, vocabulary and grammar (Salcedo, 2002; Urbancic, A., & Vizmuller, J., 1981). In the authors’ experience, however, songs can simply be treated as songs in the language classroom, rather than as linguistic artifacts. Students who sing a particular song in class several times per week, and are provided with a written copy of the lyrics and a personal copy of the recording begin using vocabulary from the song when communicating in the target language – both orally and in writing. These were words considered above their level of language study, and had not been introduced elsewhere in the curriculum. Moreover,

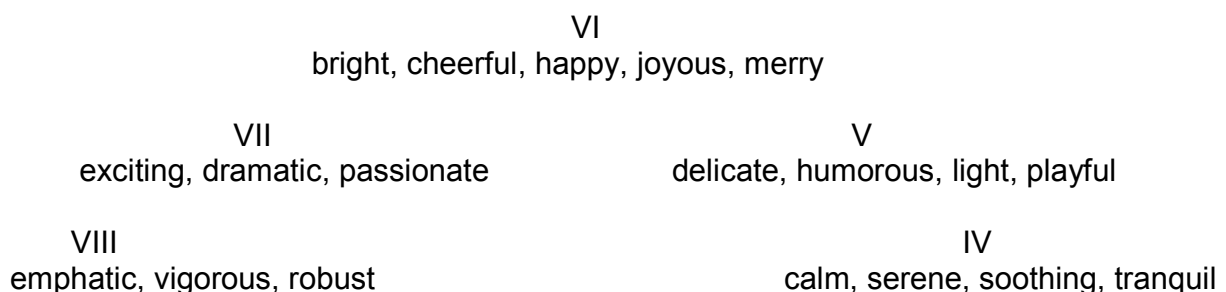
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their pronunciation of these lexical items was closer to that of a native speaker than those they had acquired from textbook and other audio materials.

When students sing along with native singers, they learn to mimic the phonetic structure and rhythm of the target language. Beat, melody, and words are synchronized, and the singer must observe these structural parameters. Singing along relieves the student from actually producing language – the content is ready-made. He or she is responsible only for moving their vocal apparatus along with the song, creating strong kinesthetic associations the phonetic features of the language. Singing also helps students increase the tempo of their speech in the target language– singing along with a fast song creates the ability to speak quickly as well.

In a pilot project, the authors are experimenting with classical music as a vehicle for foreign language learning. Classical music is seldom included in foreign language and culture curricula. Currently, the pilot study examines two techniques combining classical music with vocabulary acquisition. The object of the experiment is to use music to help learners create an emotional context for new words.

Hevner (1936, 1937) identified eight emotional categories that might be identified with the affect produced by different pieces of music. She described these affective characteristics with a series of adjectives to create an “adjective circle”:



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I
dignified, lofty, sacred, solemn

III
dreamy, tender, sentimental

II
sad, dark, heavy, melancholy (Patel, 2006, p. 311).

For a first-year Russian language class, the authors chose eight pieces by Russian composers, each representing one of the emotions above. Students hear, read and repeat Russian vocabulary items associated with each of the emotional states, while listening to short musical excerpts from the selected pieces. To reinforce the language-emotion-vocabulary link, students listen to the pieces while carrying out regular classroom activities. Backgrounding the language learning experience with music should reduce learner anxiety, while shifting the focus from producing language to the experience of listening to music. A second control group of Russian learners study the new words without musical support.

Language in the Music Classroom

Music pedagogy can productively integrate aspects of the “natural approach” to language learning – which actually shares much with the Suzuki method of music education. Creator Shin'ichi Suzuki observed that all children learn their native language quickly and easily. He extrapolated this mother tongue theory to musical learning, reasoning that young children can become musically proficient just as they develop fluency in their native language (Suzuki, 1983). The three strategies of the natural approach to language learning -- providing learners with comprehensible input, reducing learner anxiety and creating opportunities to convey messages -- are highly applicable to music instruction.

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For the music student, “comprehensible input” refers to the process of listening to the piece of music before starting to play it. The Suzuki method emphasizes learning music by ear over reading musical notation, consistent with a child’s experience that speaking the mother tongue precedes reading. With the exception of Suzuki-trained students, a surprisingly small percentage of music students prepare to play a piece of music by listening to it first (unless the teacher is unusually vigilant).

Pre-listening connects the performer with the musical context of the piece, creating sound connections that transport them beyond technical accuracy to musical fluency. This activity further reduces anxiety by encouraging the performer to focus on message, rather than form.

Music students and their teachers often lack a common “language,” because the difficulty of playing the notes gets in the way of the actual meaning of the piece at hand. Reading music is best done by singing first, away from the instrument. The best-known example is probably the song “Do-Re-Mi” from *The Sound of Music*, in which the character of Maria teaches singing to the Von Trapp family. She follows the natural approach, associating the vocal sound with the symbol on the page. This is a more organic experience than translating note into the kinesthetic feel of the finger on the string, or key.

Reading and writing about the context of the music – language-centered activities – can also help music students become confident performers. Musicians who feel tied to the technical aspects of performance are limited by notes on a page. Asking students to write reports and create portfolios exploring the artistic, biographical, social, historical background of a piece connects them to the composer’s experience and

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artistic vision.

A subsequent, higher-order activity is for learners to create a fictional story inspired by the music. In general, the emotions underlying a piece must be identified before applying the kinesthetic techniques that will bring them out of the instrument. Translating the “narrative” of the music into words, imagining the story for which this music might provide the soundtrack, cements this link. This is music as message – another feature of the natural approach.

Verbal communication can shape the music lesson as well. Aristotle said “the greatest thing by far is to be master of the metaphor.” Metaphors and analogies offer another vehicle for using language to enhance musical learning. Analogies between aspects of the piece of music and the student’s life experiences associate images with sound. Analogies likening notes to flowing water, or comparing the technique of bouncing a bow to sitting a trot on a horse link the kinesthetic movement of playing the instrument to the expression of the piece. Seemingly incongruous associations bring humor to the learning environment, enhancing the multi-sensory effect.

Challenging music students to create their own analogies to describe features of a musical piece can be extremely revealing. A student’s choice of metaphor -- physical, visual or sensory -- provides clues to what is not understood, and helps them connect the musical idea to their existing knowledge base.

Judicious use of error correction is essential to the natural approach. These authors’ experience reveals that music students benefit most from verbal feedback when the instructor chooses words carefully, and organizes the message to emphasize what is *needed* as opposed to what is *wrong*. Serious music students are frequently

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their own worst critics. Negative messages can lead to an over-emphasis on mistakes, creating anxiety precisely when he or she should relax and let it happen. Ideally, the instructor should begin the correction with a positive observation. Specific criticisms should be framed as affirmatively as possible. For instance, “the tone would be more beautiful if you pulled the bow with a lot of strength with a very relaxed hand” rather than “the tone is ugly--you are pressing too hard.” While both statements are true, in the first the student is quickly shown what he can do to solve the problem, whereas the second statement emphasizes the problem, not the solution.

Concluding Remarks

For music students as well as language learners, communication is the goal. Borrowing from each other’s methodologies, teachers can help students create meaningful connections that exploit the “music” of language, as well as the “language” of music. Teachers must provide students with plentiful musical and linguistic input in the appropriate context, and encourage them to play or speak without excessive focus on errors. The key to finding a common language with students, whether in music or language learning, lies in teaching for communication first.

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