

Oral Transmission in French *Conservatoires*: Towards a Hybrid Learning Strategy?

Adapting musical transmission: a personal experience

As a young music graduate with a fresh performer's degree (Diplôme d'Etudes Musicales) in hand from a French *conservatoire*, I often replaced conservatoire teachers in the Parisian suburbs. On one occasion, I was asked to substitute for a recorder teacher who was suffering from severe health issues for a couple of months. I was required to teach several young students who were preparing for their end of year exams. The music teacher gave me instructions as to which pieces they were working on and what to expect from the students. One of them, she told me, was completely hopeless: after three or four years of study he could still not read music, he would play about two notes and then get stuck. She had no hopes regarding his exam performance.

When I first met the said student, I discovered a timid boy of eleven or twelve years who was indeed incapable of reading the music in front of him. After a painful ten minutes spent correcting his mistakes, replacing his fingers on the recorder and unsuccessfully trying to make him read out the notes or tap out the rhythm, I decided to try something different. I had recently started playing the bagpipes and through this had discovered a whole new way of learning music by ear rather than by reading music scores. I decided to implement my newfound insight and turned the music stand away from him. I told him we wouldn't be using the score anymore and asked him to imitate me, both singing the music and playing it on the recorder.

As weeks went by, we developed his aural and kinesthetic skills, improving his performance skills considerably. Soon before the exam, I reluctantly left the students, but an astonished recorder teacher—who had all but given up hope—wrote

to me to ask how I had managed to improve this particular student's skills sufficiently for him to play the piece and pass his exam. Over the weeks, the boy had gained confidence in his musical abilities and was able to relate to his instrument in a different way. The huge barrier presented by the music score had disappeared as he learned by watching, listening and imitating. After a few lessons, I placed the music in front of him again, but the piece had been cognitively absorbed and the score became a prop rather than the source of the music.

This article will examine different modes of teaching used in French conservatoires and explore how vernacular transmission methods have increasingly been applied in an institutional environment.¹ Inspired by Patricia Shehan Campbell's 'safe supposition',² I will give a brief insight into a specific music education system and reveal what existing transmission methods might gain from taking a more holistic approach to music education by incorporating techniques from different music traditions around the world.

French conservatoires and their score-based teaching tradition

French conservatoires have been the stronghold for score-based tuition since the creation of the Conservatoire in 1795, now known as the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris (CNSMDP). With a fierce reputation for strong theoretical knowledge, conservatoires often require young music students to undergo a year of music theory (known as *Solfège* or *Formation Musicale*) before even starting to play an instrument. Score-based tuition then unfolds throughout the entire training of the musician, three cycles of four years. Following Patricia Shehan Campbell's classification, music education in French conservatoires can be categorized as 'highly structured'.³ Music is transmitted in an extremely formal way

within an institution. Tuition includes group classes for music theory, analysis and harmony and one-to-one lessons for instrument training. The former can be described as ‘formal learning’, the latter as ‘technical learning’.⁴ Completing these categories, Estelle Jorgenson’s classification shows that conservatoires are a combination of schooling (transmitting the discipline and traditional beliefs related to the system) and training (acquisition of a variety of skills in order to render a performance).⁵

From the moment they start learning music, French students are confronted by written notation. Great emphasis is put on building analytical abilities based on reading scores, not necessarily with an instrument in hand, but by articulating the name of the notes (do-re-mi) independently from the music-making process. Whilst these skills are useful at a more advanced level, from my experience (echoed in Wandler’s study) young children almost unanimously suffer from this rigid structure.⁶

Strong score-based tuition means that children are never asked to step away from a music score to improvise, watch or imitate what they hear. This inevitably leads to a deficit in the ability to produce music without a written prop – exemplified numerous times by highly trained classical musicians who are unable or unwilling to play without sheet music, even in informal contexts. Applying Shehan Campbell’s conclusions⁷ to my observations, also supported by many French music educators,⁸ I notice that unlike other vernacular music cultures where learning involves different approaches including aural-oral and visual-kinesthetic techniques, conservatoire students are thrown into a one-dimensional world where the visual deciphering of the score overrides any of the other sensory skills that might be developed.⁹

From the mid-twentieth century, several music educators such as Carl Orff, Edgar Willems, Zoltan Kodály and Shinichi Suzuki, to name a few, created innovative methods around improvisation to address this issue.¹⁰ In France, composer

and cellist Maurice Martenot also provided a different approach to music education. He was concerned by the lack of musicality created by the bypass of aural skills and wrote in his later years that:

[T]raditional *solfège* creates a direct relation between notation and instrumental or vocal activity, thus more often than not bypassing the process of musical thought. As the latter cannot express itself, the sound might be correct but will be without expressive life, therefore devoid of music.¹¹

Similarly, musician and composer Claude Henry Joubert asked in 1988:

Haven't we ever noticed how reading scores is still dominant in the first years of musical studies? Thus the eye precedes the ear, image precedes sound, concept precedes perception and it is often the eye, the image and the concept that, eventually, replace the ear, the sound and perception.¹²

Returning to my young student described at the start of this article, the boy was being forced into such a system: if his eye was not able to decipher the code on the paper, he was therefore unable to play and thus deemed musically inept. Not once had he been offered an alternative to the notation-based system. Yet, from the moment he was exposed to another technique he progressed quickly.

Learning differently within a conservatoire framework

The questions asked by various music educators and musicians did not go completely unheard. In 1982, Maurice Fleuret, director of music and dance at the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs, declared that, following a policy of 'democratization', the State would support different kinds of music that had until then been overlooked including jazz, rock, popular music and traditional music. Thus, a significant number of music schools and conservatoires legitimized these different

music styles by inaugurating jazz, electro-acoustic and traditional music classes.¹³ Although a jazz class had been created at the Conservatoire de Marseille in 1963, jazz was mostly taught in private schools and it was only in 1991 that a class was opened at the CNSMDP.¹⁴

Similarly, although folk music education had been thriving within local music societies since the late 1960s, the first traditional music department was opened in 1987 at the Conservatoire National de Limoges.¹⁵ A report published in 2006 counted 80 schools with traditional music classes in 2001 (21% of the total number of music institutions in France at the time). One of the goals of Fleuret's policy was to bring to the classical world innovative elements from other musical practices.¹⁶

Despite fears of 'standardization' in order to fit in the institutional format, jazz and traditional music teachers seem to have retained inherent aspects of their teaching techniques, namely through oral transmission. At the CNSMDP, jazz students are taught a variety of skills including improvisation. Jazz student Adam Grauman, who trained at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm and spent his Erasmus year at the CNSMDP in 2013, evaluated that his French tuition was '20% score-based, 60% lead sheets where you had to improvise solos/grooves or walking bass, 10% by ear, and 10% just free improvisation'.¹⁷

At the Conservatoire National de Perpignan, traditional music tuition is 'hybrid', integrating both written and oral elements, although written skills may be reduced to grids, especially for diatonic accordionists.¹⁸ Here, again, score-based tuition was questioned; Luc Charles-Dominique gives an example of a teacher who, after many years supporting the *solfège* system, finally opted for a hybrid transmission system after realizing that 'the systematic use of written notation ... is more likely to block students than to make them thrive' and that 'many [students] fit

very well in a hybrid teaching pattern, both oral and written'.¹⁹ This technique, according to another testimony, helps students become independent musicians and provides them with transferable skills applicable to other repertoires.

However, these hybrid teaching systems do not seem to have found their way to classical instrumental teaching beyond individual initiatives by theory teachers (*Formation Musicale*, formerly known as *Solfège*). A young theory teacher, trained as a jazz saxophonist, explained to me in March 2016 how he had introduced improvisation and imitation in his class as he felt the students never distanced themselves from the scores. Thankfully, these issues seem to have made their way to state-level policies once again.

In 2010 Frédéric Mitterrand, Minister of Cultural Affairs, commissioned a report to 'generalize the new pedagogical approaches based on the decompartmentalization of esthetics, the valorization of listening and the increase of group music-making'.²⁰ Didier Lockwood, a prominent jazz violinist who created his own music centre in 2001, gathered a group of specialists to work on the issue and handed in a report in January 2012. In the opening letter, Lockwood points out that despite the fact that conservatoires have opened themselves to different kinds of music, they remain the stronghold of classical music whilst the latter only represents a small percentage of the world's music industry.

In today's world, he writes, popular music is much stronger economically and occupies a much stronger place in society. It also allows younger people to develop a taste for music beyond the walls of the conservatoire, especially with today's numerous digital platforms that makes music far more accessible to all. Lockwood remarks that classical music students should be able to make the most of popular music teaching and vice-versa; both music schools would gain greatly to exchange

transmission techniques.²¹ Students could then be trained to use different skill sets useful for today's musical world where musicians are brought to interact with many different styles of music. In order to address this, Lockwood's brainstorming team came up with a different 'art school' system where students would major in one type of music (classical/score-based or popular/oral-based) but would be required to attend lessons from the other branch. Theory classes, however, would be commonly taught and would encompass a wide range of repertoire, from J.S. Bach to James Brown.

Towards alternative transmission methods

An essential question which I believe to be at the heart of the written/oral transmission debate, echoed by Lockwood's report, is whether we want conservatoires to solely train virtuoso concert musicians or if an equally relevant goal would be to share the pleasure of music-making to the greatest possible number of people whilst remaining a place where high-level cross-genre music training is possible. If we are striving towards the latter – and this would not only be more democratic but also more economically viable for institutions – then it seems that we should strive towards more holistic music transmission methods within the conservatoire to include written, oral, aural, visual and kinesthetic skills.

Following on Shehan Campbell's 'safe supposition' that such skills would allow teachers to develop strategies better suited for their students,²² I concur that a hybrid tuition pattern would allow music-learners to experience music through different memory patterns and would facilitate their social insertion into the music scene, whether as an amateur or a professional. It would also help to recognize which learning mechanisms students best respond to, regardless of the teachers' preference. Indeed, had my case example student been introduced to different learning patterns

earlier, he may have discovered that his musical abilities were not limited to his reading abilities, and may have experienced far less stress when playing his instrument. As it is, I hope our brief encounter, during which I unwittingly put into action a hybrid learning system thanks to my exposure to vernacular learning methods, changed his perspective. It has certainly made me an advocate for an active hybrid learning mechanism within French conservatoires, merging teaching methods from both the written and oral music worlds. Such a transmission pattern is, I believe, already happening through individual initiative. It can, however, be systematically implemented once students who experience a hybrid learning system throughout their musical training become teachers, open to possibility and alternative learning paths.

¹ For discussions on different European music academies and conservatories using vernacular music within their transmission systems, see Tina Ramnarine, *Ilmatar's Inspirations: Nationalization, Globalization and the changing soundscapes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Juniper Hill, "The Influence of Conservatory Folk Music Programmes: The Sibelius Academy in Comparative Context," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18:2 (2009): 205-239 and Britta Sweers, "Toward a Framework for a Pedagogically-informed Ethnomusicology: Perspectives from a German Musikhochschule," *The World of Music* 51.3 (2009): 65-92.

² Patricia Shehan Campbell, "'Unsafe Suppositions'? Cutting across cultures on questions of music's transmissions," *Music Education Research* 3:2 (2001): 226.

³ Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Songs in Their Heads: Music and its Meaning in Children's Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 179, and *Ibid*, 217.

⁴ Edward T. Hall, "Improvisation as an Acquired, Multilevel Process," *Ethnomusicology* 36 (1992): 225, 229.

⁵ Estelle Jorgenson, *Pictures of Music Education* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 58.

⁶ Mariette Wandler, *L'Équilibre à adopter entre oralité et écrit dans les situations d'apprentissage instrumental* (Centre de Formation à l'Enseignement de la Danse et la Musique Bretagne-Pays de Loirs, 2008), 10-13.

⁷ Shehan Campbell, 2001, 225-226.

⁸ Maurice Martenot, *Principes fondamentaux d'éducation musicale et leur application: méthode Martenot, livre du maître* (Paris: Editions Magnard, 1970), Claude-Henry Joubert, *Métier: Musique! Quel enseignement pour demain 2* (Paris: Edition IPMC, 1988) and Didier Lockwood *Quelles méthodes d'apprentissage et de transmission de la musique d'aujourd'hui?* (Rapport à l'attention de Monsieur Frédéric Mitterrand, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication., 2012).

⁹ Wandler, 10-17.

¹⁰ Patricia Shehan Campbell and Carol Scott-Klausner, *Music in Childhood: From Preschool through the Elementary Grades* (Boston: Shurmer Cengage Learning, 2009).

¹¹ Maurice Martenot, *Principes fondamentaux d'éducation musicale et leur application: méthode Martenot, livre du maître* (Paris: Editions Magnard, 1970), quoted in Wandler, 12. All translations are by the author.

¹² Claude-Henry Joubert, *Métier: Musique! Quel enseignement pour demain 2* (Paris: Edition IPMC, 1988), 97.

¹³ Anne Veitl and Noémi Duchemin, *Maurice Fleuret, une politique démocratique de la musique: 1981-1986* (Paris: Comité d'Histoire du Ministère de la Culture, 2000), 325.

¹⁴ <http://larevue.conservatoiredeparis.fr/index.php?id=453>, last accessed 1 April 2016.

¹⁵ Fédération des Associations de Musiques et Danses Traditionnelles (FAMDT), *L'enseignement des musiques traditionnelles en France* (Parthenay: FAMDT, 2006), 10.

¹⁶ FAMDT, 11.

¹⁷ Adam Grauman, Facebook communication with the author, 1 April 2016.

¹⁸ Charles-Dominique, in FAMDT 2006:65.

¹⁹ Ibid., 66.

²⁰ Mitterrand, 2010, in Didier Lockwood *Quelles méthodes d'apprentissage et de transmission de la musique d'aujourd'hui?* (Rapport à l'attention de Monsieur Frédéric Mitterrand, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication., 2012).

²¹ Lockwood, 2012.

²² Shehan Campbell, 2001:225-226.

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