



Special Issue

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

Interaction Creates Learning: Engaging Learners with Special Educational Needs through Orff-Schulwerk

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Abstract

We consider the individual and the collective as fundamentally interdependent. Interaction leads to learning and therefore theories of interaction are of importance. For a music teacher, the achieved awareness can lead to practical advances. Discovering the most productive interactional strategy and understanding the consequences of actions within the actual learning situation can be helpful in creating interaction and learning. However, as interaction is dynamic and complex, especially those practitioners working with students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) may not be satisfied with the respective conceptual frameworks on interaction processes.

In the present article, we reason that on close inspection it is possible to develop a conceptual approach that meets the diversified challenges of pedagogical interaction. We also suggest that pedagogical interaction with students with SEN can be grounded on the insights of Orff-Schulwerk.

First, we briefly describe some of the key principles of Orff-Schulwerk. After the theoretical background the article continues with real case examples with a view to illustrating the applications of the approach and some of the advances of the Orff-Schulwerk perspective in special music educational environments. We close with a summary, presenting some views on the potential of Orff-Schulwerk in pedagogical interaction with students with SEN.

Keywords: Orff-Schulwerk; music education; special music education; Special Educational Needs (SEN); learning; pedagogical sensitivity; pedagogical interaction; music teacher training

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Introduction

The individual develops through interaction and collaboration leads to learning. We emphasise the importance of the thorough conceptualisation and

evaluation of interaction phenomena in music education. The main challenge in analysing interaction is its complex nature due to the versatility of people, contextual and situational

dimensions. Fogel (1993: 34) summarises interaction simply as follows: “[...] individuals dynamically alter their actions with respect to the ongoing and anticipated actions of their partners”. On the other hand, Bandura (1997) concludes that individuals develop and learn in social relationships and within the patterns of interaction. In this article we consider interaction as the complicated, interpersonal sharing of information, opinions, interests and feelings. An interactional sequence includes verbal and nonverbal exchanges, actions and reactions between two or more people. The ideas of a two-way effect and continual change are essential in our definition of interaction.

However, as comprehensive as these above definitions on interaction might be, they seem to cover the early stages of interaction superficially. The differentiating feature of interaction, e.g. social behaviour, from antisocial or disruptive behaviour is whether another individual is taken into account in one’s actions. We discuss what is required *before* any actual, bi-directional interaction or learning exists.

This approach is chosen due to the varied special needs of human beings that often bring additional challenges to interactions. For example, developmental disabilities, psychiatric disorders or physical impairments can create difficulties in perceiving. A student’s behaviour is often characterised by confusion or inflexibility and it is difficult or impossible for him or her to find the meanings and requirements in interactional situations. Within pedagogical interaction music educators working with students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are often faced with new challenges, for example with unpredictability, misconceptions and unusual or disruptive behaviours (or both).

The perspectives of Orff-Schulwerk offer valuable notions to support successful pedagogical interaction and further music making and learning. However, we focus only on five key principles of Orff-Schulwerk that are especially applicable in understanding pedagogical interaction. The main purposes of this article are:

- to introduce Orff-Schulwerk within a special music education context;
- to discuss some of the fundamentals of Orff-Schulwerk and its benefits for the pedagogical interaction with students with SEN;
- to introduce the Special Music Centre Resonaari as a local example employing Orff-Schulwerk and providing further and more in-depth support and solutions for the improvement of the pedagogical interactions with students with SEN.

Some of the achievements of Orff-Schulwerk within special music education are first discussed conceptually. We also show how these five principles of Orff-Schulwerk support the evaluation of interactions in a special music educational context. Below, a brief overview of existing literature and research is provided, and two case studies are described. This is followed by a discussion regarding future potential steps.

Orff-Schulwerk and special music education

Based on the reviewed literature, the following five basic principles of Orff-Schulwerk are summarised. The following aspects are naturally interdependent, but do not include all aspects of Orff-Schulwerk.

1. Individuality and diversity

Orff-Schulwerk is student-centred. The key concept of Orff-Schulwerk is individuality that posits how diversity in learning and pedagogical interaction exists. Individuality means that the focus on pedagogical interaction is based on each student’s abilities, interests and needs, and the teacher operates in the role of a facilitator of learning. Individuality in a learning process simply means that the focus of activity is on the learners. In other words, individuality is the basis for active learning. Consequently special music education shares the basic elements with Orff-Schulwerk (Goodkin 2012).

2. Differentiation and functionality

The basis of Orff-Schulwerk is that music making is understood as a holistic and multidimensional activity (Wang & Sogin 2008). Playing, singing, speech, movement, dance and listening are at the core of the learning and teaching process (Perkiö 2013). Within music learning and musical activities, the diversity of the students can often be effectively met by differentiating the musical tasks in a functional manner. Orff-Schulwerk approaches the professionalism of the music educator summarising that the most important characteristics are the ability, willingness and commitment to arrange the learning process in a way that it is purposeful and equally challenging and motivating for all the students (Orff & Keetman 1950-54). Musical tasks and activities are a many-sided source for advanced and reasoned differentiation processes. During music learning there are endless possibilities to design and adapt convenient tasks to meet each student’s skill level including a new challenge to create learning (Jungmair 2001).

3. *Appreciation and creativity*

Orff-Schulwerk focuses on the learner's potential and capabilities. A student's previous learning and teacher's working experiences shape the real-time pedagogical interaction. However, applying the principles of Orff-Schulwerk should not be limited by the earlier skills and abilities of the learner. A music educator employing the principles of Orff-Schulwerk appreciates and encourages each student and his or her individual learning style. A music educator must bring forth the appreciation so that it constructively develops the interaction skills, motivation, creativity and self-actualisation of the student. This principle likely contributes to achieving successful pedagogical interaction and builds the student's creativity (Orff & Keetman 1950-54).

4. *Independence and innovation*

One advantage of Orff-Schulwerk is that it does not only offer exact guidelines how to create music learning but likewise recognises the situational nature of pedagogical interaction (Perkiö 2013). Interaction is complex and continuous. It is significant that the Orff perspective also presents opportunities for an educator to develop, recognise and process his or her own reflection on thinking (Goodkin 2008). A music educator employing Orff-Schulwerk is willing to grow and develop and, at the same time, is confident of his or her own skills and the key principles of Orff-Schulwerk, on which the pedagogical practice is grounded.

5. *Interaction and co-operation*

The Orff perspective emphasises that the most significant goals and values in music and dance education are social: enabling music learning together and enhancing communality. Music making and learning are highly characterised by sharing, i.e. listening, reacting and responding to the other players' actions. In some cases, individual teaching may be necessary to support the student's basic musical or interaction skills, but all individualised instruction should lead to the joint-playing with others. At best, the students also learn from each other and actual performances allow further joining to the community (Grüner 2011). Orff-Schulwerk is also grounded on the idea that very diverse learners with different backgrounds and motivations can be engaged in collaborative music making and learning processes (Perkiö 2013).

Orff-Schulwerk in practice: The Special Music Centre Resonaari and descriptive case examples

The Special Music Centre Resonaari (Helsinki, Finland, www.resonaari.fi) is a globally networked advocate and promoter of special music education. Since 1995 Resonaari has created and guaranteed opportunities for people with SEN to participate in goal-oriented and comprehensive music education. From its wide knowledge base, Resonaari arranges continuing education to professionals and maintains contacts with specialists and researchers working in the field. The Centre focuses on research and development and enhances professionals' capabilities by generating models for future pedagogical approaches and providing practical applications, such as Figurenotes notation.

More than two hundred students in all age groups are enrolled in Resonaari Music School and the Centre enjoys official music school status in Finland. Specially supported music education is offered for students whose conditions for development and learning have been impacted by illness, disability, reduced functional ability or age. The students participate in individual and/or group lessons once or twice a week and receive professional music education instruction. In addition, Resonaari offers possibilities for students with SEN to build professional musicianship. Among the best-known achievements in Resonaari in this respect is the musician project "Resonaari Group" that has supported music employment for diverse learners.

Resonaari offers *basic education in the arts* that has goal-oriented instruction, progressing from one level to other. The goals are determined in national core curricula formulated by the National Board of Education. The key principles in Resonaari's organisational culture are the goal-orientation and the endeavours to improve the students' capabilities to perceive and comprehend. Because the learning potential and the individuality of the students are valued and sufficient support and differentiation are provided, Resonaari enables very diverse learners to receive goal-oriented music teaching and achieve musical knowledge and skills.

Case 1: *Creating interaction and learning*

Simo, aged seven years, came to Resonaari for an assessment period during which the purpose was to evaluate whether he could participate in lessons or if music therapy would be a better option for him to develop. According to the background information, Simo had severe challenges with interactions. The first lessons confirmed his difficulties interacting during instruction. There was no interaction or contact with Simo, who tested instruments in the classroom independently but neither reacted to

any instructions nor to the teacher's efforts to persuade him to try playing together with him.

The teacher tried to engage Simo with facial expressions, voices, speech, movements and touching without any success. However, during the third lesson something happened. The teacher brought a drumstick and placed it in front of Simo. There was the solution. Instinctively, Simo grabbed the drumstick with both hands and immediately the teacher started to sing. He improvised a song: "Up and down, up and down, up and down". At the end of the section he sang: "...and then we play".

Simo and the teacher held the drumstick together and moved the stick to the pulse of the song. At the end of the section, the teacher offered Simo a djembe. He played his own solo after the second section ("...and then we play"). There was a clear structure in the song and it always ended with Simo's solo. He understood when he should stop his solo and return to the first section of the song ("Up and down...").

The up and down movement was challenging enough, but very quickly Simo understood the idea of the song and before long he could play independently. Even the verbal concepts were very easy to understand and adopt. The singing and the entire action was framed by the solo at the end of the song. The song guided Simo to the up and down movement and created a clear end to the activity.

Simo could perform his first song independently and remembered the song in later lessons. When Simo arrived to the next lesson, he took the drumstick and waited until the "Up and down" song began. Simo understood music making and learning and the song had created a new structure in Simo's behaviour. The song offered him a sense of control and he understood what playing together meant. Playing the song also helped the teacher and Simo to interact. This interaction opened a possibility to collaborate, learn new skills and enjoy music making. Simo did not need music therapy but continued as a student in Resonaari Music School.

From the teacher's point of view Simo's progress expressed something essential about the student's potential and capability. The teacher approached the student as an individual. Gertrud Orff (1980: 15) summarises: "Each session should be an experience in itself on which one can build. When the seed of the interest has been sown and the therapist has been accepted, everything will develop a step at a time".

Case 2: Creating interaction, learning and commitment

When Tuomas started at the Resonaari Music School, he was twelve years old and had severe difficulties with concentration and understanding instructions. He came into the classroom but was not willing to take part in the joint-playing with others and mainly only observed the activities and fussed around (testing instruments, walking, etc.). Because the group activities seemed to be too challenging for Tuomas, the teacher decided to focus on individual teaching and testing different instruments with him, but Tuomas still declined to interact or play together with the teacher.

However, the teacher was satisfied as Tuomas was willing to take part in the lessons. He never pushed Tuomas to take part in the group activities. He would sit in the classroom following from the side what the others were doing. Tuomas was especially interested in watching as the drummer played.

After a while, Tuomas started to imitate the drummer's movements and the teacher gave him drumsticks. Tuomas imitated air drumming. Next, the teacher prepared him to participate in joint-playing and gave him an opportunity to play the drums. Tuomas imitated playing without touching the drums with the sticks. Finally, he started to actually play the drums and his air drumming turned into audible music. The teacher decided that Tuomas could have a role in the band as a co-drummer by imitating and following the actual drummer.

Little by little, the teacher gave Tuomas more musical responsibility by giving him solo parts and differentiated tasks. Tuomas started to listen to his own playing and the other students' playing more carefully and joined the group by contributing as a member who complemented the music of the group. He also began to respond to and understand the teacher's instructions. Tuomas turned into a band-person. After a couple of years of music studies, Tuomas became a keyboard player in a band and in his twenties he is now an experienced singer who frequently performs.

Tuomas's development required plenty of time and space in the early stages of his musical career. It was essential to understand that he was truly interested in musical activities but the interaction situations and the principles of producing music were at first too strange to him.

The teacher valued Tuomas's musicianship, learning style and pace. In a participating learning situation, a sense of security is the most important precondition for motivation, commitment and learning new skills.

It is also likely that the student's own construction of meaning is much stronger and more effective than a completely guided, planned and controlled learning process. The student must have flexibility to learn. This denotes that it should be recognised what can be demanded from the student in the particular situation. In this context, the teacher's utmost purpose was to support Tuomas to participate fully through thorough observation.

The teacher must have courage and patience to see each student's individuality to take part and commit to musical activities. Equally, the teacher must also be sensitive enough to utilise the pleasure of the already existing capabilities and recognise the particular moments when the student is able to learn new skills and knowledge.

Over the course of interaction, the actions must be sensitively varied to support the student's capability to perceive and react. Furthermore, lessons should be designed to train the student to understand musical elements and activities and to develop his or her musical skills in a supportive and appreciating atmosphere in which one can also try again when not successful. Hence, it stands to reason, that the teacher must always be a model of high musicianship, guiding students toward constructing order from disorder and developing musical understanding (Kaikkonen 2009).

Summary

We see the individual and the collective as being fundamentally interdependent. Interaction leads to learning. The interaction and learning processes have a personal emphasis and they depend upon the personal characteristics of the individuals. Students' ideas, beliefs, attitudes and image of themselves as learners affect their general motivation and orientation towards tasks, activities and challenges. Furthermore, music in itself is about sharing and highly characterised by a social dimension.

The case material above and its context denote that there is a need for clear tasks, recursion and sensitive evaluation. Also, explanations of the learning environment and the course and ways of interaction are required. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of interaction as a phenomenon it is essential to approach the complexity of interactions systematically using applicable frameworks, such as Orff-Schulwerk. For a music teacher, the achieved awareness and developed thinking can turn into practical advances.

Discovering the most productive interactional strategy and understanding the consequences of actions within the actual learning situation can enhance interaction, learning and commitment.

However, Orff-Schulwerk is indeed about actions and reactions. It is critical to comprehend the principles of Orff-Schulwerk, but it is essential to do more than this. Therefore, a music teacher who fully comprehends and is committed to Orff-Schulwerk also assumes responsibility. In this article, we have discussed only some of the key principles of the Orff approach and, clearly, the above case examples are context dependent and concrete. According to the descriptive cases, the essence of the entire teaching and learning process is pedagogical sensitivity that creates the basis for actual interaction and Orff-Schulwerk practice.

There are many uncovered and complex challenges still left to be explored within this field. Still, our experience highlights some obvious advantages of Orff-Schulwerk to music educational practice with students with SEN.

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