



## Music Listening Activities in the Music History Classroom. What, Why, and How?

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### Abstract

*Music listening activities have always taken a relevant space in the teaching of the historical aspects of music. References to these kinds of activities can be found in the proposals of the Brocca Commission for the introduction of new courses at the Teachers' High School and, then, in the 2010 guidelines for the Music and Choreutic High School curricula.*

*But, what is the best way to propose music listening to the students? What comes first, the music listening or the explanation of historical notions? What are the criteria to select the repertoire to be listened in the classroom? What is the role of historical musical sources?*

*This paper aims at answering these questions, by taking into account not only the main literature in the field of music education, but also the legislative indications, adopting a critical approach which considers the role that music history plays in the music curriculum.*

**Keywords:** *Music education; music history; listening;*

### 1. Introduction

Music listening has always been of crucial importance as a teaching tool for the music history teacher [1]. This is true both in middle and high schools, and it is also demonstrated by the use of textbooks accompanied with CDs and DVDs, offering to the teachers the chance to integrate various practical exercises.

In Italy, the pivotal role of the music listening was recognized since the last century, when the subject "music history" acquired its autonomous place within the high-school programs, conceived to train the future generations of elementary teachers, in execution of an experimental model called "Brocca" [2].

The curriculum of music history considered the listening of compositions of the past as a way to facilitate the musical "appreciation" of the students [3].

The teacher was asked to select an accurate repertoire to be offered to the students, in order to communicate them the idea of the development of musical styles, forms, and eras.

Then, the Ministry elaborated some guidelines to facilitate the teachers in the involvement of the students in the musical listening activities: first, by allowing them to immediately listen to the musical composition; then, by analyzing with them the musical sheet and by describing the historical and cultural context in which the piece was composed by its author; lastly, by enriching the theoretical explanation through quoting references to historical musical sources of different kinds: primary (literary sources – such as chronicles or letters of the composer –; iconographic sources – e.g., a portrait of the composer –; musical sources – the autograph and the copies of the musical composition –) and secondary sources (modern editions of the pieces of music, scholars' articles on particular aspect of the historical period, etc.). Currently, the above-mentioned curriculum of music history and its methodology are no longer in force, since the Brocca experimental classes were replaced by new courses in Human Sciences (in Italian, "Liceo delle Scienze Umane"), by means of the Gelmini's reform in 2008 where music is an elective only subject [4].

Differently, music history remains a compulsory subject at the Music Oriented and Choreutic High School ("Liceo musicale e coreutico"); while at a middle school level it is included in the curriculum of general music education, leaving the teacher free to determine the space dedicated to historical topics.

Looking at the learning outcomes, at the Music Oriented and Choreutic High Schools, the music history course should provide not only the knowledge of historical contents, but also the methodological skills to independently develop critical listening abilities.

### 1.2 The selection of the repertoire

The selection of the repertoire constitutes a crucial step for the teaching of music history.

The National Guidelines enacted by the Ministry of Education [5] for the Music Oriented and Choreutic High Schools indicate some "listening pathways" to be employed by the music history teacher.

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In particular, during the first two years of high school, the students enrolled in the music oriented section should have the opportunity to listen:

a) the most representative musical pieces composed for an instrument which is different from the one the student played at school (to make an example, if the student is a violinist, he should listen to the 32 Beethoven Piano Sonatas, or to some *lieder* by Schubert and Schumann).

b) at least two well-rooted in the collective imaginary works belonging to the Western music tradition. The Guidelines mentioned, for instance: *Don Giovanni* by Mozart, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* or *Rigoletto* by Verdi.

As highlighted by the Guidelines, the music history lessons held at the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> year of high school should focus on the listening (always accompanied by the reading of the sources) of relevant musical works from the past; in the screening of these works, to favour understanding of the variety of interests, it is furthermore recommended to avoid a monographic or an encyclopedic approach (e.g., by assigning to the students the task to pay attention to the opera omnia of famous composers or compositions belonging to only one musical genre). Finally, the music history class of the last year of high school should be dedicated to the listening of the music covering a range from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, including the masterpieces of popular and jazz music.

From a methodological perspective, the choice of the repertoire should be made by the teacher by taking into account two different elements: a) the variety of musical genres, forms and styles; b) the in historical periods to which the various compositions date, without a chronological sequence being followed. That is to say that the teacher could organize listening activities without observing a strict principle of chronology: for instance, he or she could propose an activity on the piano preludes by Claude Debussy (by dividing it in different steps: a) listening to the prelude; b) making the students aware of the importance of the title of the piece, that evokes one or more images transposed by the composer into musical ideas; c) asking the students to analyze the sections that constitute the composition; d) encouraging the students in tracing the history of the prelude by means of historical musical sources [6]), and, in a second moment, an activity on Bach's Passions, without being worried about the "temporal gap" that divides these two musical works.

Then, the listening activities should be carried on by a pro-active participation of the students, stimulating their considerations on the piece of music and the reading of the music scores.

The historical information given by the teacher, as a way of integrating the listening, should be not only limited to the reference of the sources, but it should also be "food for thoughts", by showing to the students the interdisciplinary connections between music, general history, and other forms of art (above all, poetry and drama).

## 2. From music listening to the history?

One of the main issues associated to music listening pedagogy is how to coordinate the listening proposal with the necessity to illustrate the historical background.

In other words, what comes first, the music listening or the explanation of historical notions?

In the case the teacher decides to first propose to the students the listening, and later on giving the historical explanations, he or she should not to make comments about the piece of music or to provide biographical indications on the possible author, in order not to influence the students' analysis of what they are listening to [7].

Another more historiographic methodology takes into account the sound source as an evidence of a given historical period [8], helping the students to focus on specific characteristics of it. For this reason, the music listening can be seen as an activity that adds a value to the frontal lecture or to what is contained in the music textbook, that – for some commentators – remains the main instrument through which it is possible to give to the students a "written guide" to better appreciate the content of the music history class and to draw a line between the data that can be easily found in online resources [9].

This imply for the students a different kind of "mind exercise" [10]: the listening can be an effective learning tool, also if it is proposed after the "history", when it is experienced by the students through "reading keys" [11]. In so doing, the students are encouraged to focus on specific elements, such as the instrumentation chosen by the composer, the structure of the composition, the harmonic structure of the composition, etc.

Regardless of the methodological approach pursued by the teacher, the aim of the music listening activities should be to make the students "active listeners", curious about chance to go in depth with the history of music by listening to the masterpieces of the past [12], and also to be able to evaluate them in a critical and aesthetic perspective.



### 3. Music listening and the use of historical musical sources

Comprising the use of historical musical sources into the music history class represents a “new frontier” for the teachers. The music listening is, as such, an activity that entails the use of a source: obviously, a “sound” source, namely the recording of the music composition.

After having introduced, discussed, and evaluated together with the students this very source, the teacher has the opportunity and the choice to show to the class other sources.

All the sources, therefore, will be seen by the students as “pieces of history”, that facilitate their engagement in historical interpretation tasks of the musical composition.

In a second phase, the listening can be repeated using it as a prism through which reading the other sources; this can lead to a “continuous interchange” of historical data and information acquired from one source to the other.

Thanks to this process of cross-analysis of the sources (which is both horizontal and vertical, looking at the sources ideally placed in a “pyramidal” structure [13], where the basis is given by primary sources and the upper level by the secondary sources, either musical or non-musical), the students are embedded in the listening activities and they can develop some basic research skills.

In fact, they will be able to directly search the sources and they could also be involved in elaborating some “listening maps”, as soundtracks of the compositions pertaining to a historical period, to a composer or to a geographic area.

The invaluable function played by the historical musical sources within the music history class demonstrates the importance to tailor a “mixed teaching tool”, grounded on the music listening, meant to be an activity to be underpinned by the use of other sources. This allows the students not only to be aware about chronological events, but also to improve their abilities in observing and contextualizing the music in its historical components, building a “sense of history” by their own [14].

Given these premises, it is undeniable that music listening inspires historical considerations, raising interest around the art of music and their protagonists: not only composers, but also performers [15], patrons and music teachers of the past.

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