

Nothing without a context

by Monica Martini

The context in MLT

During my years of experience in Formal Education using MLT, I have come to understand one significantly new factor that belongs to this approach and makes teaching with it unique: any kind of musical content (rhythmic, tonal or harmonic patterns, etc.) must be preceded and constantly accompanied by the context (a complete piece of music) in which it finds its place and that clarifies its nature and function. What we call a context in MLT is a musical whole, finished and complete, such as a song, an instrumental piece, a piece for choir with one or more voices, and so on. Within the container-context we can define a series of contents²¹, i.e. smaller groups of musical elements with a specific rhythmic, tonal, harmonic or melodic meaning. If, during an early phase in teaching, I wish to introduce the concept of a tonal centre or tonic²² of a major key (content) I do not use words to

²¹ For the original definitions of context e content in MLT, see E.E. GORDON, *Learning sequences in music*, Chicago, GIA Publications, 2012, p. 402.

²² In MLT teaching, the tonic – or tonal centre – of a piece is called the “basic note”, and represents one of the contents of which we are speaking, a content that is moreover essential to be able to understand all the other tonal contents. Cf. E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., p. 416 and 421.

For the sake of clarity, we should define the position of a few terms used in MLT compared to the traditional concepts of tonic, tonality and mode. *Keyality* is a concept that belongs to the movable DO system used in MLT, and is identified by Gordon as “The name of the tonic (NB: with reference to its absolute pitch). While in the traditional system, we have a key signature that is learned by reading the score, the *keyality* is heard in audiation. C is the in C major, in C harmonic minor, in Aeolian C, in Doric C, in Phrygian C and so on.”

The concept of *keyality* (the absolute pitch of the tonic of the mode) is closely related to that of tonality (mode, intervallic relation between the sounds of the reference scale and the tonic): “The tonic is linked to the *keyality*, while the basic note is linked to the tonality. (...) If the basic note is C, the tonality is major; if the basic note is A, the tonality is (harmonic) minor, or Aeolian; if the basic note is D, the tonality is Dorian; if the basic note is E, the tonality is Phrygian”. Cf. E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., p. 409, 421.

theoretically describe what a tonic is within a major scale made up of tones and semitones. What I do is sing and teach a piece in a major tonality (context) in which the tonic is unequivocally and objectively recognisable. The students listen repeatedly to the sound of the tonic and sing it and feel it with (and in) their bodies. This way, the tonic will not be a theoretical concept or an isolated sound, followed by a series of intervals: it will be a concretely perceived sound, part of a piece that is known to them and that they will be able to bring to mind later on, precisely because they have gained familiarity with that piece.

In the same way, if I wish to introduce the concept of rhythmic pulsation (content), I may use a piece, whether new or already known (context) and work with listening to and moving with the pulsations of that very piece. Having contact with the context thus helps students learn, which would not be the case if I worked on theoretical or abstract pulsations, or on hypothetical durations abstractly deduced from mathematics or music theory.

Musical contexts and contents

It's also worth recalling that this understanding of a musical context (a musical work: a piece, symphony, song or any other musical form) is what gives music its motivation, its *raison d'être* for humans. Furthermore, its relation with music theory is similar to the one between words and language. Here, I am referring to logical and grammatical analysis, which are a means to understand how a discourse is structured, but only have a sense if they play a role in giving meaning to what is expressed. What actually gives rise to emotions and motivation, with languages no less than with music, is the message

expressed by sentences and the words that make them up. By this, I mean the possibility of communicating, the ability to express and comprehend communication, including its function in creating relations. Grammatical rules, understood abstractly, don't communicate, they may well help us better understand the structure of the phrase, but not the message contained in it.

With music, the same relation exists between theory and musical compositions; the ability to anticipate contexts and work on the alternation between context and content allows us to grasp and understand musical elements well before we know them in theoretical terms.

Assimilating competences

What I would like to share in this article is how important the context/content/context process is in developing Audiation, and in what way it represents, in my opinion, a revolutionary tool in music education. The following reflections were born out of my experience in class with students over the years, and are intended to pass on part of what they have taught me.

A true didactic process puts the teacher in a perpetual relation of teaching/learning with the students, as Gordon repeatedly observed. Interacting with students of all ages is what showed me when my educational methods were effective and what I had overlooked in my teaching processes.

While teaching in elementary and junior high schools, I realised that one of the risks that arises most often consists in supposing that a competence²³ gained with respect to one piece has been acquired and assimilated once and for all. Since the students have succeeded once

²³ By competence, I intend the ability to use contents in contexts in a certain way. For example, we know that the basic note is a content. If I am able to sing it in a major key, we shall say that I have the aural/aural *competence* of singing the basic note in a piece in a major key.

in gaining a competence while working on a given content, a teacher may tend to take for granted that this competence has been definitively assimilated. This is how it went for me. At the end of a very intense lesson where I had taught the bass line of a piece I had worked on previously, second-grade students succeeded in singing the piece's two voices. Naively, I thought that the competence of singing the piece with two voices had been acquired, but during the following lesson I was forced to realise that this was not the case: more lessons, also very intense, were required before the group could sing both the theme and the bass of pieces similar to the one already studied (and even the same piece) with the same degree of success. Put briefly, the group still needed to be guided, repeating the same path followed previously.

The error therefore consisted in believing that a competency put into play only once could automatically be reused for the same piece and even transferred to other pieces with the same content.

Actually, this passage cannot come about without first memorising and later interiorising the competence in question. This requires one to consider that the same tonal contents, organised differently or in a different rhythmic context, may not be immediately recognised or identified, in addition to the fact that an immediate success in comprehending and performing is often no

guarantee that the content has truly been memorised and interiorised.

An example of similar contexts, where the transfer of competences from one piece to another cannot be taken for granted, could come from the well-known popular songs *Giovannin*, *London Bridge* e *Piva Piva* (see next page). They show the same tonal content (they are all in a major key, and the harmony only contains the tonic and dominant functions), but this content emerges in different harmonic progressions or different meters.

Assimilating competences and contents is therefore a process that, even while being understood, must be repeated in relation to new contexts or the same contexts enriched with different contents. For it to be possible to make inferences regarding musical contents and contexts in more than one piece, one must consider the vocabulary of:

- pieces assimilated by students,
 - rhythmic and tonal patterns assimilated by students, harmonic patterns assimilated by students,
 - harmonic progressions assimilated by students, and on what level or sub-level of learning²⁴ these elements have actually been assimilated.
- these elements have actually been assimilated.

It's important to note that speaking of assimilation without describing its relation with the development of audiation²⁵ may lead to confusion. Here, it may help to

²⁴ The levels and sub-levels of learning to which I am referring are those based on which musical elements, as the process of assimilation gradually proceeds, are:

- known through listening;
- sung by imitation, sustained by a model and an accompaniment;
- sung by imitation without sustainment by a model, immediately after listening and with an accompaniment;
- recognised, memorised and brought back to mind without the example or the sustainment of a model, but with an accompaniment, and lastly
- memorised and brought back to mind without being sustained by a model or an accompaniment.

²⁵ For an exhaustive discussion of the concept of assimilation, see A. BORSACCHI, *Gli stadi dell'Audiation preparatoria*, in "Rivista Audiation", 0/2014, pp. 8-15, which can be read at the following link: https://www.audiation-rivista.it/images/articoli/0/Audiation_002014_8_15.pdf (last access 13 oct. 2018).

Giovanin - Lightly Row - Hänschen klein

First system of musical notation for 'Lightly Row'. It consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The upper staff contains the melody with notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4. The lower staff contains the bass line with notes: C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3. Chord symbols I, V7, I, V7, I, V7, I, V7, I are placed below the upper staff.

5

Second system of musical notation for 'Lightly Row', starting at measure 5. The upper staff continues the melody with notes: D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, A5, G5, F5, E5, D5. The lower staff continues the bass line with notes: C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3. Chord symbols V7, I, I, V7, I, V7, I are placed below the upper staff.

London Bridge

Musical notation for 'London Bridge' in 4/4 time. The upper staff contains the melody with notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4. The lower staff contains the bass line with notes: C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3. Chord symbols I, I, V7, I, I, I, V7, I are placed below the upper staff.

Piva, Piva

Musical notation for 'Piva, Piva' in 6/8 time. The upper staff contains the melody with notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4. The lower staff contains the bass line with notes: C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3, C4, G3. Chord symbols I, I, V7, I, I, I, V7, I are placed below the upper staff.

recall that by imitating, a sung vocabulary is created that can be understood and then assimilated only by passing through audiation. This is the only way for that which is imitated to be truly understood within the context in which it is proposed.

Coordination and breath in music learning

The process of assimilating a piece and its content comes to completion when we are able to recall the piece objectively²⁶ and understand all of its known content, applying all the competences learned. This occurs when the audiation is coordinated, through bodily memory, with breath, movement and the other elements in the musical syntax underlying the idea to be expressed. It's like following a discourse in our native language: we listen to and follow in our thoughts what is being said, elaborating our answer by organising our thought (with no need for analysis) during the breath we will take before speaking. Similarly, in music this breath through audiation will be coherent with the "musical sentence" we are about to play or sing.

Understood in this way, assimilation requires the following passages: "listening and knowledge". Gordon used to say that "the body knows before the mind understands"²⁷, : when the mind has "understood" what the body has already known, it must be able to "put it into practice" repeatedly in the same or different contexts. This way, the mind memorises it and reaches a motor/auditory coordination (for example, when singing the basic note in tune) making it become a "bodily memory" that has no need for the mediation of thought to act in a way that is coherent with its context. In assimilation, the same things

happens as when these automatic motor acts come into play. A non-musical example: when we first learn to drive, everything is new and we are very concentrated, we have to think about every action without knowing the result of what we are doing, only able to do simple manoeuvres, slowly and with continual adjustments. As we gradually assimilate a few gestures and become familiar with coordinating them with the expected results, our driving skills become more fluid and rapid, because most of the motor gestures now occur automatically, without calling for the same motor and mental effort. We are able to automatically anticipate and correct our gestures based on the sensory feedback coming from the environment, above all because we have the perceptive space to listen to them. Let's imagine for a moment what happens when we sing a previously unknown melody for the first time: we listen to it or hear it in audiation while reading it from the score, we search for reference points, such as the basic note that helps us get our orientation in the key, or the macro-beats and the micro-beats that orient us in the meter. When these audio/motor/oral gestures have been assimilated and coordinated with audiation, we can try to memorise the melody, finding out if there are repetitions or variations, or points where we feel more rhythmic weight. As these aspect become gradually clearer, we sing a bit better each time; until we've learned it and understood it in relation to the rhythmic and harmonic elements that support it. If we sing in a choir, we will then deal with more complexity as we discover how our voice comes together with the others, exploring the tonal and rhythmic polyphony.

Even when speaking a foreign language, the same thing occurs: while in well-known contexts that require a

²⁶ Objectivity is to be understood in relation to the cultural context at hand, which for us is Western music and the tonal system. Hearing a piece "objectively" means "in the same way as all others recognise on average as being accurate", as regards its rhythmic, melodic and harmonic profile.

²⁷ From E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., p. 247.

familiar vocabulary, the words come to mind effortlessly, in new situations or one in which we don't have enough experience, we often don't have the means with which to express ourselves. Getting back to music, from this point of view it may help to pay attention to the difference between a vocal or instrumental repetition of pieces that we know perfectly (e.g. *Frère Jacques*) and highly complex pieces, or ones that we have only heard or played very few times. Repetition is necessary for the motor-auditory experience to be assimilated; we realise this when, for example, one deep breath is enough to sing a melody alone or in a choir, integrated with its context, because the melody has already clearly acquired space and form in our Audiation.

- There are many ways in which a new context can differ from what we already know:
 - new melody,
 - new content,
 - new *keyality*²⁸;
 - new meter;
 - melody with unfamiliar course, rhythms, etc.

Even adult, expert musicians, when approaching areas of listening that are not overly familiar, need repeated listenings before they understand the elements²⁹.

Music learning development

²⁸ The reference to the new *keyality* means that, even when we transpose a piece already learned in E major to C major, we are bringing new elements into the context. See note 2

²⁹ From E.E. GORDON (2010), cit., p. 12.

³⁰ see note 7

³¹ Discriminatory learning is the more elementary of the two general types of competence learning. With discriminatory learning, students learn competences and patterns through imitation. Discriminatory learning includes the oral/aural level, and those of verbal association, partial synthesis, reading-writing symbolic association, reading-writing composite synthesis. Discriminatory learning is the "preparatory basis" for inference learning. Cfr. E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., p. 95-99.

³² Inference learning is the more advanced of the two types of learning. With inference learning, students are led by the teacher to learn competences and patterns autonomously, and no longer learn through imitation. Inference learning includes the levels of: aural/oral-verbal-symbolic generalisation, symbolic aural/oral creativity/improvisation and verbal-symbolic theoretical comprehension. Cfr. E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., p. 95-99.

With music, and during our entire existence, this fundamental process of acquiring knowledge and information on musical syntax always involves listening, first and foremost. Listening leads to processes of imitation that are initially subjective³⁰ and then objective, which allow the content to be informally assimilated and inevitably give rise to the simplest forms of musical dialogue: first by straightforwardly imitating and recalling the most familiar content, and later by improvising. The improvisation I am referring to begins with an autonomous use of familiar material, by making simple decisions such as choosing to sing the melody or the bass of a piece, and then gradually beginning to use original material, as is the case when a "solo" passage is performed in a concert. This is an essential activity because it offers a chance for liberation, moving towards the ability to express one's own musical ideas and construct one's own active musical vocabulary with familiar content, and it necessarily represents a development that takes place after the content has been imitated and memorised.

Gordon stresses the fact that a sufficient vocabulary of pieces and tonal and rhythmic patterns must be assimilated on the level of discrimination³¹, earning, through imitation and audiation, before proceeding to the level of inference learning³². Patterns different from those

previously heard can now be improvised, which are therefore not imitated but already come to life in audiation. This is the first step towards generalisation, in which one learns to reuse the vocabulary of content and familiar competences to invent something completely but knowingly new; or again, unfamiliar content is understood and classified (for example, through verbal association³³). We can well expect the first patterns recalled in Audiation during this activity to be the most familiar ones (already learned through imitation), which therefore “represent the core of generalisation”³⁴

One thing remains to be specified as to processes of generalisation, concerning the age of the students. In our general development, as of birth, we learn by discrimination, recognising the differences between concrete elements in direct experience. With school-aged children, thought becomes reversible. The first forms of abstract and inference-based thought begin to appear at about nine years of age, when the mental images formed until this moment, exclusively concrete, begin to exist without ties to the real. Thoughts gain an existence that is increasingly autonomous from what is concrete and begin to carry out independent functions³⁵. This moment is crucial because the most significant part of the learning that has occurred until now on the discriminatory level begins to take shape by using abstract thought as well, and what is learned can begin to be transferred from one context to another.

In light of this, when speaking of music learning we must remember that, regardless of a student’s chronological age, which might lead us to introduce inference competences too early, we must first of all make sure that

the processes of discriminatory aural/oral/sensorial learning have been sufficiently assimilated. Only if the competences acquired on this level have been consolidated, and if those learning have a sufficient vocabulary in listening, singing and improvising, will the inferences be real and not logical/symbolical/mathematical deductions or inductions. Otherwise, it would be like writing a sentence in an unknown language, copying it but not succeeding in understanding its meaning.

Lastly, it is very important to point out that what I have mentioned above does not set the various periods of learning development apart from one another in an absolute or clear-cut way. All of these changes come about through a slow evolution, made up of small and gradual transformations, steps backwards and adjustments. The role of the learner is crucial in the miracle of learning; if the student feels motivated, full of trust and curiosity, they will let themselves be helped, one step after another, trying, making mistakes and trying again until they reach their aim.

The familiar vocabulary and liberation

Taking up where we left off, we now see how important it is to teach a vocabulary of familiar patterns and pieces. This is because what is familiar represents the core of the generalisation processes that allow the student to bring a competency acquired in known contexts into unknown contexts and to learn new contexts and contents without the mediation provided by the teacher. At this point in learning, precisely when they are in more familiar environments, students begin to deduce and

³³ The generalisation-verbal sub-level is described in E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., p. 132.

³⁴ From E.E. GORDON, *Essential Preparation for Beginning Instrumental Music Instruction*, Chicago, GIA Publications, 2010 p.1.

³⁵ J. PIAGET E B. INHELDER, *La psicologia del Bambino*, Torino, Einaudi, 1970, p. 113 and ss.

autonomously understand the first elements of musical syntax. From this point on, the enrichment coming from discrimination will continue to nourish and reinforce the inference process, allowing them to move freely within new areas and competences.

So what is the purpose, as regards our educational tool, of returning to contents?

Put briefly, the purpose is to allow learning to be enriched with new elements (for example harmonies, second voices, improvisations), open new paths and offer new solutions compared to the usual ones, learned by imitation and memorisation.

In my opinion, one passage written by Gordon is particularly enlightening on this matter, and I will quote it because I couldn't express the idea better myself: *"Although repetition and imitation are necessary in initial stage of intellectual development, their solitary, constant and extended reinforcement dull the mind. Moreover, if memorization, a stunning form of sameness, is encouraged at the expenses of difference, the thinking vocabulary becomes subdued."* (Anche se ripetizione e imitazione sono necessari negli stadi iniziali dello sviluppo intellettuale, il loro solo e continuo rinforzo ottunde la mente. Inoltre, se la memorizzazione, che è una forma sbalorditiva di uguaglianza, viene favorita a spese della differenza, il vocabolario del pensiero finirà per esservi sottomesso³⁶).

That is: once one has gained an assimilated vocabulary of rhythmic and tonal patterns and pieces, sufficient to introduce activity in improvising, it is imperative to go back to the content, this time organising activities in which students can become involved autonomously.

For example, one could choose which voice of a piece to sing or play, choose a competence and apply it, or sing unfamiliar patterns with verbal associations³⁷ (being sure that they are grafted onto familiar patterns that guarantee they are anchored to known content).

A circular path

Ultimately, assimilating contexts and contents is possible if we set out a circular path that begins with contexts (proposed through imitation or memory, "by rote"³⁸) and gradually analyse, "under a magnifying glass" and case by case, the following kinds of content:

- contextual: a basic note that corresponds to the tonal centre and is the link between mode and absolute pitch; macro-beats and micro-beats that acts as references for metre and tempo;
- Tonal and rhythmic: tonal and rhythmic patterns;
- harmonic: harmonic patterns and progressions;
- stylistic: form, genre;
- polyphonic: a partial list could include second voices and voicing while singing or playing monadic instruments; finger-picking and strumming while playing plucked string instruments; a melody coupled with a bass line or triads in various inversions while playing the piano.

Cyclically returning to contexts makes them increasingly rich and better understood, furthermore allowing them to be put into relation with new content learned at a later date, within the same circular process. It's like a three-dimensional path that goes along the same route over

³⁶ From E.E. GORDON (2010), cit., pp. 1-2

³⁷For a description of the discriminatory-verbal association level, see E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., pp. 103-114. For a description of the level of inference verbal-generalisation see E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., pp. 132-140.

³⁸ Per una definizione di *rote learning* si veda E.E. GORDON (2012), cit., pag. 417.

and over, enriching it with new elements. Elaborating this same analogy, what comes to mind is what has happened with the street I drive down to go to work every day: the first time I was concentrated solely on finding my way, and I had no space to observe or perceive anything else; later, as I gradually assimilated the route, a mental space got freed up and I began to observe the houses, plants and shops, then people, then the passing seasons and other changes brought about by time. Every time I drive down a new road, on the contrary, my mental space is completely absorbed by it, even though space for something else opens up ever more rapidly. Furthermore, if I have not assimilated as few “fundamental” aspects (like turning on the motor, and using the steering wheel, the pedals and the gears) I cannot move on to the next level because it won't even be possible to get the car going. Lastly, it may be interesting to note that, once the car is moving and the basic techniques of driving have been learned, if I do not drive along a road I already know for a long time, when I do go down it again it will not be all that familiar, but will become so rapidly (more quickly than another that I have never taken).

Coming back to our beloved music and focusing our attention on content, this example can help us understand how important it is for some fundamental content (such as the macro- and micro-beats that define metre, the basic note and the patterns that define a key) to be freshly stated each time that a new context occurs (even in instances that include familiar contents and aspects).

In doing all this, it is equally important to always keep observing our students carefully, so as not to miss the moment in which we will be able to musically interact with them in a dialogical/improvisational/deductive way, based on autonomous musical production, without always relying on teaching by imitation. To stimulate and favour

this interaction, we can even ask small things of them, such as choosing whether to sing the basic note of a melody or else the first sound, or again to keep the song in audiation and only sing the last part, or else switch from the melody to the macro-beats and then to the micro-beats halfway through a piece, or go from the melody to the second voice or to the bass line.

Content/context and listening

Every time we hear a new musical context, which contains organised syntactic-musical elements, a process of listening is introduced. Based on the way in which the contents inserted within the context are familiar to us, and to what degree, unintentional processes of imitation are triggered in the case of young students or novices; and conscious thoughts, in the case of expert adults familiar with musical syntax. Who among us, after listening to a new piece within which they don't initially find tonal and/or rhythmic reference points, wouldn't ask to listen to it again? Indeed, to be able to bring to mind or sing those contents, we must have them in our short-term memory in a fairly precise way. Fairly often, when I listen to a piece I've never heard before and these contents are not clear to me, I wind up with my ears right next to the source of the sound, my desire to listen more closely is so strong! Or else I try moving my body, to decipher a rhythmic structure! Once we've found these points of reference, calling them back to mind or listening to them again leads us to complete the process of memorisation, but this process requires some kind of effort for the content to become clearer with every repetition.

Even when we succeed in imitating a piece immediately after hearing it, after a few days or even hours it often does not come to mind, or only does so partially and incompletely, meaning that we have to listen to it again, sing it again and understand it more clearly. But what

happens during this gradual process of imitation, repetition, comprehension, interaction and reiteration? At some point along this process, the piece comes to mind effortlessly and without any cloudy passages. In our audiation, this context and all its contents has been definitively assimilated.

By now it is perfectly clear that the continuous enrichment of our listening vocabulary can in no way harm the development of other vocabularies. The important thing is for the processes of familiarisation and assimilation to be promoted continually and circularly, never forgetting, somewhere along the way, to stimulate inference processes as well, by way of example.

Conclusive reflections

The context/content/context tool is therefore crucial in learning processes that follow the principles of MLT. Acting alongside with the key concept of familiarity, it allows assimilation to occur, leading all elements to become settled and absorbed.

When speaking of audiation development in MLT, the familiarity obtained in discriminatory learning by imitation makes it possible, if encouraged and stimulated, to pass to the level of inference: here, through deduction, the assimilated competences act as a basis on which to create and comprehend new elements, never heard before. This comes about in particular when the new elements are inserted among familiar elements.

This causes a liberation of our familiar listening vocabulary, which evolves into an active vocabulary and can now be used expressively, singing and improvising in musical relations. In this evolution, the circularity of context/content/context teaching is essential, because it allows us to continually use familiarity as a basis for unfamiliarity.

And, since there are so many musical elements to be added from one time to the next, which can be infinitely combined and varied in a multifaceted play of unique creations and combinations, the learning process itself, when structured this way, is in turn potentially infinite.