



Music and Didactics: *Der Erlkönig* by Goethe

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to reflect upon and share the ideas developed while I was specializing in German language teaching last year. My training at school focused on the perspectives offered by the use of music and multimediality in foreign, more specifically German, language and literature learning. In line with a successfully proven purpose, I mainly aim at showing that, in coordination with traditional teaching systems, original and innovative methods, based on concepts such as «multimediality», «interactivity» and «hypertextuality», are still one of the best paths to success in an attempt to motivate and engage students, thus getting their attention and arousing their interest. In order to show in practice the potentialities underlying a careful and intelligent use of these instruments, one of the canonical texts in German literature which are studied at school will be analyzed. Students often end up ignoring its haunting beauty and dramatic grandeur if it is presented with traditional teaching methods. It is one of Goethe's Sturm und Drang most famous ballads: «Der Erlkönig».

I will introduce a teaching unit where foreign language and literature teaching is mainly carried out through Vertonungen. Along with intertextual and interdisciplinary links, «multimedial, hypertextual and interactive» resources, such as cinematography, the use of videos and flash footage and other digital media, music (in its rap, classical, rock/metal variants) will therefore be at the core of this Unterrichtseinheit and this study will focus on its beneficial contribution to foreign language learning.

The use of multimediality, which mainly aims at activating the above mentioned motivational factor and getting students to adopt a critical approach to poetry, will also encourage them to reflect upon how to make use of literature and, more generally, how languages contaminate each other.

1. The use of music in foreign language teaching

In language teaching psychologists and scholars strongly underline the importance of the emotional sphere - an inducer for intrinsic motivation - for «safe and long-lasting» foreign language learning¹: «a language is more likely to be retained if it has an impact on us, if contents produce an echo in ourselves or meet our communicative needs and desires»². In this sense, the use of music is particularly effective for knowledge process development, as it, more than other instruments, directly addresses the informal dimension of learning experience and activates affective processes in learners. The use of multimediality should in fact be part of an «enlarged teaching program», taking into account the interests, daily and extracurricular experiences of students: this is the only way to a «cognitive, social, emotional, relational, affective, language, media» learning³.

Although motivation is only one of the aspects connected with music use, it is among the first factors to leverage in order to make L2 learning at school exciting and attractive - even if, and probably above all, in connection with literature learning -, as it «fosters attention, thus preparing students to receive inputs in a relaxed manner and positive emotional state»⁴. Once students' interest is captured, it will be easier to optimize all the other advantages connected with the use of songs, instruments which influence individuals both rationally and unconsciously. Neurolinguistics underlines that motifs can activate both the left cerebral hemisphere - the seat of linguistic intelligence⁵ - and the right cerebral hemisphere - the seat of music - thus «completely and analytically» letting the brain catch the coexistence of words and songs⁶ (even Gardner, a firm supporter of the autonomy of different intellectual competences, dares not deny the interference of these two types of language, although

¹ F. Caon, *Canzone pop e canzone d'autore per la didattica della lingua, della cultura italiana e per l'approccio alla letteratura*, Laboratorio Itals, in http://venus.unive.it/filim/materiali/accesso_gratuito/Filim_caon_teoria.pdf, p. 3.

² B. Dufeu, *In cammino verso una pedagogia dell'essere. Un approccio psicodrammatico all'apprendimento delle lingue*, Alpha & Beta, Bolzano 1998, p. 59.

³ D. Parmigiani, *Didattica e tecnologia diffusa. Riflessioni per un'antropologia multimediale*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2004, pp. 40-42.

⁴ M. Cardona, *Accrescere la competenza lessicale attraverso l'uso della canzone*, Laboratorio Itals - Bollettino Itals, settembre 2003, in http://venus.unive.it/italslab/modules.php?op=modload&name=ezcms&file=index&menu=100&page_id=109.

⁵ Gardner does not accept the idea of intelligence as a unitary concept and proposes the existence of six possible forms: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, personal and interpersonal intelligences. See. H. Gardner, *Formae mentis. Saggio sulla pluralità dell'intelligenza*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2000, pp. 119-147.

⁶ *Languages and Integration through Singing*, in <http://www.languagesbysongs.eu/doc-it.htm>.



information such as that proving a common origin of language and music communication can only be hypothesized)⁷. It is therefore easy to understand why language contents conveyed by music are often permanently retained in long-term, particularly semantic, memory to such an extent that the introduction of musical stimuli is by now considered a «teaching need»⁸ at the primary level of L1 teaching. The use of songs has been a proven method to assimilate the phonemes, structures and words of a foreign language for a long time, thus making music, if used in a conscious and careful manner, serve as an inexhaustible teaching resource in order to get learners to develop their phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical competences⁹. Moreover students can listen to songs again on their own and so use them for autonomous learning at home; songs also foster positive social classroom dynamics, connected with interest and passion sharing, and give teaching a recreational dimension, promoting in turn the inductive learning¹⁰ of a language as well.

It is then interesting that some researchers invite us to consider songs effective instruments for approaching literature. The introduction of aesthetic forms close to youth culture could prove useful to confirm «the importance of written words as a privileged channel of the aesthetic experience»¹¹ and to immediately and effectively transmit the dramatic effect of works as well: «Music cannot express fear, which is certainly an authentic emotion. But its movement, in tones, accents, and rhythmic design, can be restless, sharply, agitated, violent, and even suspenseful... It cannot express despair, but it can move slowly, in a prevailing downward direction; its texture can become heavy and, as we are wont to say, dark - or it can vanish entirely»¹².

2. Teaching unit: *Der Erlkönig*

This teaching unit begins with these premises and deals with one of the canonical texts in German literature which are studied at school, *Der Erlkönig* by Goethe. It will be used to help students get familiar with the critical approach to a poetic text, giving particular attention to all its possible aspects (for a total of 6-7 lesson hours). The use of multimodality, which mainly aims at activating the above mentioned motivational factor, will guide most comprehension, analysis and interpretation activities, in order to strengthen and examine students' linguistic competences, facilitate their dealing with ethical and social issues and promote the organization and exposure of their critical thinking. It will also encourage them to reflect upon how to make use of literature and, more generally, how languages contaminate each other.

I will summarize some possible practical procedures to adopt in order to reach the goals described above. The timeline used for school grids cannot be followed and I will not deal with each individual part of the content, thus also skipping over those including use of intertextual and interdisciplinary links¹³, web resources such as videos, flash footage and digital role-playing games¹⁴. I will focus on

⁷ See H. Gardner, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-137. Although several aspects of the relationship between language and music are still unclear, renowned scholars studied the evident system of analogies underlying it. The ten analogies identified by Maurizio Della Casa: 1) they are both communication media; 2) they are subject to a linear-temporal development and created a graphic transcription system; 3) they appeal to hearing and use sounds; 4) they are systematic; 5) they make use of elements which are mostly arbitrary; 6) they have a double articulation; 7) they are built acting on both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis; 8) their messages can be studied at different levels through segmentation into units of different size; 9) they can be diachronically and synchronically studied; 10) normally there is no denotation in music. M. Della Casa, *La comunicazione musicale e l'educazione*, La Scuola, Brescia 1983, p. 74, cit. in S. Cavagnoli, S. Lucchetti, E. Maule, *Musica e apprendimento linguistico. Dalle riflessioni teoriche alle proposte didattiche*, Edizioni Junior, Azzano San Paolo (BG) 2006, pp. 45-47.

⁸ See S. Cavagnoli, S. Lucchetti, E. Maule, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 24-25.

⁹ Cadorna outlines that the oral repetition of songs gets students to focus more on a language's phonetics and prosody. Other types of oral production cannot encourage such an accurate sound reproduction. Refrains, stanzas and repeated verses help students learn structures and vocabulary, as their evocative images and figures of speech encourage creativity and promote the development of expressive, poetic and imaginative skills. M. Cadorna, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Cf. F. Caon, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6.

¹¹ Guido Armellini cit. in F. Caon, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹² R. Sessions, *Questions about Music*, W. W. Norton, New York 1970, p. 14, cit. in H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, New York 1993, p. 112.

¹³ See the compared analysis of Herder's *Erlkönigs Tochter* and Gustav Schwab's ballad *Der Reiter und der Bodensee*, - of a later period, but sharing the same atmosphere and tragic tension - and the references to Norse mythology and figurative art (see lesson hour 5 and 6).

¹⁴ In the Brainstorming phase, after presenting the poem's title and introducing the controversial issue regarding its meaning - which is in turn connected with the popular King of Elves archetype typical of Northern European folklore - students will be asked to reflect and expose their knowledge about *elves*. We should expect experiences having to do mostly with fantasy, literature and movies (e.g. *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, R.A. Salvatore and T. Pratchett's novels, comics, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), videogames and digital role-playing games (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*, where the elf species plays a key role). After a guided discussion, the teacher will project an animated version of the poem (a flash cartoon by a German student of Graphic Design at HAWK Hildesheim: <http://www.georgweidenbach.de/projects/der-erlkonig/>), and then invite the students to guess something about its content. After identifying the most convincing argument, the teacher will comment on the elf figure emerged from the cartoon, thus comparing it with those analyzed in the Brainstorming phase. Then there will be a preliminary reading of the ballad.



the potentialities of songs and how to activate pleasure-based¹⁵ motivation through listening, so as to combat a possible attention decline students may experience due to previous textual analysis.

By using the most common information channels on the Internet it is easy to identify the *Vertonungen* inspired by *Der Erbkönig*¹⁶. Students should not just be invited to listen. The teacher should also find a way, working on both texts and melodies, to get them to reflect upon the various procedures offered for knowledge use and how effectively a message can be transmitted through different means. In order to critically read songs or texts and, above all, make fruitful comparisons at the linguistic, stylistic and content levels, students should be given structured interpretation schemes useful for analysis ('worksheets' in the teaching unit)¹⁷.

The second two-hour lesson dealing with theme development will focus on the comparison of five different transpositions of Goethe's work, from classical to metal music, from rap to electronic music. While some of them are faithful to Goethe's text (see Schubert's version and young 'Junge Dichter und Denker' 's¹⁸ rap/hip-hop variant), other artists used English, some of whom took inspiration from accredited translations of the poem - such as that of 1995 by Ewin Zeydel, used by Zurich's electronic music group 'Waldorf' -, others freely reworked the text (see *Erl King* by the doom-metal band 'Pagan Altar', which still alternates father-son dialogues and maintains the poem's sense, but changes its words)*. Students will also be invited to listen to, and above all read, *Dalai Lama*, a song by 'Rammstein' which offers a modern overview of *Erlkönig* and where the forest is replaced by the sky as the setting of the protagonists' tragic destiny¹⁹.

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Der Erbkönig

[Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1782]

*Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm
Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm
[...]*

*Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht
Was Erenkönig mir leise verspricht?
Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind
[...]*

The Erl King

[Pagan Altar, 2006]

*There can be no dark force in this world,
That could take the soul of a child.
No spectre so grim would dare to be heard,
No beast could be so wild.
[...]*

*Father, dear Father the Erl king is near,
I can see the fire in his eyes.
I can hear his voice whispering in my ears
Like a million children's cries
[...]*

Elfking

[Waldorf, 2006 – translation: Edwin Zeydel, 1955]

*Who's riding so late where winds blow wild?
It is the father grasping his child
He holds the boy embraced in his arm
He clasps him snugly, he keeps him warm
[...]*

*My father, my father, and can you not hear
The promise the elf-king breathes in my ear?
Be calm, stay calm, my child lie low
In withered leaves the nicht-winds blow
[...]*

Dalai Lama

[Rammstein, 2004]

*Ein Flugzeug liegt im Abendwind
An Bord ist auch ein Mann mit Kind
Sie sitzen sicher sitzen warm
und gehen so dem Schlaf ins Garn
In drei Stunden sind sie da
zum Wiegenfeste der Mama
Die Sicht ist gut der Himmel klar
[...]*

*Weiter, weiter ins Verderben
Wir müssen leben bis wir sterben
Und das Kind zum Vater spricht
Hörst du denn den Donner nicht
Das ist der König aller Winde
Er will mich zu seinem Kinde
[...]*

¹⁵ See F. Caon, *op. cit.*, p. 23

¹⁶ http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erlk%C3%B6nig_%28ballata%29.

¹⁷ See F. Caon, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ The JDD project is the result of the idea to get school age students to become familiar, through music, with the most famous poems in German literature: <http://jdd-musik.de/> e <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJw2LsXHzY>.

¹⁹ The title *Dalai Lama* includes direct reference to plane crashes, which are here recalled by current Dalai Lama's fear of flying.

In conclusion, the above described teaching unit:

Title	<i>Der Erlkönig</i>
Class profile	4th year of a language high school (according to the Italian educational system); LEVEL: Intermediate/CEFR: B1.
Timetable fit	Second term of the 4th year. 4 lesson hours (7 hours – 60 minutes: 3 two-hour lessons and a one-hour lesson for end of unit test).
Main aims	Students will learn to: 1) Interpret texts through poetry; 2) recognize poetic structures and forms; 3) talk about the poem's theme in German and express their opinions on it; 4) deal with aesthetic and moral themes; 5) historically contextualize poem and poet; 6) improve their intercultural competences and make connections with other school subjects; 7) observe that the same theme can be dealt with via different means and languages.
Teaching aids and materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Textbook - Workbook - Screen - Internet access - Video projector - CD and CD player - Blackboard - Power Point Presentations
Work methods and forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frontal lesson - Guided discussion - Homework check - Use of videos, songs and images - Pair work and group work - Transforming
Competences Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reading - Writing - Listening - Speaking <p>Ongoing evaluation through oral and written exercises and homework. An end of unit test will also take place.</p>
Procedures	<p>1. Hour 1 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brief revision of last topic studied (more specifically, Sturm und Drang). Introduction of poem's title. - Brainstorming: The students share their knowledge about elves (although the title literally means 'The Elf King', it is commonly translated with 'The Elf King'). Examples of stimulus questions: 'What kind of elves do you know? Are they good or evil? Helpful or naughty? Friendly or unfriendly? Where did you first read or hear about them?' (novels, comics, movies, music, fantasy role-playing games, videogames etc.). - Projection of flash cartoon <i>Der Erlkönig</i> (new visual interpretation by Georg Wiedenbach). - Overall comprehension: questions about the cartoon ('What is it about?'). The students try to guess something about video content. Teacher's explanation follows. - Guided discussion on the elves in the cartoon: 'Did you imagine them like that? An overview of Norse mythology.' - Introduction and preliminary reading of the poem. <p>2. Hour 2 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First attempt to translate the poem: 'How many words do you know or understand?' - Guided translation and vocabulary exercise: crossword puzzle about <i>Der Erlkönig</i> (worksheet 1). Exercise correction. - Comprehension: historical contextualization, stylistic interpretation and analysis (worksheet 2). <p>3. Hour 3 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Homework assignment (worksheet 3). - Brief revision of unit theme. Homework correction. - Video projection of Jürgen Dichter und Denker's <i>Erlkönig-Song</i> (Rap-Version): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJwZLSXhZ7Y. - The students make their observations on the song and reflect upon its faithfulness to Goethe's text, its metre and rhythm. Considerations on phonics and rhythm of words and on the features of rap music (worksheet 4). - The students listen to Franz Schubert's <i>Erlkönig</i> featuring German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XPSFP00EJI. <p>4. Hour 4 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The students make their observations on this dramatic performance and compare it with JDD's rap version. <p>Hour 4 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A translation of the poem into English (Edwin Zeydel, 1955) is introduced and the students start to reflect upon its faithfulness to the German text (worksheet 5). - The students listen to the <i>Verdunung</i> of Zeydel's <i>Erlking</i> by 'Waldorf', a Swiss group of electronic music: https://myspace.com/waldorfd27/musicsong/erlking-erlking-2510671p-24097004. - The students reflect upon the effectiveness of meta-electronic genre in performing dramatic tension (differences with Schubert and JDD). - The students listen to <i>Er/König</i>, a song (in English) by doom-metal 'Pagan Altar', and 'Ramstein's Däal Lama - Observations on the two modern transpositions of the song (worksheet 5). - Overall considerations on different <i>Verdunungen</i>: music, atmosphere, rhythm, analogies, differences, faithfulness, effectiveness of dramatic performance. <p>5. Hour 5 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The students are divided into two groups. - Group 1: reading and translation of Herder's <i>Erlkönigs Tochter</i>. Analysis of the analogies and differences between the two poems (worksheet 7). - Group 2: reading and translation of Gustav Schwab's <i>Der Feiler und der Bodeusee</i> (19th century). Analysis of the analogies and differences between the two poems (worksheet 8). <p>6. Hour 6 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Power Point Presentation of the image gallery about <i>Der Erlkönig</i>: <i>Erlkönig-konographie</i>. <p>7. Hour 7 (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The students are divided into two groups: each chooses and describes two images and then reflects upon different representations of <i>Erlking</i>. - End of unit test.



References

- [1] Cardona, M., *Accrescere la competenza lessicale attraverso l'uso della canzone*, Laboratorio Itals – Bollettino Itals, settembre 2003, in
http://venus.unive.it/italslab/modules.php?op=modload&name=ezcms&file=index&menu=100&page_id=109.
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