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**Music, Power Relations and Beyond:**  
**Critical Positions in Higher Music Education**  
(manuscript)

2023

# **Music, Power Relations and Beyond: Critical Positions in Higher Music Education**

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**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

**2023**

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# Acoustic Bodies: Working Out Excellence with Neurodivergent and Neurotypical Young Musicians

Franca Ferrari

*Notably, the normal performance body is much more regulated than other social forms of constructed normalcy: even the tiniest deviations—a sore knuckle, a swollen lip, mild sinus congestion, a shortened pinky—can audibly impair a body during music performance. (...) Just as curbs and stairways permit the movements of some bodies while disabling those of others, so do certain conventions of music performance have the power to include and exclude (...) The normal performance body, like all forms of constructed normalcy, establishes a template that real human bodies must strive to match. (...) Indeed, music performance can amplify or even generate a disability that otherwise would have remained inaudible or unrealized.*

(Howe, 2016, p. 191)

Since 1977 the Italian national school system has chosen full inclusion: we do not have any special school for primary and secondary instruction levels. In their place, special teachers and tutors work in those primary or secondary school groups that include children with special needs. To enter the specialisation curriculum a previous master is requested and it's a general opinion that special teachers perform their school job with more successful results when they come from a professional background in music. Inclusion, also in this frame, is always a challenge.

Only since the beginning of this century inclusion policy spread to universities and, even later, to music conservatories. Financial resources from the government aimed towards inclusion projects in upper-level educational institutions are becoming nearly regular; dedicated tutors can support artistically gifted young adults with special needs in their post graduate curriculum.

Nevertheless, in higher instruction levels, even more than in lower ones, a real and effective peer interaction is always a big challenge. Does a relevant musical talent turn out to be a real compensative tool in creating social interactions? What happens when a neurodivergence in the autistic spectrum is involved? Does not playing alone for hours a day, making more and more exquisite his/her own repertoire, end up in an autistic little room?

In the last thirty years, I've been personally involved in evaluation surveys aimed to observe both social and artistic results of musical inclusion projects in Italian schools and academic institutions. In this role, I examined inclusive groups based on socially well set up musical contexts, such as a drum ensemble, a traditional dance group, as well as a symphonic orchestra.<sup>40</sup>

I accepted to write this short essay as I wished to point out a project that I found perhaps the most effective of them all and which ended in an amazing performance in the Academic Hall of Conservatorio Santa Cecilia last November 2022.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See the wonderful Esagramma model in [www.esagramma.net](http://www.esagramma.net).

<sup>41</sup> Trailers can be found at the following links: <https://www.facebook.com/fuori.contesto/videos/960980411974891> and <https://www.facebook.com/fuori.contesto/videos/2694431430688497>.

The performance was the last goal of a music/theatre/dance workshop named *Acoustic Bodies*. The project won the public tender "Solidal Communities 2020", funded by Regione Lazio with EU resources. The application was submitted by *Fuori Contesto*, a cultural association who has been producing integrated theater and dance performance with professional disabled and non-disabled artists since 2005—in partnership with Conservatorio Santa Cecilia. This is a first topic point: a special expertise coming from a private association included within a conservatory curricula. In fact, neurotypical master students who were involved in the project were initially interested in just collecting credits in Body Techniques and Pedagogy of music before the end of the year. The professor of Body Techniques and myself took part in some of the activities.

A high quality artistic performance exhibiting neurotypical and neurodivergent young artists was exactly the main goal of the project. To score this goal, an extensive list of activities was scheduled.

During spring 2022, twelve neurodivergent students with an autistic spectrum disorder were invited to eurhythmics and instrumental group music classes, to let them meet and interact with other students. All neurodivergent students had already been enrolled in some of Rome's conservatory courses (instrumental classes, or violin making and piano tuning classes).

From September to November 2022, fifteen neurotypical students responded to a call and were enrolled in a three-month workshop aimed to build and set on stage an original musical theatre performance. The students came mainly from different courses of Rome Conservatory, but also from other Rome art academies master courses, bringing extremely heterogeneous artistic experiences with them—Western Art music performing piano or violin, jazz voice or guitar, dance.

For three months, then, 27 young adults, split in two mixed groups, worked together once a week. The two groups joined together just on a few weekends and in the last three weeks. A few conservatory professors were involved to guide some of the musical settings, but not one of them was directly involved in the performance, which was intended as a peer group artistic expression. A photo-video maker and a digital scene artist entered the very last part of the project, to make recordings of the stage and backstage and to frame the final digital stage setting.

During the three-month workshop, Emilia Martinelli, a director with a specific expertise in dance ability and integrated theatre, chosen by *Fuori Contesto*, slowly gave an artistic shape to the group of 27 young adults, each one with his/her own instrument, his/her own voice, his/her own acting body—*acoustic bodies*.

A few words should be written about the methodology that led to this sort of choral play, where every gesture and word told the inner essence of each player and, at the same time, mirrored the peer group itself. The first part of the workshop was aimed to meld and mix the participants: eurhythmic games with live vocal and instrumental sounds helped them to explore and fix collective postures and movements and to search for what looked and sounded interesting and beautiful.

The first ideas about a plot, a possible storyboard, came from a problem solving: "We have a violin, but it's impossible to get any sound out of it. Why? What happened? What can we do, as we urgently need the music of this violin?". One of the students, who worked as a director assistant for this specific task, wrote down all the ideas—quite often jokes—expressed as possible solutions to the problem solving and she returned them organized in a play script.

Considering the barriers to communication and deafening silences that occur in everyday life, the group discovered a need to take time and listen to each one. In this way, resources to go over and solve the problem could be found: the violin's soul, that was the group's soul itself, was thread across and music eventually came out. The very topic of narrative idea to solve the initial question came from one of the neurodivergent students, who literally threw himself into the play, as a singer (he is a singer), but also as a dancer, an actor and a concept-creator, and definitely led all the others towards the final results. Every member of the group, reading the script together after nearly a month of movement and vocal music work together, had the possibility to recognize his/her own jokes and to appreciate their weaving with others. Nevertheless, it appeared clearly that this sort of project needs a director who can listen, select, weave in a plot, a conductor, who takes the responsibility of composing pieces in a complex layout and bringing them back to the group at a certain point.

Active and concentrated listening to students' musical resources and to their free proposals as different musical answers to a group problem solving ("Which live music would be proper for this scene? Have you got anything to offer?") was another area of focus in this project's methodology. In fact, live music that was included in the final performance was selected from the repertoire resources of the students themselves, arranged and performed with guidance—when necessary—of conservatory teachers. So, the live soundtrack of the performance was extremely vibrant and heterogenous: a couple of sections from the piano version of Mussorgskij's *Pictures at an Exhibition* had a prominent role, but they were thread with Chopin's B minor *Scherzo*, Piazzolla's *Libertango* in a four-hand piano version and Piazzolla's *Oblivion* in an oboe, clarinet and piano version. In the last scene of the play, the initially mute violin's voice eventually melted and gathered all the group voices, as Clara, a neurodivergent violin player, collected all of them with the melody of Pachelbel's *Canon*. Then all this changed and everybody, also in the audience, was taken to a hard rock dance. In general, all scenes were crossed by many vocal sounds, strictly connected to eurhythmic group movements and choreographies that underlaid the climax points of the plot.

So, the workshop methodology pushed for integrated languages: movement, dance, vocal and instrumental live music, acting. Music, dance and theatre were all involved and integrated so that each participant could find out his/her own easiest way of expression and, eventually, even change it. In the performance, very good instrument players performed also as actors and dancers, while actors made music. In this sort of contamination, each one had a comfortable starting point in what he/she practiced regularly but learned to know each other and had the possibility to make a jump and experiment something new.

The director, Emilia Martinelli, pointed out that pro-active encouragement of different musical resources would push creative boundaries and ensure that the greatest possible range of voices was reflected in the work created. She did not give or ask for any pre-defined ideas about the final performance, sure that the group itself would have provided these ideas. The most fundamental action, she said, is listening—listening through your skin, body, ears, head, heart—and letting yourself be crossed by stories, lives and sensibilities of people in the group. The director's expertise then consists in framing and selecting what she has listened to, setting up all the resources in a performance. The director draws, chooses, and selects materials that can be used in the performance, but she also regularly steps back and listens/looks for moments of beauty, of grace, coming out of the group and finds a way to set them to stage.

As Teresa Chirico, supervisor of the project for Conservatory Santa Cecilia, pointed out, a Conservatory is an appropriate place for learning to listen and a workshop like this leads young musicians towards the necessary skill of listening. Ancient Greeks called it *sym-pathia*: an ability to feel and perceive what other people can and wish to tell us. One of our



neurodivergent students explained this with these words: "I do hope that many people, coming and watching the performance of *Acoustic Bodies*, will realize the importance of silence, that enables us to catch something that eventually we will not perceive through our ears".

Last but not least, I would like to underline some artistically excellent points, that I recognize as very high-level educational achievements:

- the extremely fine quality—both on a technical and communicative regard—of quite a few group members: we would have never expected it—in one extraordinary neurodivergent as in neurotypical students—and it could emerge just thanks to the context of integrated theatre that I have described;
- the artful melding of the various components of the performance, such that the dances, songs, and dialogue appear fluid and continuous, as a whole;
- a subtle and highly professional plasticity that all neurotypical students and most neurodivergent developed in turning from players to dancers, or from singers to actors, in a flash of a second. I was amazed, because I know very well that performance anxiety usually paralyzes them and they struggle with their public performances. In this case, a strong group context and an equally strong shared concept attracted and guided all the best performing energies.

As a conclusion, I truly believe that we cannot cancel power differences, particularly when they lay on a physiological difference. Rather, we can surely harmonize them in a specially conceived contextual framework. The right word for this task is *concertare* which we learned from Monteverdi and Vivaldi. The first one had some beautiful singers employed at the Gonzaga Court in Mantua, as he composed *Orfeo*, but *Orfeo* brassy intonation – 1609 brass instruments technology – surely suffered from being in the most humid region of the whole Italian landscape. This helps to understand—I think—the incredible one chord harmony of the beginning Toccata. Monteverdi used the same trick to tune a gigantic ensemble when he had his first important commission in Venice, in the *Introitus* of the *Vespers to the Blessed Virgin*: a good frame to harmonize power differences among very different musical abilities.

With this project we re-discovered that musical theatre—when organized as I tried to describe—is a powerful space for creating community. Namely, the *Acoustic Bodies* experience strongly connected students to each other and developed inclusive attitudes that will be carried for life.