

Movement and music

a story told through the
encounter between
Music Learning Theory and
Atem-Tonus-Ton

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Introduction

*I said: 'O my brothers, who have reached the west,
through a thousand dangers, do not deny
the brief vigil your senses have left to them,
experience of the unpopulated world beyond the Sun.
Consider your origin: you were not made
to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.'
With this brief speech I made my companions
so eager for the voyage, that I could hardly
have restrained them, and turning the prow
towards morning, we made wings of our oars
for that foolish flight, always turning south.*

(Dante, Inferno canto XXVI)

Before speaking of movement and music learning, I believe a premise is required to bring to mind the sense that music education and didactics have in a child's life. I feel that it's important to underline once again that we are dealing with a process that, to be supported and encouraged, calls for care and knowledge. This is because activities in music learning do not simply involve a gradual acquisition of the abilities needed to perform music, but are aimed at favouring the development of artistic expressiveness, with art understood as the key to creating new paths along which to open up one's knowledge of oneself and the world.

Thanks to what we have learned from the neurosciences, we now know with certainty that music is an initial form of knowledge, pre-logical and pre-semantic, like all sens-

ory experiences. And when I say initial experience I am not only referring to an early phase in life, but also to how we begin to approach all that is not yet known to us, even as adults. Movement is knowledge for children who form their own selves through experiences that bring them into contact with both the external world and their own inner world. Movement is the expression and at the same time the form of their growth and their emancipation, as they move towards autonomy; while they explore space and time, force and weight, nearness and farness, they control their own world. This proceeds from the illusion of being omnipotent “creators” of the world – given by each mother to her child, foreseeing their every need at the outset of life, so as not to be perceived as being separated from them – to their progressive construction of a sense of reality. These are bodies in movement, in a continuous search for balance.

An episode from the film “Dreams” by Kurosawa comes to mind, in which the director, standing still in front of a Van Gogh painting, dreams of passing inside it. Running, mingling with the colours, blending in with the yellows and the oranges in the fields, he is ultimately amazed when faced with the flight of the black crows. As though, in order to understand the marvellous work of art in front of him, he had to fully immerse himself within it.

Movement is thus to all intents and purposes a sensory experience, the *sixth sense*⁹⁷ with which we at the Audiation Institute, committed for years to exploring the role of the body and its movements in the concept of audiation, have become familiar, in both its name and its content. Along with the five senses of hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell, we also have movement, whose own sensory receptors are found along the ligaments, muscles, articulations and bones. Like all sensory experiences, movement does not only offer information but is gradu-

ally perfected in its role of anticipating actions and knowledge of the inner and outer world. It is thus the *sixth sense* through which we know something without being able to consciously reconstruct the path that brought us to it. It is like something that comes from another world, or from a feeling of ours that is still immersed in an undifferentiated sensoriality that only by gaining access to perception and becoming thinkable will take on a form and a memory.

I hope this premise will allow us to approach the concept of audiation with greater attention towards the role of the body and movement, within our cherished world of MLT.

We know that audiation is not “only” a musical thought but also corresponds to one of Edwin Gordon’s extraordinary intuitions, according to which knowledge and understanding of music also come about with the body in the body. The body first feels and then knows rhythmic pulsation, melodic directions and much more; it is able to anticipate solutions and invent new paths.

The body and movement are not simply tools at the service of the learning process, they are the place in which this process is fulfilled and is able to find its own expression. In movement, children experience and give life to their own artistic expression.

When speaking of movement we must not only imagine a small child who is listening to music via the continuous flow of movement proposed by the teacher. We must also imagine an older child who through their gestures will coordinate their own audiation with a musical instrument, with their own breath and their own voice. These gestures involving instruments will maintain the same value in knowledge and expression as those of a smaller child running about the room excitedly while listening to a piece they have recognised.

⁹⁷A. Berthoz, *Il senso del movimento*, McGraw Hill 1998

With a child's development, movement loses none of its value and force, being rather nourished by the awareness and subsequent formalisation of musical content. It changes form, certainly, it takes on a sense and will later become the network on which improvisation relies. It is a source of pleasure. It weaves relations. It nourishes motivation. It gives a voice to silence.

The question now arises: what movements can we propose to favour all of this?

Over the years we have found many interesting suggestions and many answers to our questions⁹⁸ in Atem-Tonus-Ton, the research of the German Maria Hoeller Zangenfeind⁹⁹.

Atem-Tonus-Ton – literally breath-tonicity-sound – is a type of research aimed at enquiring into the bodily nature of the voice and of instrumental sound, founded on listening and bodily awareness. The movement of breathing, above all, which intertwines elements such as posture, balances, spaces of resonance, places of support and sustainment. The relations between all these elements are capable of blending together the matter of sound and, along with audiation, giving a voice to music according to individual ways of feeling and interpretational intentions. Tonicity, resistance, grounding and listening all take on a bodily and movement-based character, our awareness of which is always born out of an initial sensory experience. Listening to our breathing, coming into contact with audiation, finding points of support and the tonicity needed to give voice to that which is already alive in the mind and the body: this is an important path to be undertaken. For the small child, who expresses all of this in their first musical dialogues, and for the adolescent, who makes every effort so that his trumpet expresses all that is alive within

him already, the path is the same. Along this path the body is the protagonist, as are, above all, the relations continually interwoven between feeling and expression.

In music education, all too often the body and movement are relegated to a secondary position, seen as important no doubt, but secondary. The work done with Atem-Tonus-Ton attempts to recuperate the value that the neurosciences have, in other contexts, given to movement: movement is knowledge, it is expression, it is relation.

Personally, I am quite unenthusiastic about all ideas in music didactics that use previously organised sequences of movements. If we wish to respect the sensory value of motor experience, then we must let movement have an exploratory character. I don't believe it is particularly useful, except in a recreational sense, if one prefers, to come up with a well-defined structure for a series of movements to be carried out all together. Indeed, in this kind of context one's attention will probably be captured by the desire to carry out the proposed movements properly, and be coordinated, proficient and correct. One will certainly not be involved in an experience based on listening and perceiving the musical context.

Movement, on the contrary, must not be used to awaken the attention, to warm up or prepare oneself, or to activate the nervous system. All of this would make it highly reductive, and even embarrassing.

Movement can also be invisible and completely internal, consisting in my willingness to let myself be moved by listening, by relations or by my own audiation. We do not want to transform a sacred music choir into a Gospel choir. We are not looking for athletic performances, nor conditions for meditation; instead, we attempt to construct a condition for our students in which they are fully

⁹⁸ For further details on this topic, see S. Biferale *La terapia del respiro. Dall'esperienza sensoriale all'espressione musicale*, Astrolabio, Roma 2014.

⁹⁹ Maria Hoeller Zangenfeind (1952-2011) was a breath therapist, student of Ilse Middendorf and creator of Atem-Tonus-Ton, who published *Stimme von Fuß bis Kopf. Ein Lehr- und Übungsbuch für Atmung und Stimme nach der Methode Atem-Tonus-Ton*, Studienverlag GmbH, Innsbruck 2004

active and in charge of their own learning process, in which their music takes on a sense for them, in which emotions and intentions are always vivid, are always part of the learning process and never appear at a later moment. "After learning the piece, you'll be able to interpret it"! Why don't we try imagining that to interpret is to learn? Much like Richard Grunow and Christopher Azzara¹⁰⁰, who teach that improvisation is knowledge, and Dina Alexander¹⁰¹ that the group, the ensemble, is where the greatest amount of learning occurs.

We should always bear in mind the bodily and material vision that ATT offers of the construction of sound and the voice within networks of relations. We must try to resolve cultural conflicts, often present when creating highly exciting situations for children and young people and then being afraid of their movements. It is highly important to "authorize" musical exploration through movement, and not to propose structured movements to children, at times even too early with respect to their development, on the contrary leaving room for running, which accompanies listening. Or again, helping an adolescent sing a piece before playing it, helping them feel it resound within themselves, filling it with tonicity and spaces, to better perceive its weight and functions.

Our colleagues at the Audiation Institute, while teaching a new piece to their school-aged students, leave them free to move about the room while singing it for them a certain number of times, allowing them to explore the piece initially through a movement that is unstructured as regards time and space, and can at times be chaotic and overexcited, even apparently distracting them from listening. Then they work on the voice of their young students with leaps and slides, changes of position in the room and

small gestures accompanied by precise sounds, all of which is already tied to the dynamics with which the song unfolds and to its rhythm, never proposed "only" to train the voice. The tonal and rhythmic patterns become the protagonists of the gestures, and breathing becomes their guide. In this way, the piece gradually takes shape and the voices adhere more and more closely to the musical content, which is increasingly understood in continuous passages between context and content. The pleasure felt by each student while noticing that the piece takes on ever more sense is palpable, while their voice becomes more assured and their listening more refined.

The work of Atem-Tonus-Ton continues to offer us much food for thought and many occasions in which to construct educative and didactic proposals. We might summarise its happy encounter with Music Learning Theory as an invitation to listen, to feel and to know with the body, to consolidate the value of aural-oral experience in the process of musical learning. In this way, it seems that we can help our students find the path that most closely corresponds to their bodily nature and their specific musical predisposition. Their interpretational intentions will also emerge, aware that this very bodily and musical specificity will make their voice unique, their song recognisable among many and the sound of their instrument their own sound. A path along which making music does not mean, for the musician, creating the re-presentation of an object outside of themselves. It means, instead, presenting themselves with it. It means incarnating music in a sounding body that moves between formal rules and expressive subjectivity. A movement that, like Ulysses, we can never do without.

¹⁰⁰ Azzara, C. D., & Grunow, R. F., *Developing musicianship through improvisation*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2006

¹⁰¹ Alexander, D. L., *Intrinsic motivation in a collegiate secondary music instrument class.*, University of Rochester, Eastman School of Music 2015.