

“I hear with my little ear” – a music education project

In autumn of 2006 I was asked to make a contribution to a concert series about senses. There were two conditions: children had to be involved and it had to be about the sense of hearing. As it often happens, reality was different, and I ended up developing an educational project with a school in Amsterdam. That project ended with a concert in a retirement home close to the school.

This paper looks at the background to and aims of this project. After that I will talk about the project itself, and end with my thoughts about what should happen next.

Background

For a while I wanted to do something with children, try out some of my ideas about how (music) education could be and thereby share my knowledge and fascination about music, sound and the world around us with the children. I wanted to be a counterweight for the vision of music as it is seen in most of the media at the moment.

The tendency is to view music as something you can measure in performance like we see it “Idols” or “Junior Song Festival”. This trend influences the way children think about music and about making music. They are stimulated to act as little copies of adults, and end up thinking that making a game out of music is childish and thus not “cool”. Music becomes something you perform instead of an integrated part of a child’s life.

I believe music is essential for the development of a child into a “whole person”, and especially essential for the development of imagination, creativity and sense of community.

I’ve been inspired in these thoughts by Jon Roar Bjørkvold with his “Muse within”, by Even Ruud and R. Murray Schafer with in their writings about soundscapes and the human factor. I am especially inspired by their holistic view: how we listen, how we treat each other and the world around us - everything is connected.

The pilot project at a school in Amsterdam gave me the opportunity to try out some of these ideas in reality, and to work on a longer project with the focus on the “muse within”.

The school

The school is situated in a deprived part of Amsterdam North. Most of the children have a mother tongue other than Dutch. Consequently the school offers a broad language learning program. The school is also very active in the local area. There were 44 children aged 9 and 10 participating in the project.

Aims

The aims of the project were:

- 1) Teach the children about what sound is and sharpen their awareness of the sounds in their own surroundings;
- 2) Enlarge the consciousness of the children with respect to how their hearing works - hoping that this will make the children be more responsible in the use of cell phones and mp3 players
- 3) Let the children discover that they can make a composition with their own personal soundscape as source of inspiration;
- 4) Make music and improvise with professional musicians in order to get to know their world and learn from it;
- 5) Through this all develop a framework which does not favour any of the many cultures at the school at the expense of the others.

The project

The project was divided in two parts. The first part focused on background material and theory, and involved the children carrying out experiments. The second part focused on preparing for the concert. Both parts ended with a performance; the first part at school and the second with a concert in a retirement home nearby.

I wanted to provide the children with different ways of learning as i.e. Howard Gardner has formulated it (the 8 forms of intelligence). Another important issue to me was to provide the children with attractive learning tools, well designed and in attractive colours.

The overall concept:

Learning about and experiencing what sound is, then listen actively to the surroundings, transcribe the sounds of the surroundings into a painting, use this painting as inspiration or notation for a new sound in a musical context, try this out and rehearse this with professional musicians and end with a performance together with the musicians for a local audience.

Both parts of the project consisted of three lessons. The lessons for first part lasted two hours each and the second part lasted one hour each. The length of the lessons was due to practical reasons, we could easily have used more time. The two groups followed the lessons separately but came together in the final performances.

The first part: theory and experimenting

The three lessons in the first part of the project all had the same structure. Each lesson starting with an introduction about the subject of the day. Then the children carried out experiments, using what they had heard.

The first lesson was about sound waves, sound and hearing. After an introduction the children had the opportunity to experiment themselves: "Can you make sound disappear?" "Can you feel sound?" "Why do we have two ears?" and "Can coffee dance?"

The children then got homework to prepare for the next lesson, i.e. they had to make a sound diary: each day write down at least one sound they'd heard that day.

The second lesson focused on listening. The introduction was about the difference between active and passive listening, about how you can use your ears to discover things about the surroundings.

Next the children made a listening quiz, they listened to samples of sounds which seemed to be very similar. An example: Which of these three sounds is the sea? Sound no. 1 was the rustling of the wind in the woods, sound no. 2 was traffic on a wet highway, and sound no. 3 was the real sea. The aim of this exercise was to make the children aware that the way we interpret a sound depends on the context. In other words, when a sound is freed of its context a different concept occurs: you can use the sound without its meaning and therefore you can use these sounds to make music.

After this the children made a sound walk in the neighbourhood. I had already worked out a route that took us through different soundscapes: city sounds, rural sounds, highway sounds.

The walk was a sort of treasure hunt with different assignments in order to sharpen the consciousness and the hearing, and to provide the children with a focus. The children were given various tasks. Can you hear whether a car comes from the right or the left if you cannot see the car? Listen to a tree with a stethoscope to hear its sap. Walk with a stick like a blind person. At what distance do you detect the difference between the speed of light and the speed of sound?

After the walk was finished the children made two sound maps with their own notes. One map was to be the sound walk as they had experienced it and the other was to be a fantasy sound map.

The third lesson was about notation and reproduction. After having seen and heard different examples of notation – from spectrograms via graphic notation to music notes – the children had to choose one sound they had

heard during the walk, real or fantasy, and paint this sound on a A3 format paper.

After this was finished the painting was translated back into sound using the voice, body, all sorts of paper, cardboard tubes, pots and pans and much more.

The result of these three lessons were then presented at school in a cyclic group composition, that consisted of a short song made especially for this occasion by Sarah Stiles. (see <http://www.sarahstilesmusic.com>) The song was repeated and in between the repeats there was room for the improvised pieces that the children had made.

The second part: rehearsing and performing

The second part started after the summer holidays, and now our aim was to prepare the performance in the retirement home. The performance was to be continuation of the work we had produced in the spring, making use of the same material.

Now, however, three professional improvisation artists joined us: Han Buhrs, voice; Felicity Provan, voice and cornet; and Alan Purvis, percussion.

The meeting of children and musicians was a huge success. The children performed together with the musicians at the concert, and the sound paintings the children had made in the spring were used as inspiration for the improvisations.

Composer Sarah Stiles made a piece for the occasion. The piece consisted of three parts with each its own character and possibility for free improvisation. As in the first performance, the children used everyday materials as cardboard boxes and water bottles. Furthermore they used whirlyies and "familiar traffic sounds like bicycle bells and car horns. The piece ended with the song from the spring extended with an accompaniment of voice, cornet, whirly and percussion.

After a totally chaotic general rehearsal bringing everything and everybody together for the first time, we had a good and concentrated performance at the concert. The children enjoyed performing for the home's elderly residents, and even though I suppose that most of them had not heard anything like this before, they enjoyed looking at and listening to the children.

The next stage

The result of the project was beyond my expectations. What I saw were children who worked with pleasure, enthusiasm and creativity, children who were able to work creatively with sound. Before we started this project, we were "warned" not to have too high expectations of the ability of these children when it came to abstract assignments like "paint a sound". Some of the children did say that they could not do this, but the result showed something else!

It is my impression that the structure of the lessons and the way the children were motivated helped them to cross the threshold. And because everything was new to all of them, there was room for all ideas and right and wrong did not matter. But also the contact with the improvisation artists gave the children courage. If grown-ups make weird and strange sounds, then you can do it as well without feeling ashamed.

Considering the positive results and the amount of ideas this project has generated, I have to go on. So: To be continued!

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