

## **Body and music at the improvisation in asymmetric meters: a workshop in progress**

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### **Abstract**

At this article we will explain the building process for the workshop that proposes improvisation through body/music interactions, using expanded techniques from the concepts initially brought by Emile Jacques-Dalcroze (1865-1950). Considering the internalization of musical materials through body exercises as a starting point, we will promote the study of lesser used structures in formal music education, like asymmetric meters and non-Western scale configurations via music improvisation. The use of these structures is inspired by twentieth century composers and the ways in which they dealt with non-Western music influences. After explaining the relevant aspects to our proposal, we will go through some examples of the music materials to be developed at the workshop.

Keywords: Body and music, asymmetric meters, improvisation.

### **Introduction: connecting music to the body**

In non-Western cultures, like in Africa and India, music is part of daily life, as part of a ritual and of a cultural identity. In those cultures music and dance are directly related, considering that those areas always have coexisted together at the performance, improvisation and in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. Despite the fact that music and dance were born together; the Western didactics usually treats those areas separately. Considering the perspective of music education, music educators of the early twentieth century created new teaching methodologies involving the body practice. Among them we can cite Emile Jacques Dalcroze (1865-1950), Edgar Willems (1890 - 1978), Carl Orff (1895-1982) and Murray Schafer (1933). These educators defended the idea of the use of the body to sensitize the student to

learn music. Their work was focused on the close relationship between the body and the development of cognitive structures.

Among those educators, Dalcroze was the first to initiate the thoughts about music and movement interactions, with the premise that body movement is an essential factor to rhythm development of the human being.

It was Emile Jacques Dalcroze who first realized that musical rhythm depends absolutely on motor consciousness for its fuller expression. His researches led him to evolve a system of rhythm movement designed to develop mastery of musical rhythm. This system of music education uses the body as the interpreter of musical rhythm and is known the world over by eurhythmics— good rhythm. (Findlay 1999: 2)

Besides the connections between body and music in non-Western cultures and in music educational proposals, we can also observe the growth of multidisciplinary initiatives in the performance scenery. Specially focusing on works focused on music/body approaches we can cite groups such as STOMP (UK), Crosspulse/Keith Terry (USA), KeKeÇa (Turkey), Tekeyé (Colombia), Step Afrika! (USA), B.A.S.E – Bay Area Sonic Ensemble (USA), The Gogmagogs (UK) and Barbatuques (Brazil), among many others<sup>1</sup>.

It is also interesting to observe the different approaches to music and movement when we refer to the musician and the dancer's points of view. Even not delving on that matter, we could consider that the music and movement interactions (here focused on the rhythmical aspect) could benefit both areas of their creational processes. Framed in this broad picture, our proposal is to build a one hour long workshop that raises the idea of music and body interactions through rhythmic and improvisation practices.

### **1. Musical materials to work with**

If MUSIC consists in a variety of music cultures, then MUSIC is inherently multicultural. And if MUSIC is inherently multicultural, then music education ought to be multicultural in essence. (Elliot 1995:207)

Besides body/music connections initially proposed by Dalcroze, there are some more musical structures that could provide expressive materials to be explored

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<sup>1</sup> Some of them recently participated at the International Body Music Festival 3<sup>o</sup> edition in São Paulo/Brazil, November of 2010, <http://www.br.internationalbodymusicfestival.com/2010/>

in proposals for music improvisation. Considering improvisational practice, there are several approaches to it, and this practice exists in many different contexts and periods of music history. In India, for example, where the music can be found in more traditional formats in the North (Hindustani music) and most innovative in the South (Carnatic music), improvisation is a vital element in the two regions. The structures of Indian music are malleable in nature and improvisation for Indians is a fact, a present element in his music. In some regions of Africa we can also find the practice of improvisation, often based on rhythmic ostinato that forms the basis for improvisation to happen. In Indonesia, Javanese music played in the formation instrumental called gamelan; musicians often improvise when they play small interpretative variations<sup>2</sup>.

Even with less flexible structures of improvisation, the sonority of the music of Indonesia and – with other melodic and rhythmic non-Western structures – have influenced twentieth century composers like Claude Debussy, Bela Bartok, Olivier Messiaen and Steve Reich. Each of these composers incorporated such elements in a particular way, creating extended forms of using non-Western musical structures. Referring to modern music at the beginning of the twentieth century Paul Griffiths says: “If there were to be a new release in music, it would come not from the West but from East” (Griffiths 1994:116). Considering the extended possibilities started from these composers from the influence of non-Western music we will be inspired by structures such as modal scales configurations, asymmetric meters and the use of ostinato patterns to elaborate our proposal. It is also important to highlight that – even influencing composers since the early twentieth century and extensively used in multicultural contexts at the current performance scenery – those structures are not totally absorbed on the music education in formal undergraduate musician programs.

## **2.Warming up: Body and rhythm ideas**

The Leadership Programme primarily provides a foundation for fundamental skills in creative collaboration, flexible performance and also communication/leadership skills. This includes a focus on improvisation; voice; body and percussion skills; exploration of non-European and folk-

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to observe that dance, music and improvisation are very connected at the mentioned cultures of Africa, India and Indonesia.

based approaches to arts practice; introduction to cross-arts collaboration; group composition; creative and repertoire-linked projects; performance and workshop-leading for different contexts. Building on this experience, students will devise, direct and perform their own material in a variety of ensemble and community settings. Students are then given the opportunity to work on Inter-Disciplinary and Inter-Cultural Collaborations with artists and practitioners from a range of disciplines and backgrounds, culminating in performances of newly created work. (Guildhall School of Music & Drama 2010)

Based on courses and workshops at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama<sup>3</sup>, and current improvisation workshops at USP/Brazil, as a teaching assistant of professor Rogério Costa<sup>4</sup>, I will then start this proposal.

At the beginning of our workshop we are going to propose some simple interactions between music and movement using some rhythmic patterns. Considering the “asymmetric” element as our rhythm motivation, the first exercise consists in a pattern that is built by adding an extra pulse each two measures.

The participants will step forth and back, using the established beat. The rhythms will be made by clapping the written patterns bellow. Depending on the group response, we can propose the same warming up phasing the entrances in a canon format.



Figure 1: Warming up rhythm proposal.

<sup>3</sup> I went to the Guildhall School to take the CPD course in 2001/2002 under a Brazilian scholarship in composition.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Costa is the dean of the music post-graduate studies at USP, Universidade de São Paulo/Brazil and has conducted research on free improvisation.

The second warming up exercise uses a body percussion ostinato in 7/4 (built in 3/4 plus 4/4), where we will propose a voice improvisation. People will walk using the ostinato pattern and will sing freely, until they feel comfortable to coordinate their movement to their voice.

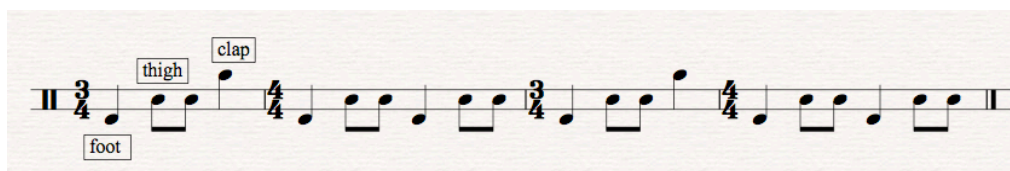


Figure 2: Ostinato pattern for voice warming up.

### 3. Proposals for group improvisation

After the warming up exercises we will go to improvisation based in an African chant from Tanzania named *Kalele*<sup>5</sup>. The first step for this proposal will be singing the original song excerpt



Figure 3: *Kalele* song (excerpt).

After singing the original song we will then present a “compound” version of *Kalele*, which will be built in two measures of 3/4 and one of 4/4.

We will propose that each participant try to improvise using voice or body rhythms while the group does the “compound *Kalele*”. If there are a large number of participants we will ask that to be made by some volunteers. The suggested scale to improvise will be Dorian F, although other scales and elements to improvise will be welcome

<sup>5</sup> In a second visit to the Guildhall School in 2008, we participated on a collaborative work with musicians of Tanzania, where *Kalele* was taught to the group.

compound kalele

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "compound kalele". It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a treble clef and a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The melody is written on a single staff with lyrics underneath: "ka le le ka le le ka le ña bo ka le le ka le le ka le le ka". The rhythm is complex, with time signatures changing from 4/4 to 3/4 to 4/4 to 3/4 to 4/4. Below the melody, a bass line is shown with two boxes labeled "foot" and "clap" indicating rhythmic accompaniment. The second system starts with a measure rest marked with the number "7" above it, followed by a treble clef and a key signature of three flats. The melody continues with the lyrics "le ma ma ka le le". The bass line continues with rhythmic accompaniment. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Figure 4: Variation of the original song used as a base to improvise

At this point the group should be connected to the body, rhythm, movement and improvisation. Of course the workshop will depend on the group dynamics, assuming that would be possible to have some variations on the presented material.

### Final Considerations

As a musician and dancer myself, I had been in a long journey walking through those two areas, making a large number of connections and possibilities between them. As a dancer, the music knowledge allowed me to deepen on rhythm and body connections such as the ones we can find in flamenco and Indian dance. I also was able to teach music and communicate to dancers knowing how important and effective the connection with music and movement could be. As a musician, the movement has led me to compositional works specially rhythm driven, always in a connection to movement, even when just playing an instrument.

Based on the idea of music and body interactions and considering the rhythm elements that are not so explored in music education – especially improvisational practice – I elaborated this workshop. I hope this work, together with other proposals, could contribute to new perspectives on body and music approaches and I am delighted to present this article in a workshop format.

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## Author's biography

Composer, arranger and pianist, she concluded her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts and an extension course in composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London. She is now pursuing her PhD at USP, University of São Paulo/Brazil, studying music improvisation in non-western cultures, under the supervision of Rogério Luiz Moraes Costa.