

The Implementation of Batia Strauss's Method of Active Listening to Music with Didactic and Therapeutic Aims during Music Classes in Polish Public Schools

Renata Gozdecka, Ph.D.

Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin
The Faculty of Art, Institute of Music, Poland

Abstract: The article chronicles the implementation of Active Listening to Music, a pedagogical method developed by Batia Strauss that has become extremely popular in Poland in recent years. Strauss, working at Levinsky College for Teachers in Tel Aviv and managing the Branch of Music Teaching at the Jerusalem Music Academy, led workshops for a wide circle of participants worldwide. This article includes aims and forms of music therapy as used in Polish schools, a description of the method of Batia Strauss, particularly its therapeutic features, and means of implementation of elements of Strauss's method through a variety of music therapy techniques as adapted in Poland.

Key Words: Active Listening, music therapy, Batia Strauss

Introduction

Music therapy is nowadays a dynamically developing field. In Poland it developed most rapidly in the 1970s, and since that time the number of its practitioners and advocates has been growing continually.

As a form of psychotherapeutic treatment, music therapy evokes interest in a wide range of therapists. Based mostly on medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, it concentrates its healing and therapeutic activity mainly within the frames of these disciplines. Music, however, is not only a medium used in therapy – it is an essential element of the life of the contemporary human, regardless of health or impairment status (Szulc, 2005, p. 15). Teaching may become an important area for music therapy as the school environment provides many possibilities for therapeutic activity.

Current research by psychologists and pedagogues in Polish schools shows that the number of students with various impairments and health conditions is on the increase. The new educational reform introduced in Poland in 1999 divided learning into a new set of stages: I – integrated education, 7-9 years of age; II – block education, 10-12 years of age; III – grammar school, 13-15 years of age; IV – over-grammar education, 16-18 years of age. Grammar school has proven to be the most difficult stage for teachers. Many pupils in this age group often show anxiety, find it difficult to control their behavior, and act out numerous nervous reactions.

It would be extremely useful to introduce music therapy classes into such situations, both during music classes and in after-class activities organized at school. Music used with children and young people with this aim can become an important component of the educational process. Used by a therapist or a teacher, music facilitates communication, intensifies learning and helps students concentrate, both intellectually and emotionally. It also improves a variety of conditions that hinder learning, releases emotional tension, stimulates focus and memory and reduces aggression. Most teachers show interest in the way music influences such problems. Once they

have an awareness of the benefits, they can include music therapy in their yearly cycle of teaching music in public schools.

Aims and Forms of Music Education in Polish schools

Numerous pedagogical theories stress the importance of art in shaping the personalities of young people, and how it enriches them intellectually and emotionally. Aesthetic upbringing – an essential element of education - has as its aim to arouse sensitivity to its beauty, to evoke interests, and to shape a conviction that art makes an indispensable contribution to our lives.

This kind of thinking is a foundation of music education in Poland, which is based on the accomplishments of Polish pedagogy and psychology from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries as well as upon many European and American theories. Public music education developed in Poland most rapidly in the twenty-year period between the wars and in the 70s and 80s. The Polish idea of music education was brought into being by many academic centers. It is based on theoretical foundations (the theory of aesthetic upbringing, psychology, ethnomusicology, aesthetics, and other branches of the humanities), Polish traditions of teaching methods and music syllabus and on the achievements of pedagogues from other countries, especially the systems of E. Jacques-Dalcroze, C. Orff, Z. Kodaly and J. Mursell (Lipska & Przychodzińska, 1999, p. 5). The aims of the Polish concept of music education are versatile. They concern the development of basic musical abilities, shaping musical sensitivity and acquiring musical knowledge, all necessary to participate in musical culture. The contents of music education are equally versatile. The term “contents” refers both to the repertoire used for singing, playing and listening and the activities taught, such as singing, playing instruments, expression through movement, creating music, and listening to music. In Polish schools music classes are planned according to the principle of the integration of the aforementioned activities, which gives teachers the possibility to lead varied and interesting classes (Przychodzińska, 1989).

The first important area of teaching is elementary music which is simple in structure and fulfils a didactic function. The term “elementary music” covers uncomplicated musical material, that is, simple melodies with clear rhythm, allowing the principle of repetition, similarity and contrast, with simple formal structure, such as two- or three-part forms, rondos, rounds, and variations. Experiences with elementary music prepare pupils for music with more difficult structures and pieces which are much more musically sophisticated.

Elementary music, apart from its teaching function, plays expressive and aesthetic roles, manifested through what pupils experience in direct contact with pieces which evoke joy and entice the inclination to further musical study. Elementary music is an ideal material for active musical practice in accordance with the principles of Batia Strauss's method.

Taking into account the cultural and artistic values of our native folklore, the Polish concept of music education includes Polish folk music and ethnic music of other countries in its teaching program. This kind of music can be taught to pupils in the form of songs from different regions as well as instrumental pieces intended for both playing and listening.

In all music syllabuses intended for Polish public schools, artistic music occupies a special position. The term “artistic music” refers to the body of works created in past epochs of Western culture which reflects one of the great cultural heritages of humankind. This emphasis, while not unmindful of other repertoires, befits the culture of a Central European nation such as Poland. And thus the syllabus includes the examples of early music from the Middle Ages through Baroque, Classical and Romantic – the periods whose pieces comprise the main, standard repertoire of concert halls – to the Western art music of the 20th century.

Artistic, folk, and contemporary music presented to pupils in the form of directed listening to chosen compositions, is for the majority their first contact with this kind of work. It creates an opportunity for students to become seriously interested in music in the future. Making music accessible to pupils within the framework of a subject taught in school has many advantages. Most important are: regular contact with music, careful and accurate choice of material taught and attractive approaches to learning music. All of these characterize the method of active listening propagated by the Israeli pedagogue Batia Strauss. Apart from its didactic values, Strauss’s method can be successfully used as a form of therapy through music.

Music Therapy in Public Schools

The music education syllabus defined by the Polish Ministry of Education does not clearly specify any recommendations as to how to teach particular music therapy classes. The reasons for introducing music therapy to schools are mainly to influence the effectiveness of the intellectual work by pupils by toning down their nervous states, releasing tension through different relaxation activities and stimulating concentration and memory. Projects focused on such activities can be introduced briefly within classes and they can be incorporated into the principal topic of the lesson.

In the school environment there are children with different levels and degrees of emotional, behavioral, and adjustment difficulty. These derive from a variety of factors, including the attitudes of parents and teachers and stressful situations at school. To ensure a stress-free educational environment, the teacher should first of all secure an atmosphere conducive to peaceful learning. Music can be an important element in helping to reduce tension.

Modern teaching should incorporate different forms of therapy through art, including music, in order to shape in pupils the positive sides of their personality. In Poland, many student’s books as well as methodological guides for music teachers include many forms of therapy through music. These are often components of practical activities that can be used during music classes (Więckowska, & Rękas, 2001). They include, for example, different kinds of improvisation and musical dialogues between pupils which expose their emotional states, as well as different miming activities around given subjects. Practising music on the basis of simple forms such as AB, ABA, rondo, or round using percussion instruments can also prove an interesting form of relaxation during class, especially when led in an unrestricted way.

The implementation of such methods is obvious in the work with children with disabilities who are taught in Polish public schools either within mainstreamed classes, or in special education settings for children with paralysis, autism, or ADHD taught in so called

“therapeutic” classes. Regardless of the type of school, the Strauss method of active listening can be successfully as a form of therapeutic activity.

Characteristic Features of Strauss's Method of Active Listening to Music

Batia Strauss is a figure to whom music pedagogy owes a great deal. Her contribution to its development, both in Europe and around the world, is invaluable. After graduating from the Music Department in Israel and Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris in the 1960s, she began teaching in Levinsky College for Teachers in Tel Aviv where she worked till the end of her life. Beginning in 1979, she directed the Music Education Department at Jerusalem Rubin Music Academy, and for 20 years she taught workshops to a wide group of participants from all over the world. Polish teachers had a chance to get acquainted with her method in the 90s when Strauss visited Gdańsk where she taught the students of the Department of Music Education and Rhythmic (1993), and Warsaw where she participated in Carl Orff's Seminary at the Music Academy (1996) (Tarczyński, 2000).

Strauss's method is based on the assumption that listening to music shouldn't be passive. Getting acquainted with music should be based on the teacher's using different media such as movement, dance, gesture, singing, percussion, or instruments made by children, as well as other available objects used for generating sound; so called unconventional elements, such as plastic bags, mugs, keys or sticks. When one gives listeners/pupils a possibility to play with music, it becomes appreciated, understood and willingly listened to, be it artistic, folk, or popular music.

Teaching how to listen is one of the more difficult forms of music education. It demands from pupils both sensitivity of perception and the ability to focus attention. For those pupils who are truly interested, music can be a source of interesting and deep aesthetic experiences. In this situation the teacher is obliged to guide the students' capacity for understanding and perceiving music. This can be accomplished through setting particular music tasks for young listeners, motivating them towards a positive attitude, and inspiring their own musical experiences. Listening to chosen repertoire can be done in various ways. The teacher can use analytical listening which singles out particular sound layers of the piece, such elements as voices, instruments, units, the style of the period, the style of the composer, the form of the piece and its interpretation. The teacher can also present examples with reference to semantics and comparatively, within the context of the entire music curriculum. Finally, the teacher can use a third way of presenting music which incorporates various tasks which activate the process of listening.

Listening to music at school often poses teachers many problems, such as pupils' difficulty in concentration and in perceiving the multiple sound layers of pieces consciously, or in having to deal with non-musical duties while presenting the pieces, especially when the chosen examples differ radically from pupils' musical interests (as it is commonly known in Poland and elsewhere that art music is not the main interest of young listeners). Using appropriate methods can result in progress. One approach is to diversify the process of listening by using different methods, which will make it both more interesting and more thoroughly understood. Strauss's is undoubtedly such a method.

Active listening includes several stages. The first is the presentation of a chosen musical example followed by a conversation about the character of the music, the sound and other elements that can be recognized by the listeners adequately at their level. At this stage the teacher can create a story appropriate to the music in the lesson, which can then be presented through movement in the form of gestures or dance. This kind of exercise develops imagination and stimulates activity in the group.

The next stage is the introduction of percussion instruments or other sound making objects to the listening process (depending on the teacher's choice and upon the character of the piece) in order to create an orchestra with a conductor. The role of the conductor could be initially played by the teacher. However, later on, it should be given to one of the pupils. At that stage pupils have a chance to become the co-performers of the piece as their music becomes an accompaniment for the work played in the background. The accompaniment can be led freely or it can be restrained in the area of melody, rhythm, tone (using different groups of instruments at a given moment), or form (the same accompaniment for the repeated parts of the piece, which helps students to recognize the form of the composition).

Another stage of active musical participation can be playing percussion instruments while looking at the score prepared for the piece used in the lesson (Gozdecka, 2004, p. 285). The score can be prepared conventionally as the notation of the parts of particular instruments accompanying the listening, or it can be a graphic score made for the needs of children in the form of illustrations or different graphic signs, such as lines, points and drawings.

The method beautifully suits the Polish model of teaching music. It includes all forms of musical activity: listening, playing instruments, creativity, improvisation, singing, and movement. Strauss's method is extremely well-liked by Polish music teachers for its didactic value.

Didactic and Therapeutic Values of B. Strauss' Method of Active Listening to Music

Strauss's method has many virtues, both didactic and therapeutic. The most important of these is the potential for adapting a variety of works, regardless of the period they come from or features they possess. Teachers who want their classes to be therapeutically effective should not only know the repertoire, they should also exhibit empathy and have the attributes of a good, sensitive pedagogue who reacts to the needs of pupils. Pieces intended for music therapy classes can be classified according to mood. The teacher could choose compositions which are cheerful, sad, nostalgic, mournful, dramatic, pompous, or joyful and dynamic. Composers such as J.S. Bach, Chopin and Gershwin come immediately to mind; however, the choice should be guided by the type of class and the needs of the pupils.

Another value worth stressing is the possibility to teach rhythm and movement to children in the form of musical games or music listening through movement (for example, a separate choreographic preparation for each part in the form of clapping, slapping the thighs, snapping the fingers or walking in a circle, bearing in mind that when a part is repeated we should use the same patterns, as it allows children to recognize the form of the piece clearly). Experiencing music through movement can have a positive influence on the child's personality

and physical condition, as well as enhancing concentration and group responsibility. What is most important is for children to listen to music and become fond of it. Through that they can subconsciously acquire the knowledge of instruments and musical elements, such as rhythm, dynamics, form or tonality.

There are also many possibilities of implementing B. Strauss' method in combination with drawing or painting. Such activities performed under the influence of listening are an interesting form of musical interpretation; they exhibit emotion, invite artistic expression and allow students to visualize pieces in the form of "picture scores." During such activities the teacher displays a set of graphic signs suitable to the form of the piece on the board and points to particular signs assigned to specific percussion instruments while playing the composition. Music therapy in combination with plastic arts is particularly useful for children who haven't developed the ability to verbalize their experiences (Żychowska, 1999, p. 66).

Singing, although not always properly appreciated for its healing properties, is an excellent method of music therapy, especially when done in a group. Pupils singing in a choir or in a group in class experience different feelings such as the sense of togetherness, responsibility and satisfaction, as well as discharging emotional tension, another positive effect of singing. The music and lyrics become integrated during choral singing, while pupils follow the conductor's directions and feel the need to achieve a common goal.

Aware of these values, Strauss included singing in her method. She suggested that singing could be used while listening. Singing can be also successfully used in music therapy with autistic and stammering children who, thanks to this method, can establish a better contact with their environment.

There are many more advantages to Strauss's method. It enables pupils to perform prepared pieces in public, which encourages and motivates them to further activity. Furthermore, it allows pupils to identify with the artist performing the piece and to play different roles, such as that of performer or conductor.

Strauss's method is enthusiastically received by children regardless of their age. Music teachers who raise their qualifications in the Strauss method at workshops or during post-graduate studies also discover exciting new possibilities for music teaching.

When Strauss presented in Poland, she included only a few pieces as examples intended for active listening. Among them were Baroque, Classical, Romantic and 20th century art music pieces as well as folk compositions from different countries. The growing interest in the implementation of her method proves that teachers find it inspiring to look for their own ideas and to adapt her method in an individual way. Children with whom the method was used exhibit many positive features, such as consistency and persistence. They listen to music for longer periods of time and more attentively; they are more disciplined and accurate. Strauss also showed that thanks to music we can have fun and be happy, which in our times is much desired.

Renata Gozdecka, Ph.D., is an academic teacher in The Faculty of Art, Institute of Music at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin, Poland, and Director of Postgraduate Studies in the Institute of Music, co-funded by the European Union Structural Funds. Her academic

interests concentrate on issues in music education in the Polish schools. She can be contacted at: Wydział Artystyczny UMCS, Al. Kraśnicka 2a, 20-718 Lublin, Poland or through e-mail at: regoz@poczta.onet.pl

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