



Special Issue

The Orff approach to special music education and music therapy:
Practice, theory and research

Elemental Music and Dance Pedagogy (EMDP): Artistic and Pedagogical Opportunities for People in Advanced Age

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Abstract

Age and ageing are issues of high significance in our times, and lead us to ask how this prolonged lifespan can be spent in a most self-determined, meaningful and satisfying way. The author's personal approach to working with this age group is described and complemented by personal reflections on this subject. The many objectives include non-musical goals as well as music-oriented objectives which can instigate valuable and satisfying musical experiences of a high quality. Fundamental principles include: becoming a player – taking an active part; the interplay of music, speech, movement and dance; improvisation and forms.

Important parts of sessions are described as well as their goals: the greeting ritual is of importance and warm-up exercises can be offered using movement or body percussion. Singing well-known songs as well as new ones, and playing Orff instruments are valuable activities. Movement is also an important part of the sessions where diverse objects such as gloves, sticks or peacock feathers are used.

The Orff approach has the wonderful advantage of being multifaceted, putting emphasis on improvisation and individual creativity which

allows making music according to one's own abilities – something that is important for elderly people – and offering many different impulses to feel, to live and physically express music.

Keywords: elemental music; resources; social-communicative competence; artistic opportunities

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Introduction

"I am young again". These words express the feelings of a female participant¹ aged 96, after a lesson in which we accompanied the *"Annenpolka"* of Johann Strauss with percussion instruments and danced to it, inspired by colourful scarves.

"Satisfied ageing can be learnt".

"Staying young in old age".

"The next ones needing care will be ourselves".

Headlines like these, drawn from newspaper articles, underline the fact that age and ageing are issues of high significance in our times.

The demographic development of our society, increasing life expectancy (by 2050 almost 40% of the German population will be older than 60) and the simultaneously decreasing birth rates do not only present us with new opportunities². There also

¹ A photo of this participant is shown on the front cover of my DVD (Schönherr & Kallós 2012). This photograph can be also found in the relevant DVD reviews included in this special journal issue (see Danuser 2013; Kessler-Kakoulidi 2013).

² See www.destatis.de/bevoelkerungspyramide/

are numerous problems, unanswered questions and conceptions such as the comprehensible wish to age in health, remain in a good mental and physical condition, and not to be put into retirement. It is not only important how old we will be but also how we want to become old.

This leads us to consider by what means and how this prolonged lifespan can be spent in a most self-determined, meaningful and satisfying way. How should existing competences and resources be used and how do the deficits that ageing bring about have to be met?

The year 2012 was declared as the “European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations” (EYAA) by the European Parliament and the European Council in order to direct people’s attention to the challenges and chances of a long-living society and to show the spectrum of possibilities to cope with age(ing). Consistent with this concern, the logo chosen for this campaign shows two stylised people dancing, since moving to music and actively making music realise the aims of the European Year 2012 in an ideal way (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The EYAA logo

In 2007 the Wiesbadener Declaration – a 12-point list made by the German Music Council – demanded that “[t]he image of a human-oriented society goes hand-in-hand with the conviction that musical encounters in their own right should be made available as a fundamental element at any age”³.

My personal approach

In 2003, my mother moved into a home for aged people. I often visited her and had many opportunities to observe, that living in a nursing

home is not easy. There is no mixture of generations but the more or less daily confrontation with the death of other inhabitants and thus also with one’s own mortality. One day is very much like another, there are very few activities or events and it is not easy to develop contacts and to communicate with others.

This span of life is marked by the degeneration of physical and mental abilities, by the shrinking of the social network and the realisation that one is not needed any more. In this surrounding the fulfilling of such basic human needs such as feeling loved, being embraced, nourishing one’s self respect, having space for self-expression and self-realisation is extremely limited.

What I observed there inspired me to start a project offering music and movement to the people living in this nursing home, so I developed the following invitation to make the residents curious and encourage them to come (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Invitation to music and movement project

This was the first step in changing my previous field of instruction – with the students at the Orff Institute, Mozarteum University in Salzburg and teaching music and dance to children of different age groups – to teaching groups of aged people. Since then, every Friday during the semester for one hour “Joy with Music and Movement” sessions take place.

The sessions are attended mostly by about 15-20 residents aged between 75 and 100, many of whom have mental and/or physical disabilities. There is a hard-core group of enthusiasts who do their best not to miss the sessions accompanied by two or three students. This dedicated group of regulars, who also insist on having the same “regular” seats each week, are constantly confronted with change due to the advanced age of the participants and deaths among their fellow residents, an ever-present theme when working with people in the last phase of their lives.

By now several students who gained practical teaching experience in this age group have shared their knowledge in their written bachelor and

³ See www.musikrat.de/musikpolitik/musizieren-50/wiesbadener-erklaerung.html

master degree theses. A graduate from the Department of Psychology at the Paris-Lodron University Salzburg attended our lessons for one semester and chose to write her master's thesis on *"Music and Its Psychophysical Effect on People in Advanced Age"* (Anzengruber 2006).

From the beginning of these classes in 2003, many lessons have been filmed as unobtrusively as possible to avoid irritating the participants. So the video insights have to be seen as precious documentation rather than as professional recordings.

The filming of these music and movement educational sessions with the elderly over such a long period of time is unique and enables us, among other things, to witness a wide range of topics. The many recordings, after a process of filtering, have been compiled to make a DVD with the aim of giving people insight into this area of work to encourage and motivate them to provide adequate opportunities and to develop their own concepts (Schönherr & Kallós 2012).

Pedagogical reflections

Having taught students and children in the Orff Institute for many years I was quite sure that a weekly session of music and movement based on the pedagogical concept of Elemental Music and Dance Pedagogy (EMDP) developed by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman could help to bring joy and happiness to the aged people. It could give them many impulses to come into contact with each other and could nourish some of their unfulfilled human needs. When I started my work the following key questions influenced my concept:

- Which contents and approaches of EMDP "reach" people who live in a nursing home and belong to the age group 75 years and upwards?
- What does an adaptation to age-related difficulties and impairments look like?
- With which objectives and in which way do we provide topics so that the participants will have a sense of achievement and be open for the elemental, emotional effects of music, to be able to truly experience music and to spend their time meaningfully and constructively?
- Are there any music and music-related topics that are specifically "tailored" to this age group?

I realised the following for this group:

- It is of great importance to offer musical themes easily accessible but with a musical impact and especially to create a motivating, protective and joyful atmosphere.

- It is particularly important to always be aware of the humorous side of situations that occur during a lesson. Laughing and learning are an absolute dream-team, which is supported by findings from the field of neuroscience. A smile builds a bridge between 'me' and 'you'. Hearty laughter stimulates the diaphragm and is strongly linked to one of the most pleasant human emotions: joy.
- One should try to establish a relaxed atmosphere based on empathy and defined by mutual appreciation and acceptance which is decisive for the success of our work with people of this age group.

In my planning of the lessons I am mostly led by the following non-musical, human orientated aims and music-orientated objectives.

Non-musical objectives

The sessions should:

- activate emotional awareness;
- create phases of spending time meaningfully;
- play a part in revitalising or strengthening social-communicative competence;
- promote a feeling of success and therefore satisfying basic needs such as recognition and esteem.

These objectives are not intrinsically musical. Firstly, this clearly highlights the fact that, when dealing with this age group especially, important non-musical areas can be stimulated and strengthened using musical activities. Secondly, it should make us aware that this age group must be given the privilege to decide for themselves freely whether they want to take part in such a music session or not, without any therapy-related pressure to perform or learning objectives. This age group should be allowed to enjoy the lesson in their way and to decide for themselves what does them good. This is what a resident once said to me after a session: *"I needed something to pick me up today that's why I attended the session and it worked"*.

Music-oriented objectives

The list of non-musical objectives should not however, hide the fact that these sessions are about instigating valuable and satisfying musical experiences of a high quality. With music we provide a medium that can be truly enchanting and can induce a wide range of positive aspects:

- the realisation that everybody has creative skills;

- working with music to find undiscovered talent and unused resources which can be enjoyed in music;
- the ability to recall songs, instrumental pieces of music and dances from the past and to experience them in a new way;
- memories (not directly musical) of certain events in life come alive again through music or dance and can strengthen a feeling of self-identity; and above all that
- even in old age new and unfamiliar music can be interesting and inspiring and that learning, whether it be it on an emotional, motor or cognitive level, is still possible.

The perfect example of this is when a happy 90 year old participant commented after a session: “*I really learned something new today*”, and her neighbour added: “*you see, we are not too old!*”

Becoming a player

From the very beginning of my lessons in the old people’s home it was clear that Orff’s fundamental philosophy also worked for this age group: not watching from the side-lines but actively taking part and becoming a player. Of course there will always be participants who take part in the activities in a very reserved manner but who are nevertheless very concentrated and often obviously emotionally touched.

Interplay of music, speech, movement and dance

The extent to which the clients take part and join in is, of course, inseparably linked to the choice of medium in which the activities are conducted, namely those embedded in the Orff philosophy: a combination of music, speech and movement or dance. “Elemental music is never music alone but forms a unity with movement, dance and speech. It is music that one makes oneself, in which one takes part not as a listener but as a participant” (Orff 1964/2011: 144). This is the credo of Carl Orff.

Improvisation and forms

Equally important in the concept of the EMDP is the area of improvisation and the composition related to it. They offer space to find and to discover for oneself and to live out one’s need to play that is also there in this lifespan. Improvisation leads to contact with the artistic potential inherent in all humans and inspires participants to actively express themselves. In such phases, joy of life and creativity are shown, and it becomes apparent that learning at an advanced age is also possible on emotional, motor and cognitive levels.

Another advantage of improvisation is the scope the participants have to adapt their own experiences to their physical abilities, so that the likelihood of being over-strained or frustrated with not being able to perform the given tasks is minimised.

Insight into the practical work

Before the lesson starts the students and I welcome every participant entering the room by shaking hands, making eye contact and saying his or her name. This helps to improve the feelings of self-awareness for them. I then usually begin the programme with a “hello ritual” to establish contact between the participants. This can be a greeting canon or dance combined with greeting gestures, inspired by a well-known piece of classical music such as a Contradance by W.A. Mozart.

A warming up exercise can be offered in combination with body percussion which has more than just a musical function: it stimulates the blood circulation, raises the spirit, mobilises arms and legs, and creates the feeling of being embedded in the rhythm of a united community - something very important in this life-phase. Next, is the singing of well-known or new songs which enables participants to share feelings and sensations with each other. In addition, singing supports the good health of the breathing organs through the fine vibrations and the activation of the breath; hence, the saying: “*Singing is the queen of the breathing exercises*”.

Playing Orff Instruments is well accepted, especially the percussion instruments in combination with rhythmical improvisation and/or instrumental sound experiments. The experimenting parts are more or less like a workshop. Mutual contact becomes possible, the joy of playing is reactivated and self-confidence develops. Everybody has the freedom to improvise and play according to her or his abilities. I often join the percussion group by improvising on the piano or on the recorder (Photograph 1)⁴.

⁴ All photographs were taken by W. Minder.



Photograph 1: The percussion group

A very important part in our lessons is the movement, the dance while sitting on the chair, as locomotion in the room is not possible for most of the participants. Objects are helpful, such as gloves in different colours, which inspire the fingers and hands to do choreographies or hand sculptures in duets, trios or small groups, or we use sticks which motivate movements as well as develop sounds (Photographs 2, 3, 4 and 5).



Photograph 2: Improvisation with movement inspired by gloves



Photograph 3: One stick for two people needs cooperation



Photograph 4: A stick sculpture



Photograph 5: Exploring sounds with knitting needles

Peacock feathers stimulate swinging movements in connection with soft music in 3/4 or 6/8. The tempo of the music must be carefully chosen to motivate the dancing movements and nevertheless to avoid excessive physical strain (Photograph 6).

Live accompaniment by the facilitator is preferred using instruments such as the piano, recorder, drum and voice and has the advantage of being able to adjust to the bodily abilities of the dancing participants.



Photograph 6: Peacock choreography

Summary

The artistic and pedagogical opportunities for people in advanced age are found at a point where pedagogy and therapy meet, but our sessions – in comparison to certain music therapy models – are an opportunity to renew musical activities from the past and to enrich it by getting to know new themes. It is not about set situations with clearly defined objectives: for example, using a specific piece of music to achieve a certain effect or result for a client in a therapeutic process.

The Orff approach has the wonderful advantage of being multifaceted, putting emphasis on improvisation and individual creativity which allows making music according to one's own abilities – something that is important for older people – and offering many different impulses to feel, to live and physically express music. Music animates, calms and moves. Music is a medium that acts beyond the laws of linguistic syntax. Through music, feelings can be lived without having to use lexical statements. Music even manages to reawaken emotions believed to be lost and to penetrate inner psychic levels that words cannot reach. According to the German revolutionary Sophie Scholl (cited in Hartogh & Wickel 2008: 26), “very easily and without violence, music opens the doors of the soul”. This quality of music is particularly important when working with people suffering from dementia.

Music unites, establishes bridges of contact and communication, opens hearts and hence acts as a counterbalance to social isolation. Music reminds people of past times and experiences and therefore strengthens people's identities, which is very important for aged people who are so often confronted with the loss of their abilities.

At the end of a session the participants sometimes express the effect of the lesson in the following ways:

“I feel that I am living”

“Joy streams through me, and lets me forget everyday sorrows, feeling no pain and being back in the room everything still sounds inside me”

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