

## Pre-Instrumental Training – Doing Dalcroze

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The piano continues to be one of the most popular instruments for children to learn. Its ability to produce such a range of sounds and dynamics simply by pressing a key remains fascinating for children. In the schools where I have taught it has dominated among the peripatetic teachers and, as a Head of Music, I had more enquiries from piano teachers looking for work and more enquiries from parents for piano lessons than for any other instrument.

My own first experiences as a young pianist were very frustrating. In retrospect, my few “false starts” on the instrument and my “lack of application” were clearly symptoms of a child wanting to play with music, to engage with music. The piano lessons didn’t seem to allow for this and were geared towards learning about crochets and quavers. It seemed that the further I “progressed” in my piano studies the more I really moved away from the music and towards making the piano work as directed by the printed page. Worst of all, with my mind taken up so much by the mechanics of playing, decoding, co-ordinating, memorising and learning pieces, I didn’t learn to listen properly.

This problem, to do with listening, was recognised 80 years before I first touched a keyboard by a music educator working in Switzerland. His name was Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. With direct reference to the piano he said:

*“.....the ear is not appealed to in judging sounds. It takes in the sound without having made any effort to call it forth, and also without having to decide whether it is correct or not. .... the fact that the sound is produced mechanically by the impact of the fingers, and that the only means of checking its place in the context is supplied by the eyes first, and afterwards by the touch, induces habits of laziness as regards the ear.”*

He goes on to say:

*“It is well known that any physical faculty not exercised during the period of growth is checked or retarded in its development. It is the same with piano practice; unless this is accompanied with exercises in hearing, it produces idleness and inertia of the powers of hearing.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

I am sure many would be appalled to think that anyone could learn to play the piano while not listening to what they are doing. The sad fact is that it is all too

simple. Consider the mammoth task a child has to overcome when first we sit them at the piano. Piano technique is immensely complicated, comprising numerous types of co-ordination between left and right hands, feet (once pedal is added), eyes and ears. The fingers need to develop great sensitivity, independence and strength. Posture needs to be right from the start and involves a combination of strength and flexibility and the ability to release the weight of the arms for the purposes of securing a rich tone. Spatial awareness needs to be practised in order to find notes without looking and, later on, jumps and leaps in space. These require just the right amount of energy to land in the correct place with the correct weight and freedom of movement using at times just the hand and at other times the whole arm and even shift of body. The body needs to respond rapidly to all manner of instructions both visual (the written music), aural and kinaesthetic, and to do this without interference or overuse of energy causing tension. Then there is the language of music they must take on board: note values, bar time, rhythm and dynamics. Phrasing on the piano can be particularly challenging when there is nothing to breathe into and no bow to sustain as in the voice, wind or string instruments and structure is often left to one side or until the aural test demands some reference to it later on.

Like many children I learnt to play the piano reasonably well, despite all the challenges. The fact, however, that we often begin instructing a child on playing the piano before the child has developed a love of music or song now strikes me as doing things completely the wrong way around. Indeed Dalcroze believed that *“the study of the piano, an instrument of music expression, should begin only when the child has become capable of experiencing musical sensations, feels the desire to express them and has learned to respond with understanding”*. He suggests that, before the child is bogged down with all the technical and intellectual difficulties described above, and that, before their fingers are “called upon to produce sound and combinations of sounds on the keyboard”, the child’s ear should first of all be familiarised with all the possibilities of the piano. It is, after all, the ear that needs to control the fingers. If it does not then the child will not be capable of making subtle gradations of tone, find sounds by ear (and reconstitute melodies when the memory slips), transpose, interpret polyphonic music effectively shade, accent and articulate musically – as these things depend on the ear as much as touch.

For Dalcroze, this ‘familiarisation’ of sound would come where all aspects of music are addressed through movement. He proposed using movement to understand musical elements such as pulse, notation, rhythm, dynamic energy and nuances of tempo, which had, up until then been taught in an intellectual way, leading to the creation of technicians rather than musicians.

All this came about at a time when European and American psychologists and educationalists were beginning to look at the child as a whole being and researchers were emphasising that the nature of rhythm was fundamentally a motor function. For sound to be produced there must be corresponding movement. Dalcroze became convinced that in order to develop as a musician one first needed to use one's own body, or more specifically the action of one's body to learn the language of music and to build up the necessary skills required. It is "at one and the same time the source, *the instrument* and the basic requirement of all understanding" <sup>(2)</sup>. The method that emerged was called Dalcroze Eurhythmics (from Greek *eurythmia* meaning "good rhythm"). The central branch is known as rhythmics and is the area where music is explored through movement. The other branches are ear-training (solfa) and improvisation (specifically, improvisation for movement).

Dalcroze said "if children are to become musicians, their pianoforte studies should be preceded by at least *two years'* elementary study of Eurhythmics (the rhythmics and solfa branches) i.e. beginning through play at the age of five or six. This study will include singing and aural exercises in which both physical and mental powers will be directed simultaneously towards knowledge of music and its elements and the gaining of an inner musical sense." Through this multisensory approach the child will build up within their very muscles and nervous system an understanding of the language of music through whole body movement, the feeling for different note values, rhythms, bar time etc. With these motor images securely in the body the child then has a vocabulary of sensations. These can be used by the parts of the body later on when they begin to play the instrument. In this way the playing is not mechanical but is infused with sensations drawn from past experience.

Why use the whole body and why isn't it sufficient to train only the parts of the body that play the instrument? One reason is that learning first through the whole body follows the natural pattern of development. Gross motor skills come before fine motor skills. Big movements are practised before little movements. What can be done in a large way is then refined and practised in smaller ways. Learning through whole body movement also arouses in the child the things they do spontaneously - walking, jogging, skipping and running etc. It is through these very natural actions that Dalcroze developed ways of giving the child an experience of pulse, followed by movements twice as fast and slow, which naturally lead to basic notation. The crotchet is walked (known as 'walk' in Dalcroze terms), quavers are jogged ('jogging'), the dotted quaver/semiquaver is skipped ('skipty'), and semiquavers done at a controlled run ('running quickly'). The emphasis is on experiencing the feelings that each of these notes has and how each has its own particular quality. The emphasis is not on

counting, which as Dalcroze remarked is “less likely to promote a regular pulse, simply add a verbal problem”.

This is true even when a longer note such as a minim is added. This note, generally known as a ‘stride’, is experienced as an elongated walk. All of these natural movements are experienced through play during the course of a lesson, where the child follows the lead of the teacher, who improvises music to represent each step on the piano (or other instrument, including singing). The ear is immediately engaged in the process, as the child listens to which ‘step’ the piano is playing. If the child does not respond to a change in the step the teacher can immediately observe this and do whatever is required to bring their attention back.

These note values are not, however, experienced just in the legs and feet. They are transferred to as many areas of the body as possible – head, shoulders, knees, fingers, elbows, etc. By co-ordinating themselves with music the child’s whole body begins the process of becoming an organised being, free from tension and having a rapid and regular communication system between the body and brain. With the addition of other movements such as jumps, swings and sways, they also begin to understand how each part of their body can move and develop the ability to manage energy and release weight, both of which are crucial later on at the piano.

It is impossible to engage with rhythmic activities without listening. The teacher has instant visible feedback as to how each individual child is responding. But experienced rhythmic teacher can also recognise the personality and temperament of each child simply by the way they walk.

*“Those with easy natural gait, whose tempo is readily modifiable, possess in essence the suppleness of rhythm. Those who are stiff and unnatural may have a mental idea of metre, but their rhythmical accentuation will be sharp and inflexible, while those of irregular gait and gesture will manifest an uneasy restless rhythm. All these defects, however, may – and should – disappear, or at least be considerably lessened, by means of rhythmic exercises arranged for the purpose of enabling the child to control his muscles rapidly and to co-ordinate diverse movements.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

Many of the skills that children have to develop right at the beginning of their studies could be addressed through rhythmic work. For instance, if the child readily understands the language of music and can move his/her body freely and without tension and has learnt how to listen, then the teacher can focus more effectively on other areas of study such as technique. The teacher’s job is made much easier and the child is not overloaded with too many things at the same time.

The language of music can be explored and learned so effectively through whole body movement, harnessing as it does the child’s spontaneous desire to move.

What is needed first is a sense of pulse, which can be learned by stepping, clapping and moving to music. While children may not initially co-ordinate their movements perfectly with sound, an exercise like this does engage the ear straight away. If the child is not in time with the music the teacher can find ways of encouraging them, in whatever way they can, to refocus. Once a relatively steady pulse is achieved then the child is challenged to keep following the piano even if the music gets faster or slower, or to maintain the pulse even if the piano stops for a short while and then resumes.

I can illustrate this with some simple exercises that are best experienced using the whole body. This, of necessity, demands a certain amount of space. But, while the confines of a small piano studio are not ideal, many exercises can be adapted and executed in such a space. If you are uneasy about improvising then you could sing or tap a tambour. Get the child to clap with you as you tap until you achieve unison. This may take a number of weeks, depending on the age and ability of your student, but a little practice at the start of each lesson awakens the ears and makes them alert. Vary the quality of the music so that it is sometimes loud or smooth or soft and ask them to clap in this way too. Once they are relatively good at this then you can gradually vary the tempo of the pulse, *gradually* getting faster or slower and getting them to follow you. Ask them to do this with their eyes closed so the focus again is on listening not looking. Then you could ask them to face away from you, tap in unison together but tell them that you are occasionally going to stop and that they should continue. To ensure that the pulse remains constant ask them to create with their hands the shape that a fountain would make: clap at the bottom, watch the water rise and spill outwards over the top and down to the bottom again. If the physical space of each clap is kept the same the pulse will remain constant too. Alternatively ask your pupil to stop at a given signal (you could simply say 'stop') for four counts and then continue.

From here Dalcroze got children to step, clap and move twice as fast and twice as slow as the pulse played. If the pulse is seen as a crochet (a 'walk' step) then twice as fast gives us quavers ('jogging') and twice as slow a minim ('stride'). Again, if there is no room to do this, try getting your pupils to clap each one of these note values against you. The faster pulse ('jogging') will be clapped using less space than the stride, which will correspond to the image of a large fountain. In this way quavers are experienced as having more energy and lift than the crochet and the minim is not learnt as being equal to two crochets but having a quality and length uniquely its own. They are heard by the ears, felt in the muscles and seen with the eyes – a much more profound kind of learning than just knowing a notes

mathematical value. These images, both visual and motor, are extremely valuable when the child plays the piano. As the piano key, once struck, is heard and no amount of extra pressing can do anything to the sound it is these images that will enliven the playing and keep the performer involved. Because of the mechanical nature of the piano it is too easy for the body not to be involved with the sound and for it to 'switch off' along with the ears.

Each note may have its own quality but how do they relate to one another? Once the children have been able to be with and against an external sound or action they can then co-ordinate two note values together – stepping one and clapping the other. The piano determines what the hands or feet should be doing by representing the hands in the treble clef and feet in the bass clef. Both start with a crochet pulse (walk) but then the treble clef moves to quavers (jogging). This shows how the notes are related to one another but without the need for counting. Later the pupil might use both hands (the left hand following the bass and the right the treble) so as to imitate more their roles at the piano.

“Visual attention to notation, which tends to distract from listening, is delayed until a later stage when the basic concepts of music have been experienced and absorbed” <sup>(3)</sup>. “Musical theory is too often the study the signs of music, instead of being the experience and analysis of music itself. It ought to be a consequence, not an end in itself.” <sup>(1)</sup>

Explored in a Dalcroze way, i.e. using full body movement, even these simple exercises are helping develop within the child a number of critical skills needed to be a musician. The obvious ones are listening skills, being able to respond with another (ensemble skills) and developing a variety of co-ordination skills. Being able to match and vary the energy according to the quality of the music. Developing an internal pulse. Being able to galvanise the body into action (suddenly or gradually, as when changing dynamics or tempo). Equally being able to check an action when doing the reverse. Developing a relationship between sound and space. Reacting at the appropriate moment. Being able to co-ordinate either against another or against oneself, which is the start of polyrhythm and part playing. Learning about how each part of the body can move. Learning how to move effortlessly.

*“Rhythmics is a musical education based, above all else, on listening and an education in movement based on this listening”.* It makes the whole body into a living, rhythmical organism. It develops bodies free of tension and able to respond appropriately in all situations. Dalcroze again, *“The course will ...prepare the pupils*

*directly for playing the piano, in that they are accustomed to interpret music with any part of their body”<sup>(1)</sup>*

While training at a young age is preferable, the study of Dalcroze does not have to be restricted to the Early Years. Whole body learning can be of use to the mature pianist and there is much that can be accomplished later on. Although your listening skills may be solid and your co-ordination secure, Dalcroze Eurhythmics can still be extremely beneficial, especially in the realm of interpretation. I believe Dalcroze offers a unique way of looking at music and unlocking music. Dalcroze can shed a new light on a familiar piece because its physical approach gives emphasis to what music, and all the elements of music, feel like. Training in Dalcroze Eurhythmics gives even the qualified musician a new inner vocabulary of motor images that can be applied to performance and can free one’s playing enormously. The goal of Eurhythmics is to enable one, at the end of a period of study, not to say “I know” but “I feel”. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze wrote in 1898,

*“I look forward to a system of music education in which the body itself shall play the role of intermediary between sound and thought, becoming in time the direct medium of our feelings...the child will thus be taught at school not only to sing, listen carefully and keep time, but also to move and think accurately and rhythmically. That would constitute at once instruction in rhythm and education by rhythm”*

### **References:**

- <sup>(1)</sup> *The Piano & Musicianship* by Jaques-Dalcroze
- <sup>(2)</sup> *Comparing Dalcroze, Orff & Kodály* by Gilles Comeau
- <sup>(3)</sup> *Teaching Rhythmics* by Elizabeth Vanderspar.

(All books available from Dalcroze Books T: 01932 348754)

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