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## CONSTRUCTING MUSIC HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM

This essay is a reflection on how to construct the teaching and learning of music history in the school educational system. The didactics of music history is a branch of music didactics, the science of transposing expert musical knowledge into educational knowledge. Over the past 15 years, this discipline has been the focus of a part of academic musicological research in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Moving from a new educational paradigm for music education based on the comprehension of music, and designed by these scholars,<sup>2</sup> the methodological-didactic examination identified a series of objects and methods of musical knowledge transposition, concerning *what* to transmit and *how*. The *what* recalls the principles of essentialization and axiologization of knowledge areas: in order to help students achieve significant results in cultural education, we need to select content that is “epistemologically and aesthetically relevant”, and promotes the development of the mind and personality, as well as encouraging the learner to create a network of knowledge that branches out towards other areas of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The *how* refers to the methods for adapting specialist

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the academic research projects carried out for SagGEM “Il Saggiatore musicale - Gruppo per l’Educazione Musicale”, which has been active since the early 2000s within the Arts Department of Bologna University, Bologna, as well as to the Study Group “Transmission of Knowledge as Primary Aim of Music Education”, which came together in 2012 on the initiative of Giuseppina La Face Bianconi, as part of the International Musicological Society. An extensive analysis of the scientific research produced up to now can be read in the keynote address of Giuseppina La Face, “Italian Musicologists and the Challenge of Music Pedagogy”, which opened the Session ‘Transmission of Knowledge as Primary Aim in Music Education’ of the IAML/IMS Conference ‘Music Research in the Digital Age’ (New York, June 21-26 2015), and is published in this issue on pp. 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> This disciplinary paradigm was first described by Maurizio Della Casa and subsequently perfected and extended by Giuseppina La Face: see M. DELLA CASA, *Educazione musicale e curricolo*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1985, p. 20 f.; see G. LA FACE BIANCONI, “Il cammino dell’Educazione musicale: vicoli chiusi e strade maestre”, in *Educazione musicale e Formazione*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and F. Frabboni, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2008, pp. 13-25; see also other contributions by La Face (for example: “Le pedate di Pierrot. Comprensione musicale e didattica dell’ascolto”, in *Musikalische Bildung. Erfahrungen und Reflexionen / Educazione musicale. Esperienze e riflessioni*, ed. by F. Comploi, Brixen/Bressanone, Weger, 2005, pp. 40-60) collected in the ‘Biblioteca elettronica’ of SagGEM at <http://www.saggiatoremusicale.it/home/biblioteca-elettronica/testi-di-pedagogia-musicale/>.

<sup>3</sup> See LA FACE BIANCONI, “Le pedate di Pierrot” cit., p. 41 f.

musical knowledge to the didactic system (teacher-learner-knowledge).<sup>4</sup> This is achieved by applying three transposition practices: listening, production (performance, improvisation, composition) and music history.<sup>5</sup> The didactics of listening is the foundation of music didactics. It teaches critical, reflective listening by stimulating basic cognitive processes based on strategies of attention and memorizing.<sup>6</sup> It is strictly linked to the didactics of music history, whose purpose is to teach students how to do historical and documentary research, namely consciously problematize and contextualize historical data.<sup>7</sup> Finally, production didactics, the third practice, centres on technical and process-related aspects, on *doing* (playing, composing and improvising), while integrating closely with the other two didactic practices towards the development of “critical exercise”, and hence the training of the cognitive and meta-cognitive processes that govern production.<sup>8</sup>

From a methodological point of view, in the achievement of musical comprehension the three transposition practices are connected to each other by a relationship of continuity, or circularity, by an uninterrupted link (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of ‘didactic transposition’ originally formulated by Yves Chevallard (*La transposition didactique*, Grenoble, La Pensée Sauvage, 1985; enlarged edition 1991) has been further developed by Berta Martini in her *Didattiche disciplinari. Aspetti teorici e metodologici*, Bologna, Pitagora, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘practice’ is to be understood not in an applicationist sense, but as a theoretical reflection on specific strategies and methodologies in the teaching and learning of music: see B. MARTINI, “La trasposizione didattica: concetto-chiave della didattica della musica”, in B. MARTINI - C. CUOMO - M. R. DE LUCA, “Trasposizione didattica del sapere musicale: aspetti di contenuto e di metodo”, in *La musica tra conoscere e fare*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and A. Scalfaro, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2011, pp. 123-156: 123-129.

<sup>6</sup> A fundamental reference on listening didactics are the studies of Giuseppina La Face: see G. LA FACE BIANCONI, “La didattica dell’ascolto”, *Musica e Storia*, XIV/3, 2006, pp. 511-541 and *passim* in the ‘Biblioteca elettronica’ of SagGEM (see here note 2).

<sup>7</sup> See A. CHEGAI - P. RUSSO, “La didattica della Storia della musica”, *Il Saggiatore musicale*, XV/1, 2008, pp. 269-279; M. R. DE LUCA, “Un approccio didattico alla costruzione del sapere storico-musicale”, in MARTINI - CUOMO - DE LUCA, “Trasposizione didattica del sapere musicale” cit., pp. 142-153.

<sup>8</sup> See C. CUOMO, “L’esecuzione come esercizio critico”, *Pedagogia più Didattica*, I/3, oct. 2008, pp. 129-134.

<sup>9</sup> The thesis of continuity has also been posited by Carla Cuomo in her article “Didattica dell’ascolto e didattica della produzione musicale: ipotesi di continuità”, in *Musikalische Bildung / Educazione musicale* cit., pp. 61-74, with regard to the circular relationship existing between listening and production didactics. Subsequent research has extended, and further examined this thesis, including music history didactics as well: see MARTINI - CUOMO - DE LUCA, “Trasposizione didattica del sapere musicale” cit.

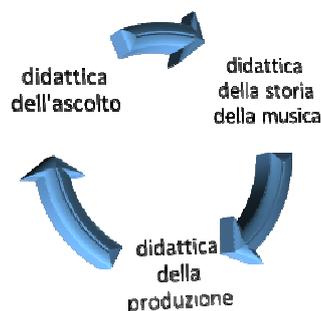


Fig. 1 – The circularity between the three transposition practices.

This interconnection promotes ‘musical competence’ in learners, which means “integration between *thinking music*, that is mastering musical knowledge on a historical-critical and theoretical-musical level, and *thinking in music*, that is developing mental habits on a linguistic-communicative and technical-procedural level”.<sup>10</sup> In the general field of education-didactics, the studies of Massimo Baldacci have shown that competence develops around the human ability to problematize reality, formulate possible solutions to problems, and ‘learn how to learn’.<sup>11</sup> Today’s society increasingly demands that citizens be able to learn on their own and find their way in a complex society. Consequently, the relationship between transmission of knowledge and development of competences today seems to be a crucial issue in education. Hence the need for the transmission of knowledge in intellectual education, that is in shaping critical minds that are able to problematize, and therefore discern.

In light of these issues, methodological-didactic studies on specific transposition practices have insisted particularly on the didactics of music history, discussing the epistemological premises that underpin the teaching of history today, at the different levels of school education, and the challenges that await teachers in the process of transposing content to the didactic setting.<sup>12</sup> It

<sup>10</sup> C. CUOMO, “Ascoltare ed eseguire la musica con competenza”, in C. CUOMO - M. R. DE LUCA, “La trasposizione del sapere musicale nella formazione intellettuale”, this journal, III, 2013, pp. 17-38: 17-29, in part. 19 (English trans.: “Listening to and performing music with competence”, in “The Transposition of Musical Knowledge in Intellectual Education”, this journal, Special Issue, 2014, pp. 17-39: 17-29 in part. 19).

<sup>11</sup> M. BALDACCIO, “La struttura logica del curricolo tra obiettivi, competenze e finalità”, in *Indicazioni per il curricolo*, ed. by G. Domenici and F. Frabboni, Trento, Erickson, 2007, pp. 57-68: 59 f.; see also ID., *Curricolo e competenze*, Milan, Mondadori, 2010, pp. 18-24.

<sup>12</sup> Part of the results of the research carried out up to now can be read in the following publications: “La storia della musica: prospettive del secolo XXI”, Conference proceedings (Bologna, November 17-18 2000), *Il Saggiatore musicale*, VIII/1, 2001, pp. 7-169; P. FABBRI, “Una sfida didattica e culturale: insegnare la storia della musica”, this journal, V, 2015, pp. 5-10, as well as the contributions by F. DELLA SETA, “La

is worth reminding here that in Italy music history is taught in some upper secondary schools (musical colleges), in universities (bachelor degree and master's degree courses which include music-related subjects) and in conservatories. It is also taught in music didactics schools. However, concerning the processes involved in the teaching and learning of music history, the construction of a vertical syllabus of music teaching that harmonizes the different training courses (from lower secondary school and music college to conservatory and university) also involves lower secondary school teachers who teach the subject referred to as 'Music'. Indeed, on the basis of the disciplinary paradigm based on musical comprehension, a connection on the historical-contextual axis seems necessary both for listening and production didactics.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on the development of new methodological models aimed at fostering a critical mind (one that can problematize, and hence discern), in the case of music history, too, we felt the need to redefine the contents and teaching methods, which should be aimed at the acquisition of 'competences' rather than notions.<sup>14</sup> This means that the teacher cannot simply provide information about music events in chronological order, but should encourage students to develop a sense of history in relation to music, in its various genres and functions.<sup>15</sup> In this way, music history can help build and consolidate the cultural and civic identity of students, since it allows them to access a significant part of the world heritage, which primarily consists of musical works of art, but also of techniques, styles, genres, forms, etc. Yet this can only happen if students transform the cultural information they have acquired from the practice of listening, through a process of intellectual re-construction.<sup>16</sup>

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manualistica per la storia della musica" and C. M. BALENSUELA, "American Handbooks of Music History: Breadth, Depth, and the Critique of Pedagogy", published respectively on pp. 103-106 and 107-111 of the same issue.

<sup>13</sup> See MINISTERO DELL'ISTRUZIONE DELL'UNIVERSITÀ E DELLA RICERCA, *Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione*, September 2012; the text can be read at [http://wwwcat.saggiatoremusicale.it/saggem/documenti/prot7734\\_12\\_all2-2.pdf](http://wwwcat.saggiatoremusicale.it/saggem/documenti/prot7734_12_all2-2.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> BALDACCI, *Curricolo e competenze* cit., pp. 107-115.

<sup>15</sup> L. BIANCONI, "La musica al plurale", in *Musica Ricerca e Didattica. Profili culturali e competenza musicale*, ed. by A. Nuzzaci and G. Pagannone, Lecce, Pensa MultiMedia, 2008, pp. 23-32; ID., "Superstizioni pedagogico-musicali. La storia *desaparecida*", in *La musica tra conoscere e fare* cit., pp. 24-41; see also ID., *ISME and the Twilight of History*, in this issue on pp. 39-49.

<sup>16</sup> I have already discussed this aspect in "Comprendere indagando?: come formare alla ricerca storico-musicale", in CUOMO - DE LUCA, "La trasposizione del sapere musicale nella formazione intellettuale" cit., p. 29-38. (English trans. "Understanding by Investigating?: How to Educate Students in Historical-Musical Research", in CUOMO - DE LUCA, "The Transposition of Musical Knowledge in Intellectual Education" cit., p. 30-39).

How should students be guided towards intellectual re-construction, and therefore towards critical work? It is always helpful to ask ‘what’ should be learned and ‘how’. Concerning the ‘what’, the attention of students should be attracted towards the peculiar nature of music history which, being the history of an art, requires a double approach in the treatment of its objects, namely the musical works it describes in their connections to history. They are characterized by aesthetic ‘nowness’ and therefore, as aesthetic objects, they are part of the present, and only secondarily do they constitute sources of the past.<sup>17</sup>

From the point of view of methodology, what we refer to as didactic transposition of historical-musical knowledge assumes the principles of specialized research for the purpose of teaching the methodology of historical research.<sup>18</sup> The latter relies on the so-called ‘circular’ historiography model: seeking in the past an answer to questions that have emerged in the present. Subsequently, these questions are reformulated after testing hypotheses against historical sources and data, according to the idea of ‘comprehension’ as a hermeneutic operation, in the sense of “understanding by investigating”, a notion that was discussed by Dahlhaus with unparalleled clarity.<sup>19</sup>

What can help achieve this goal is a didactic transposition of the historiographical method into the laboratory mode. The laboratory indeed facilitates a different kind of teaching, relying on research rather than on the transmission-based lesson, or frontal lesson. It promotes active learning, since the pupil is actively engaged in doing, experimenting, and observing the consequences of what he has done. The laboratory can therefore be an effective didactic strategy in guiding pupils to the ‘construction of knowledge’, a privileged space for cognitive training that can reconcile *doing* and *knowing*.<sup>20</sup>

Because it restores the link between *doing* and *knowing*, the music history laboratory allows students to learn how to retrieve sources, compare and verify documents, and organize notions. Last but not least, it teaches how to critically evaluate (or “ponder” to use Eggebrecht’s word)<sup>21</sup> the terms in which the

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<sup>17</sup> See C. DAHLHAUS, *Foundations of Music History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 5; see also BIANCONI, “Superstizioni pedagogico-musicali” cit., p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> See H. H. EGGBRECHT, “La scienza come insegnamento”, *Il Saggiatore musicale*, XII/1, 2005, pp. 231-237.

<sup>19</sup> See DAHLHAUS, *Foundations of Music History* cit., p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> M. BALDACCI, *Ripensare il curricolo*, Rome, Carocci, 2008, pp. 129-138; see also ID., “Il laboratorio come strategia didattica. Suggestioni deweyane”, in *Dewey e l'educazione della mente*, ed. by N. Filograsso and R. Travaglini, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2004, pp. 86-97; on the active methodologies, see S. FIORETTI, *Laboratorio e competenze. Basi pedagogiche e metodologie didattiche*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2010, pp. 108-122.

<sup>21</sup> According to Eggebrecht this is a key cognitive step in the process of music research education: the teacher should encourage students to “ponder” (that is, to critically evaluate) the outcomes of the inquiry. In so doing, the teacher allows

musical and aesthetic debates of the past and present are formulated. This is how the didactics of music history can contribute to train a critical mind that is able to discern.<sup>22</sup>

Now I shall go into detail about the transposition of the historical research process. At the level of specialist work, in order to arrive at comprehension seven steps are necessary (Fig. 2).

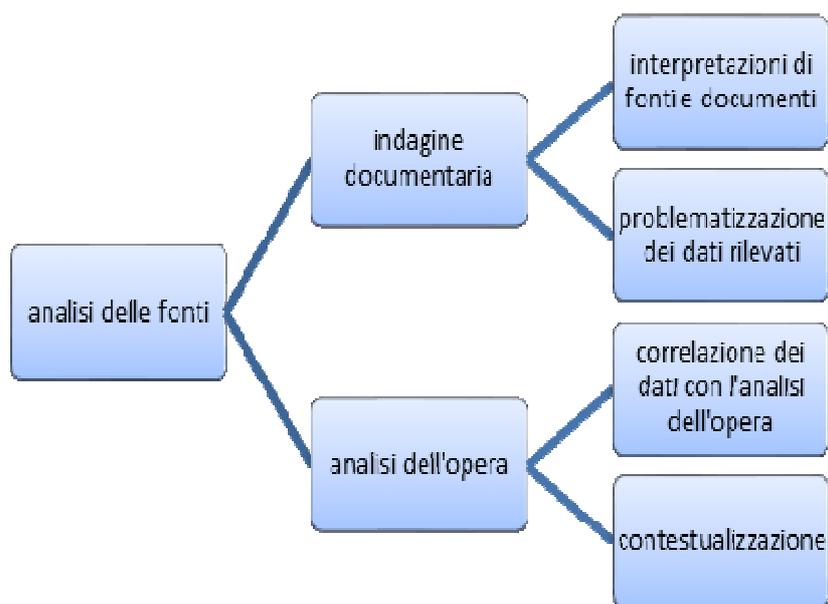


Fig. 2 – The seven steps of the historical research process.

The adaptation of the historiographical method, modified accordingly, may be further condensed into three steps (Fig. 3).<sup>23</sup>

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students to be an “active part in the processes that are peculiar to science”: EGGBRECHT, “La scienza come insegnamento” cit., p. 233.

<sup>22</sup> MARTINI, “La trasposizione didattica: concetto-chiave della didattica della musica” cit., p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> See DE LUCA, “Un approccio didattico alla costruzione del sapere storico-musicale” cit., p. 146.

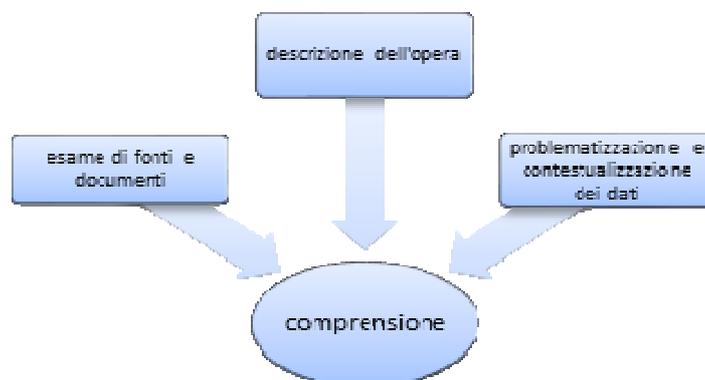


Fig. 3 – Adaptation into three steps of the process of Fig. 2.

The following is a brief description of the specific aspects pertaining to the three steps of didactic action. For examples, readers should refer to the didactic strategies produced in the past few years, and already published, by the research group.<sup>24</sup>

1) *Examining sources and documents.* The process of historical construction starts by finding, selecting and categorizing sources. In guiding students to develop a correct idea of what a ‘source’ is, and how it should be used, it will be essential to stress that sources are the very foundation of historical inquiry, and that traces of the past acquire the status of sources when historians examine them, drawing information from them. By *direct* sources we mean those that connect us directly to the past (the autograph manuscript of a music work, the first printed edition of it, the correspondence of composers etc.); by *indirect* sources we mean those that, with respect to the object of inquiry, are based on reconstructions and interpretations by others (a critical essay on a music work). At the stage of source selection teachers, for their part, will have to transpose their *expert knowledge* in light of the educational goals to be achieved, of the cognitive processes that these sources enable, and of the conceptualization and problematization they elicit and lead to. In classifying and presenting them, teachers will have to direct the attention of students to the informational potential of the documentation. This step precedes an important stage of education in historical research: the querying of sources and the gathering of data. The two steps are related, since data gathering depends on the query criteria.

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<sup>24</sup> Two didactic examples based on the transposition of the historiographical method can be read in: DE LUCA, “Un approccio didattico alla costruzione del sapere storico-musicale” cit., pp. 142-153; EAD., “Comprendere indagando?: come formare alla ricerca storico-musicale” cit. (English trans. “Understanding by Investigating?: How to Educate Students in Historical-Musical Research” cit.).

To get started, an individual piece of knowledge may be selected, on which to build an assignment. A possible example is a didactic strategy for the historical-musical comprehension of a piece like *Children at Play* by Béla Bartók.<sup>25</sup> Here the piece of knowledge on which to build the assignment through the analysis of a set of direct sources (letters, critical essays by Bartók from the period in which he composed the work) could be arrived at by looking for evidence of the Hungarian composer's interest for popular song. The teacher will decide whether to go through this stage with a group activity, asking each group to analyse one source, and assigning a broad question, organized by key words and identical for all, or alternatively one questionnaire per group.<sup>26</sup> What should be done is look for answers to the questions posed during the querying stage, and abstract and generalize the gathered information. These are key cognitive operations that give students an active role in the process of knowledge constructing and lay the foundations for their critical thinking.

2) *Describing the work.* In the three-part organization of our simplified historiographical method, this step merges with listening didactics, i.e. the part of the didactic transposition process in which teachers lead students towards 'reflective, conscious listening', thereby helping them grasp the structures of the music piece, zero in on its connecting and turning points, and build a mental map of it.<sup>27</sup> As was already mentioned, on the basis of this method (or that of performance, which is seen as "critical exercise" and is strictly related to listening), we can perform a mental reconstruction of the piece, place it in its historical context and unearth its relations with that context (historical-contextual line). This is therefore a foundational moment in the construction of knowledge. Linking back to the previous example, the listening stage will have provided information on the salient rhythmic-articulatory and phrasal features that determine the 'musical meaning' of *Children at Play*: in this case, the fact that the composition is based on a popular Hungarian melody.

3) *Problematizing and contextualizing data.* This third step leads to the sensitive stage of data interpretation. In the work of a specialist, this is a creative moment, but at the same time it should be scientifically grounded. Historians do not limit themselves to extracting data from sources, they also interpret them by problematizing them, which requires the application of strict criteria.

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<sup>25</sup> DE LUCA, "Un approccio didattico alla costruzione del sapere storico-musicale" cit.: this didactic strategy focuses on the piano piece by Béla Bartók, *Children at Play*, from the collection *For Children*, vol. 1, London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1946. Henceforth I shall refer to the already mentioned pages for complete examples pertaining to the various stages of the didactic process.

<sup>26</sup> On group activities in the domain of education and music didactics, see L. CERROCCI - C. CUOMO, "La gestione del gruppo classe nell'insegnamento-apprendimento della musica", in *Educazione musicale e Formazione* cit., pp. 472-492.

<sup>27</sup> LA FACE BIANCONI, "Le pedate di Pierrot" cit.

The subsequent activities are therefore aimed at problematizing and offering a broader contextualization of what emerged from the cognitive processing at the listening stage, and of what was inferred from the analysis of sources and documents. Coming back to the example of *Children at Play*, this means guiding students in problematizing the salient expressive features of the piece (melodic structure, pentatonic cores, rhythmic scheme) and what has emerged from the analysis of documents (ethnomusicological research carried out by Bartók; development of a specific musical language from the peculiarities of Hungarian popular song). Indeed, a critical, accurate comprehension work can only be the result of the intersection between musical competence and historical competence. This stage can be developed in several ways: a dialogical lesson or a more structured one, opting for a questionnaire or written composition/essay.

As we have seen, critical, accurate comprehension presupposes the combination of musical and historical competences. Students are encouraged to *interconnect* data and answer various questions, also with the help of further bibliographic material. This teaches them to both select knowledge and place it into a larger framework, creating a network from the pieces of information they have retrieved during the research stage. The purpose is to reconstruct the “historical meaning” of the work, i.e. to view it in its historical context, and highlight its relations with that context. Although the laboratory is the ideal place for music history didactics, as already argued in this article, this type of comprehension process can be successfully introduced in traditional classes as well. My own individual experience concerns the teaching of music history in undergraduate and post-graduate courses: within the structure of academic programs, the reproduction of the historiographical method in the lecture room, in particular of its music-didactical aspects, can for example be helpful when preparing students to perform historical and documentary research prior to writing their term paper. However, by tweaking the level of complexity of the three stages, it can also be used during frontal lectures, to motivate students to problematize and contextualize historical data, that is, to bring the composition back to its context of production and reception, and to learn how to understand its functions and connections with other areas of knowledge. In conclusion, the reproduction of the historiographical method serves to construct a context for the teaching and learning of musical-historical knowledge that is aimed at the comprehension of music as culture.

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