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Expressive performance of children aged 4-5 years: teaching models and vocal abilities

ABSTRACT

Background

Studies on performance usually deal with musics intended for concerts and very few of them are devoted to the genesis of expressive abilities that first arises in children's singing.

Among the studies observing the ability of children aged 4-5 years to sing in an expressive way it is possible to find that often children change their vocal expressivity through little variations in timing, dynamics and other musical characteristics. (Young 2003; Tidoni 2011; Tafuri, Baroni 2014; Tafuri, Fabbri 2016).

On the other hand, studies that explore the relationships between music and emotions with the particular aim of understanding the underlying processes of an expressive performance, pointed out that, in order to produce it, performers need to manage physical sound properties (Juslin and Timmers 2010). At this point a question arises: would children show better expressive abilities if they sing spontaneously learned songs or if teachers attract their attention to some properties? Do they like and show pleasure in moulding their voice to show different emotions?

Children experience different emotions very early on beginning with anger, fear and tenderness.

They recognise them in their parents' everyday vocal expressions and they soon learn to manifest them themselves when they speak and sometimes when they sing (Tafuri 2007, 2011). It is mainly when they are playing that we can identify by the way they use their voices that they take pleasure in:

- experiencing the sounds resonating in their head and chest
- accompanying their games
- feeling like singing
- feeling proud in front of parents and/or peers
- manifesting different emotions in moulding their voice according to different musical structures (mainly rhythm and melody)

- expressing the emotional experience of episodes in the story (fear, sadness, anger, etc.) by using the prosodic elements they use spontaneously or that are suggested by the teacher's performance model.

Aims and repertoire studied

In the pilot study previously carried out (Tafuri, Fabbri 2016), the researchers dealt in particular with a certain tendency of children, 3-5 years old, to spontaneously imitate, while singing, the vocal model of teachers in relation to the different emotions presented in the stories narrated by the songs.

A story offers children one of the best ways to experience different emotional situations. Stories belong to all cultures and express the fundamental situations of human life. A story leads

children to recognise and imitate the fundamental emotions, with their various nuances, and to reproduce, through their voices when they sing, different aspects of the emotional physiological parameters.

The results of this pilot study confirmed the presence of a certain ability of children aged 3-5 years to manage some sound features (mainly dynamics and timing) in order to be expressive in singing and that they do not pay particular attention to the model offered by the teachers.

In the present study, the aims are firstly to enlarge on the results obtained in the pilot study with a wider group of children. Secondly, it is to compare the children's abilities in managing sound properties that they demonstrate when performing spontaneously learned songs or guided learned songs.

Methods

First phase: two songs were chosen and five teachers learned to sing them with the precise expressivity chosen by the two researchers and with the use of the particular parameters (timing, dynamics, phrasing, timbre quality...) specified by the researchers. Each teacher sang them often, with the expressivity chosen, to his/her 4-5 year-old children at their school, without explaining or demanding any expressive character. When children knew those songs quite well, teachers recorded their performance individually.

Second phase: the same teachers sang the same two songs again. They asked the children to pay attention to the particular parameters chosen by emphasising, for example, the *rallentando*, or the trembling voice etc. when appropriate. Then teachers recorded the children's individual performance.

Results and Implications

When we look at all the results we can firstly confirm the same results (Tafuri, Fabbri 2016) for this new and wider group of children as those obtained in the pilot study, that is, the ability of children aged 3-5 years to manage some sound features in order to sing in an expressive way.

The easiest parameters for children of that age are: dynamics, mainly in using *forte* and *piano*, and timing in using the *rallentando*. They do not yet spontaneously pay too much attention, in general, to *crescendo/diminuendo*, to the articulation (*legato/staccato*), nor to the quality of vocal sound produced.

With regard to the influence of the teacher singing model, it did not appear to be particularly strong. We would actually say that the expressive teacher model acts as a possible suggestion that singing is not done mechanically but that they can change some quality of their voice according to what the lyrics are expressing and the emotion that is being communicated.

The performance analysis made with the software Sonic Visualizer confirmed a certain presence in some children's performance of the teacher's expressive model (particularly the use of timing and dynamics) that manifests a first intuitive assimilation of a particular performance style. The results obtained through the guided learning process show an improvement in the ability of children to produce a more expressive performance, mainly in those more interested in the action of singing and not only in the general enjoyment produced by the global experience.

As a consequence, an expressive performance depends not only on the ability to manage the sound properties but also on the pleasure children have in "playing" with their voices to produce certain sound results.

Keywords

Analysis, performance, singing, children, education

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