

Chapter Ten

The three magic words for an inclusive approach to musical group activities: listen, observe and relate

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BOX 1

Playing with ‘are you sleeping, brother John’ (Frere Jacques)

The song is most likely already known to everyone, so you can start by singing it together. Once everyone is familiar with the piece, it's time to take up the instruments and play. I suggest some of the following alternatives:

Learn to play the piece by imitation

The teacher proposes a phrase (in this case the first two bars) and the group repeats it together once or twice. The phrase is then repeated by everyone individually, in succession. As soon as everyone feels safe with the first phrase, the group moves on to the next phrase and so on until a satisfactory control of each phrase is obtained.

Playing with some variations:

- Play two bars each, in a circle.
- One pupil begins by playing the song and stops at a random point of his own choice and the next continues, without having established at what point the exchange will take place.
- Everyone chooses a two-bar phrase and repeats it continuously; the pupils all play together and then try to identify who is playing the same part.
- One pupil begins and plays a phrase of his own choice, repeating it constantly - in turns, the other pupils playing one of the other phrases are added to create duets.
- The entire piece is performed as a round in two parts.

Playing with expression

Each of the following examples can be played both alone, while the group observes, as well as in a group:

- At different speeds;
- With different intensities;
- With different timbres, bow strokes and articulations;
- Expressing different sensations: perform as if directed by a furious, delicate, cheerful, playful, etc. conductor (I often use the images of the directors of satirical cartoonist Gerard Offnung).
- With a ‘guest conductor’: the baton can be passed to the pupils, with the request to conduct the group.

Focus on rhythmic patterns

- The song is played rhythmically at a chosen pitch (for example on an open string). Attention is paid to the fact that the same rhythm is always performed twice, then changes, thus obtaining four different fragments. The different fragments are repeated several times and it is noted that the second and the last are the same.
- The patterns can be performed in different orders, overlapped, played with different pitches or even on a scale.
- One group plays the rhythm and the other marks the beat by clapping and vice versa.
- Walk along on the beat while playing the rhythm.

Analysis of different rhythmic values

When the previous activity (walking on the beat) is mastered, attention is paid to how many notes are in each step (or beat). In a short time the group will identify the points where each step corresponds to a sound (crotchet), where each sound corresponds to two steps (minim) and where each step corresponds to two sounds (quavers).

Writing and reading

The symbol which represents each rhythmic figure is presented to the group: minim, crotchet and quavers.

The three rhythmic patterns of the song are reproduced on a poster or flashcards for the pupils to play rhythmically: at first the three patterns will be arranged in the order of the song but then they will also be 'shuffled'.

First the teacher plays a sequence by choosing a succession of the three patterns; a pupil or the group is asked to recognize the order in which the three patterns were played and then arrange the symbols in the correct order. Then, of course, the pupils are invited to do the same.

Pupils can also be asked to play the rhythmic patterns in the order of the song, but with pitches of their own choice (perhaps the open strings of the violin) - followed by performance of the patterns in random order.

Rhythmic patterns can also be "broken up" into smaller pieces which are reorganized to create new patterns (cut and paste). New rhythmic sequences and patterns can be invented by first playing them and then trying to write them down and vice versa, until pupils can reproduce short rhythmical patterns by reading them.

Repeating the rhythmic activities with the addition of pitch

For the violin, the proposal of the piece in D major, starting from the open string, facilitates the execution.

- The entire piece is sung and played, even as a round.
- Application of the rhythmic, melodic and other variations suggested in the precedent activities.
- Performance (by reading) of other pieces that contain the same rhythmic and melodic elements, introduced in progressive order of difficulty.

These are only some of the many possible activities; of course it is not necessary to reproduce them all and neither is the order binding. However, it shows how one can get to read and write rhythmic values and pitches by means of a process based on experimentation, imitation, invention, variation and mutual listening.

Reading and writing is made "easy", almost obvious, even for pupils with SLD and will not be forgotten soon.

BOX 2
Synoptic table: passive listening - active listening

<i>Passive listening</i>	<i>Active listening</i>
Passive (reflects reality)	Active (builds reality)
Static (one perspective)	Dynamic (various perspectives)
Controlled (hitches are negative)	Experimental (hitches are accepted)
Subjective: no objective: yes	Neither subjective nor objective (explores possibilities)
Emotions are neutralized	Emotions are fundamental
Focus on content.	Focus on form

Sclavi Marianella (2000), *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili*, Le vespe, Milano, p. 105.

BOX 3 - Experience

C. is a student with serious disabilities of the autistic spectrum and with important motor disorders. He doesn't use verbal language, but he wants to communicate and he does it with sounds, gestures and body attitudes. Overall he is very cheerful, nice, outgoing and well liked by his companions. He shows great pleasure in activities involving sounds and wishes to get close to instruments, even if his movements are poorly controlled.

At the request of the family, we decide to embark on a musical journey that I will coordinate (dedicating a few hours of my teaching schedule, thanks to the flexible hours that we have been adopting for years), with the support teacher and, in some moments, the educator.

I will summarize the succession of activities carried out as a demonstration of just one of many possibilities. Unfortunately, for now, we have had to limit ourselves almost exclusively to individual work due to the Covid-19 safety regulations which have required the interruption of group activities. Nevertheless, we have always been able to meet in presence, even during lockdown and distance learning periods, with many spaces available at school due to the physical absence of the other pupils. Initially C. was taken to the music room (which he learned to recognize and on whose door he hung his drawing) and was given a piano, a keyboard, some violins, and many different percussion instruments (both rhythmical and pitched). While I played the violin (sometimes we also used recordings) he was free to use what he wanted, as he wanted, while the support teacher and I observed the situation. His excitement was great and prompted him to switch rapidly from one instrument to another, from one situation to another, showing no change in attitude as the music changed, but emphasizing the fact that he was listening, even if apparently not interacting. In subsequent lessons, the material that C. had available was limited: only the piano, only the violin, only some percussions, then others and, in the end, all the instruments again. C. has always shown that he appreciates the activity, joyfully greeting my arrival and showing clear pleasure.

In this first phase of listening, observation and exploration, it soon became clear that his interest turned to the violin which, in the last few lessons, he immediately chose without looking at the other instruments. This could be due to the fact that I played the violin, but in the case of another boy in a similar situation the chosen instrument was the piano.

We therefore decided to concentrate the activity on the violin and C. immediately demanded that the support teacher also be practically involved and that she too be given a violin to play with us. Since the use of the bow, which he absolutely did not want to give up, was particularly complex, we used a shorter bow (that of a quarter violin) which was easier for him to control.

I will briefly list some activities, or rather games, that we did together:

- together we explore the sounds of the violin - all the possible ones, as long as we don't get hurt or damage the instrument (too much);
- we imitate the sonorities he proposes and I ask him to do the same with ours;
- we begin a dialogue by imitating and responding to each other;
- I play and he "accompanies" me, as he sees fit;
- we move on his sounds and ask him to do the same on ours;
- we ask him to move on my sounds and to stop when I stop (this activity turned out to be particularly difficult);
- I play very different music, or the same music in very different ways (pianissimo, fortissimo, very fast, very slow, with all the combinations) and C. accompanies me as he prefers;
- I make and ask him to make very loud or very soft, sweet or rough sounds;
- I bring some sandpaper and some cotton, we touch them together, then we play like one or like the other;
- we imitate different animals with sounds and movements.

Here are some general observations, made at the end of the activity, regarding the behavior and reactions of C.:

- he always welcomed the start of the activity with joy, waiting for it, sometimes, impatiently;
- he always showed very clearly what he liked to do and determinedly refused the activities he didn't want;
- he never asked to interrupt the activity and did not always willingly accept the end of the lesson;
- he invented some beautiful sounds and enjoyed repeating and listening to them, as well as liking some (not all) of our sounds and asked me to repeat them several times. Some of these then became animal noises that he recognized and asked to be reproduced;
- he preferred some music to others and, in particular, he really enjoyed the increase in speed. The music played faster and faster, accompanied by running or jumping movements, made him laugh and he often asked to repeat this situation;
- over time he has acquired an ever better control of his gestures and of the bow, managing to differentiate the sounds by length, intensity and timbre;
- he developed some very interesting sound gestures: for example an upbow, with a lot of momentum, accompanied by a final scream. He was very amused by the fact that I too, imitating him, yelled at the end of the sound, in a school context where, as a rule, yelling is forbidden. But music, fortunately, also allows you to go beyond the prohibitions.

The next steps, pandemic permitting, will be to include him in group activities with other companions of the music course. I'd like to be able to use his favorite sound gesture, so vital and full of joy, for a piece of music to be proposed to my entire violin class, or to the entire school orchestra.

This work did not require extensive studies on the specific disability on my part, but a great willingness to listen actively. The constant, active and attentive presence of the support teacher, with whom I always exchanged impressions at the end of the lessons in order to analyze our sensations, observations and emotions, was of fundamental importance. We reminded each other of some details and some moments and together we were able to discuss some of C.'s or some of his changes.

For his birthday, his parents gave C. a violin and the photos with the image of his joy that they sent me are one of the best memories of this school year.

I'm not sure I've always worked in the best way, there were many doubts and moments of uncertainty, but C.'s expression of happiness when he saw me arrive to start playing together and the pleasure with which he took up the violin (so intense which sometimes made him blush), or let out his scream at the end of the arch, has never ceased to excite me and convinces me that it is worth continuing.

BOX 4 - The exploration of musical conducts

One of the simplest activities to propose in order to try to understand the prevailing conduct of pupils is to have them listen to a piece (playing live or with a recording) and asking: «while you were listening, what did you think?». Someone will say: «I thought I was dancing, running, jumping, falling, flying». They are people who have implemented a sensorimotor conduct.

Others will respond by telling stories: «I thought I was walking in the woods, then...». Or describing moods: «I thought something good had happened to me, so I was very happy, but then...». In these cases we find a symbolic conduct.

The conduct of rules, on the other hand, determines responses such as: «I thought that music always repeats itself for a while, but then it changes». Or: «I thought that the music is always different and you hear the violins, then other instruments».

In case pupils have a disability that does not allow the use of language, the activity can be equally useful, but it is more difficult to "read" the answers and it will be necessary to pay much more attention to body attitudes when listening .

In the case of sensorimotor conduct, we notice that often, in a more or less evident way, the person moves, stamps his foot, sways his head, waves his arms or hands or other parts of the body, more or less in time.

In symbolic conduct one often notices closing one's eyes, having a fixed gaze, as if lost in another world.

In the conduct of rules, the body attitude appears less evident, but attention and concentration are noted; sometimes there are signs of recognition of a returning element (a rhythm, an instrument, a refrain).

All these answers, verbal or non-verbal, may be more or less responsive to the music (sometimes the analyzes are surprisingly precise, even in their naivety), but they still give us useful information on the prevailing type of behavior of the people with whom we will have to work.

It's up to us then to look for activities that mainly rely on one or the other conduct, knowing that we won't have to limit ourselves to this, but that it will be useful to start from this if we want to put students at ease.

Box 5 - Activities centered on the different musical conducts

I describe some activities in which a conduct is prevalent, to be performed preferably in a group, conceived for the violin, but which can be easily transferred or adapted to other instruments.

Sensorimotor conduct

- Timbric exploration of the instrument.

Look for all the possible sounds, with and without the bow, with the only limit of not damaging the instrument and not getting hurt. Choose some particularly significant ones and perfect them: repeat them several times, with different intensities and different rhythms. Play several sounds in succession; if you are in a group, or with the involvement of the support teacher, try to overlap them. Build short pieces with successions and overlapping of the sounds found. Show the sounds found to the whole group and teach them to each other in order to come to a common repertoire. Find effective ways to write down the sounds found. Organize performative moments with the conduction modality using the sounds found; initially the teacher will lead the work, then students in turn.

- Dynamic exploration activity

Perform single sounds or already known melodies with different intensities, with crescendos and diminuendos. The violin bow offers the possibility of infinite nuances and can be played with in various ways, enjoying the pleasure of weight or lightness, of entering deeply into the string or touching it.

- Search for bow strokes

Imitation of bow strokes to be performed at different speeds. Invention of bow strokes to linger on to perfect them. Application of bow strokes to known melodies

- Activities related to speed

Perform rhythmic passages at increasing speed. Perform passages that require finger articulation at increasing speed. Perform particular bow strokes faster and faster.

These activities can also be very useful for developing specific elements such as bow technique, or violin holding and position changes, if we play with glissandi, just to name a few.

Symbolic conduct

- Play a simple known piece, or even just a scale "as if it were..."

It could be as if it were an animal (ant, elephant, turtle, kangaroo, hare, flea...), or as if it were a sensation (soft, rough, fizzy, smooth, soft, hard...), or a feeling (sad, cheerful, furious, desperate, dreamy...), or a color, a flavor, a scent...

- Starting from a simple piece without a title and without indications of dynamics and agogics, decide on a title and perform it coherently. In this activity it is interesting to propose the exercise to several pupils and compare how the same passage can be different if the communicative intention changes.

- Play a piece (or a scale) making it correspond to an image, or a painting, or a color. In this case it is important that the teacher actually shows the image, perhaps by printing it and letting it be chosen among many.

I think it is evident how this type of activity can be useful not only for acquiring expressive skills, but also for the development of instrumental technique. Sometimes, for example to reinforce the sound, it can be more useful to title a song *The elephant*, than to give endless indications on how to hold the arm, or distribute the weight, or draw the bow.

Conduct of rules

Explicitly highlight the rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, formal constituent elements when playing.

Highlight the repeated elements (rhythmic cells, intervals, harmonic successions, refrains...), those recurring with variations and completely different ones.

Perform highlighting the shape.

Analyze the score.

This type of activity makes the performance clearer to the listener and thus improves communication between the performer and the listener.