

Music as a Tool to Express Emotions: Remembering the Quarantine Soundscape at the Middle School

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Abstract: *This paper aims to illustrate the results of a pilot study carried out with 20 students attending an Italian middle school after the lockdown. In the first phase of the research, the music teacher collected data about the personal memories of the students related to the soundscape of quarantine. The thematic analysis showed that while most students identified listening and making music as relaxing and positive activities, others had trouble remembering the sounds heard during the lockdown. After that, the students were asked to describe the seasons of quarantine through a multimodal approach, which combined music, words, and pictures. The students used Google Classroom and mobile apps to meet, discuss and share ideas. Most of the notes of the students were referred to positive affects. This demonstrated the value of the music lesson as a space to express emotions in stressful conditions, like those caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Key words: *Covid-19; emotions; middle school; soundscape; Vivaldi.*

1. Introduction

Covid-19 emergency had a serious impact on pre-adolescents (Bonafede, 2021; Buzzi et al., 2020; Musso and Cassibba, 2020; Uccella et al., 2021; Vicari and Di Vara, 2021). Drawing upon the relevant literature on this topic, the pandemic: a) affected the behavior and the emotional areas; b) limited the freedom of movement, reducing contacts and socialization opportunities; c) deeply influenced the processes of teaching and learning; d) changed daily activities and routines; e) required a high degree of adaptation to restrictions and rules. Socialization plays an important role in pre-adolescence development, supporting self-definition and the transition to adulthood. The limitations and containment measures imposed by the national government during the peak of Covid-19 infections had psychological consequences on young people, that were deprived of the possibility to be physically in contact with



their peers. The inability to move and attend school in presence¹ (Santagati and Barabanti, 2019; Roncaglia, 2020) affected early adolescents' lifestyles and emotional states. The digitization through distance learning exposed the students to an "alienating and unexpected experience", which produced "a depotentiation of their resources and an exasperation of conditions already present in most of them, such as anxiety, restlessness, isolation and regression" (Montanari, 2021). Emotions can also have an impact on the subjective sense of time. During the lockdown, pre-adolescents were deprived of their temporal agency, such as the ability to perceive and manage the time, plan daily activities and observe routines. This was somewhat a consequence of the school closure plan. Home confinement had an influence on time perception and measuring, as strictly connected to the sense of space. Early adolescents "often search for atypical schedules (desynchronization) in order to resist external constraints and develop their subjective sense of time" (Grondin and Mendoza-Duran, 2020). They usually reported a sense of emptiness and a slowing in the passage of time, a phenomenon that psychological research associates with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Rankin et al., 2019). They were also "inserted in forced dynamics in the family nucleus", with a lot of problematic reactions (Mancaniello, 2020), including mobile phone and new technologies addiction. In this context, music could represent a valuable instrument to reduce stressful situations, improve wellbeing, and promote the recognition and expression of emotions arisen from the quarantine (Cappa and Sellari, 2018; Caterina, 2016; Piatti, 1996, 2005). As a temporal art, it has the benefit of being employed to support the development of the ability to plan and organize time and spaces.

Music educators emphasised the importance of using music as a rewarding and healthy practice for pre-adolescents and a channel for mirroring emotions and reducing stress. They also highlighted the power of the auditory system, being awaked in the silent atmosphere created by the lockdown. As Vitali (2021) reported, the sound became "a natural amplifier of the most delicate and important sensations and sensitivities, a precious travel companion in a renewed self-formative process".

2. The context: musical activities in the Italian middle school during the pandemic

In the school sector, the Italian legislator, like others all over the world, implemented provisions on distance learning and social distancing in the presential activities. In some cases, teachers must reach students only through online platforms; in others, depending on the school grade level and the emergency circumstances, class sizes were

¹ Adolescence is a phase in the lifetime characterized by vulnerability e fragility (Barone, 2019; Maltese, 2021). Since before the pandemic, well-established research shows that "trusting relationships at school and within other social networks emerge as protective factors that are crucial to the positive development of early adolescents"; in this sense, "school is one of the critical environments where they can develop a sense of belonging" (Drolet and Arcand, 2013).



minimized to ensure the safety of students and school staff members. The Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, in two legislative acts, in particular Note n. 1994 enacted on 9 November 2020 and a Circular adopted on 15 September 2020, established specific guidelines for musical activities. At school, students over the age of six were obliged to wear masks during the lessons. It was generally forbidden to sing and to play wind instruments, unless the social distancing could be maintained or guaranteed by special devices (for instance, by wearing face shields). Some schools adopted protective measures, allowing the students to sing only in one direction, without moving or changing their position, or doing vocal warm-up with their mouths closed. Music teachers were encouraged to organize body percussion, listening, music theory and history activities, and enhance rule-following inside and outside the school.

3. The project

The project started in October 2020 and was implemented over three months of in-class and home activities. It involved a population of 20 students attending the second class of an Italian middle school. The study was conceived as an action-research project for the educational context, to facilitate emotional literacy and positive social behavior in the classroom through music mediation.

The specific goal of the project consists in making students able to share their memories about the lockdown, pointing the attention to the emotions of those weeks and the role of musicking (Small, 1998) in their daily life. A much broader purpose of such an action-research was to establish new and good practices to educate pre-adolescents to make music in a safe environment, adapting the learning activities not only to the legislative guidelines, but especially to the needs of the students as human beings in a crucial phase of their life, in terms of cognitive, social, and physical development.

The activities of the project were completed over various steps, moving from the musical skills that the students acquired during the previous school year and being inspired by the pedagogical approach of active methods in music education. The methodology chosen by the teacher assumed that the researcher is not only an external observer but is immersed in the reality under examination through a continuous relationship with the students involved in the research. The music teacher applied qualitative inquiry instruments (questionnaire, brain-storming, and free-texts comments) and experiential class activities (individual, in pairs, in small groups) to help students express their feelings and recognize their emotions and, at the same time, develop musical skills (creation, improvisation, rhythmic coordination, music history knowledge, creativity, image and sound manipulation, text writing) and social attitudes, promoting the observation of basic rules to ensure their safety. The data were examined using qualitative content analysis.

In the first step of the study, information about the students' memories related to the quarantine were collected. The teacher asked the students to fill in an anonymous short questionnaire composed of five open-ended questions which focused on: a) the



activities involving music (music listening and practice, e.g., by playing an instrument or singing); b) the outdoor and indoor soundscape (with reference both to natural and artificial sounds); c) the emotions associated with musicking and with the immersion in the quarantine soundscape.

The questions were listed as follows:

1. “Did you listen to music, sing, or play a musical instrument during the lockdown? If yes, in which moment of the day and in what place (bedroom, garden, living room, etc.)?”;
2. “Could you list the sounds you heard inside your house and associate an emotion?”;
3. “Could you list the sounds you heard outside your house and associate an emotion?”;
4. “Did your share music experience with your relatives (e.g., singing with a parent, listening to music with a brother or a sister, etc.)?”;
5. “How did you feel when listening to music, singing, or playing a musical instrument during the quarantine?”.

Sound is an essential component of life and the basis of making music.

The sounds of the environment changed during the lockdown: some were emphasized, others were reduced; some were noted, others were ignored. Sound is an essential component of life and the basis of doing music. As Disoteo (2013) stated, “in many cases, the attention of children and young people is no longer focused primarily” on the elements of music, such as harmony, melody, or rhythm, but “on sound”. A preliminary activity based on remembering the sounds heard in specific circumstances was not only an exercise of musical memory but an experience that allowed the participants to create an autobiographical track (Demetrio, 1996; Strollo, 2014) of the lockdown months.

Moreover, this reflection allowed the students to elaborate on their feelings, and the suffering of traumatic situations that occurred in daily life, such as domestic conflicts or loss of relatives.

It finally represented a way to underline the difference between hearing and listening, passive and active listening², as a necessary step not only to consider “the sounds that surround us with greater critical attention” (Schafer, 1985)³, but also to appreciate musical works.

² The phenomenon of “desensitization” (Truax, 2001) is particularly widespread among young, people that get used to background sounds, particularly when they are permanent and without substantial variation. Similarly, Biasutti (1999) revealed the common trend in contemporary Western culture to “experience passive listening modes”.

³ The Canadian composer Raymond Murray Schafer ideated the notion of “soundscape”, then enriched through different nuances by the contribution of other musicologists.



The questionnaire results gave the teacher a comprehensive framework on the soundscape in which each student was engaged during the quarantine.

From the thematic analysis of the answers, it emerged that most students, during the quarantine:

- a) were widely exposed to TV and electronic devices' sounds;
- b) associated natural sounds with positive feelings⁴ and house noises to negative affective states;
- c) identified listening and making music as a relaxing and positive activity;
- d) reported the absence of some sounds (urban noises, school bell ringing, sounds from city traffic)⁵.

It is relevant to note that some students (30%) had trouble remembering the sounds heard during the lockdown.

In the second step of the study, the teacher asked the students to list the healthy practices to prevent Covid-19 illness in a focus group session of 20 minutes that occurred during the music lesson. The flow of ideas included the following rules:

- a) frequent hand-washing;
- b) maintenance of physical distancing;
- c) wearing a face mask.

After choosing the first rule as the most “musical” one, the students were encouraged to compose a rhythmic musical message to raise awareness on the importance of washing hands, using soap and water. Each student recorded a personal message and uploaded it on Google Classroom, sharing their work with the teacher and the classmates. Taking inspiration from the messages, the students created body percussion sequences performed in pairs during the music lesson at school.

Starting from an investigation of the sound environment and the acoustic background of the quarantine to build an idea of familiar music, passing through creative composition with body sounds, the students were guided into music history as the central step of the project.

The music teacher introduced *The Four Seasons* (Castellani, 2010) by the renowned Baroque composer Antonio Vivaldi (4 March 1678 – 28 July 1741)⁶.

⁴ In the time of pandemic crisis, the “presence” of the “voices of nature [...] became more delineated and significant, both from a symbolic and a social point of view” (Vitali, 2021).

⁵ This observation recalls Schafer's concept of Museums of Disappearing Sounds, referring to those sounds and noises which disappeared through urbanization processes and the development of modern cities.

⁶ The musicological literature on the figure of Antonio Vivaldi is rich and under constant updates. Among the others, see Formichetti (2017), Pozzi (2007), Talbot (2013), While (2013), and Zerbi (2020).



This activity engaged the students as listeners and creators of a multi-modal product by using technology in the classroom and at home. First, the students acquired a general knowledge about Vivaldi by interacting with different typologies of historical sources. The contact with sources sparked curiosity about the life and works of Vivaldi. There were used:

- a) iconographical sources, in particular an engraving of the composer by the French painter François Morellon de La Cave inserted in the first edition of Opus 8;
- b) archival sources, such as the text of Vivaldi's baptismal certificate, dated 6 May 1678⁷;
- c) printing sources, comprising the title page of the volume *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione*, printed in 1725 in Amsterdam by the publisher Michel-Charles Le Cène. The collection, dedicated to the Count of Morzin, is constituted of twelve concertos. The first four concertos are *The Four Seasons*.



Figure 1 – Engraving of Antonio Vivaldi by François Morellon de La Cave



Figure 2 – Title page of the printed collection *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione*

⁷ The document is preserved at the Archivio Storico del Patriarcato di Venezia, Reg. n. 10, 1678. The content of the text is hereby reported in the original language: “Adì 6 mggio 1678. Antonio Lucio figliolo del Sig. Gio:Batta q. Augustin Vivaldi Sonador et della Sig.ra Camilla figliola del q. Camillo Calicchio sua Cons.te nato li 4 marzo, qual hebbe l'Acqua in casa p. pericolo di morte della Comare allev.ce mad.ma Margarita Veronese, hoggi fù portato alla chiesa ricevo gl'essorcismi, et ogli ss.ti da me Giacomo Fornacieri. Piovano à quali lo tene il Sig.re Antonio q. Gerolamo Veccelio specier all'insegna del Dose in Contrà”.



Students were grouped into four teams composed of five members. Each team was named with the title of one concert (*Spring* – concert RV 269; *Summer* – concert RV 315; *Autumn* – concert RV 293; *Winter* – concert RV 297). They were asked to read and comment on the sonnet which accompanied the music and to listen to some short recording extracts of the assigned concert, randomly chosen from each movement. Each group of students isolated one recording of their choice and used it as a soundtrack of a video to describe what happened in the corresponding season over the past year. The students were asked to adapt Vivaldi’s work to the seasons of quarantine and those of the post-lockdown months, writing a short text based on the model of each sonnet. The text was included in the video, enriched with pictures.

For completeness, hereby is reported the sonnet on the *Autumn*:

- I. *Celebra il Vilanel con balli e Canti | Del felice raccolto il bel piacere | E del liquor di Bacco accesi tanti | Finiscono col Sonno il lor godere* (“The peasant celebrates with song and dance for the harvest safely gathered in. The cup of Bacchus flows freely, and many find their relief in deep slumber”⁸).
- II. *Fa' ch' ogn' uno tralasci e balli e canti | L'aria che temperata dà piacere | E la Staggion ch' invita tanti e tanti | D' un dolcissimo sonno al bel godere* (“The singing and the dancing die away as cooling breezes fan the pleasant air, inviting all to sleep without a care”).
- III. *I cacciator alla nov'alba à caccia | Con corni, Schioppi, e cani escono fuore | Fugge la belva, e Seguono la traccia | Già Sbigottita, e lassa al gran rumore | De' Schioppi e cani, ferita minaccia | Languida di fuggire, mà oppressa muore* (“The hunters emerge at dawn, ready for the chase, with horns and dogs and cries. Their quarry flees while they give chase. Terrified and wounded, the prey struggles on, but, harried, dies”).

The activity was carried out in the classroom and at home, using Google Classroom and mobile apps to meet, discuss and share ideas. Each video was shown during the music lesson; the texts were read by the students and commented in class. This put the students in a condition to reflect on the ability of music to tell stories through the emotions it conveys and to realize a creative product which revealed something about their personal view of the considered season as lived during the pandemic. The mediation of music, images, and literary text, combined in a video format, provided the students with an effective tool to bring out their experiences and emotions. Peer-to-peer contact allowed the understanding of the feelings of the others, giving the students the opportunity to experience empathy and recognize and validate difficult emotions, such as fear, avoiding the need to feel a sense of control over the pandemic. It

⁸ The English translation of the sonnets was provided in the program notes to *The Four Seasons* by Francisco (2020) for the Seattle Symphony autumn season.



also brought the focus on the passage of the months, to the cycle of nature and the resilience of human life. This helped the students to restructure the notion of time through reference to the season's sequence. Finally, it afforded a greater understanding of the function that music plays in different times (from the 18th century to nowadays) and a chance to appreciate a masterpiece of Italian music history. This is particularly remarkable since one of the main difficulties encountered by music teachers at the middle school is a lack of interest from the students in unfamiliar "musical landscapes" (Strobino, 2002), especially historical landscapes, which are very far from preadolescents' everyday life, musical preferences and listening habits.

Placing emphasis on *The Four Seasons* created common narrative patterns in the classroom, making students much more confident in communicating thoughts to others. The goal of writing together a "story" of the seasons at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, with new protagonists and situations if compared to those of the 18th century, constituted a challenging task for each group and was pursued with commitment, trust, and collaboration by the single member of the team. Working on and through *The Four Seasons* revealed the invisible link between past and present and shown how the music from the past could make easier the understanding of the current time.

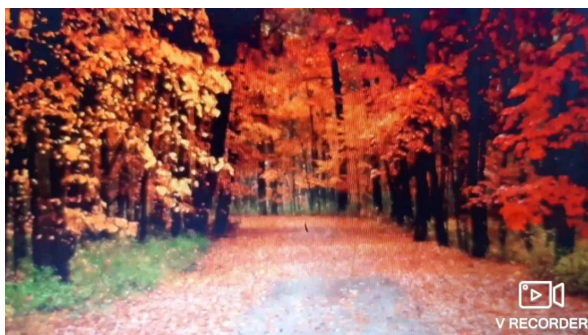


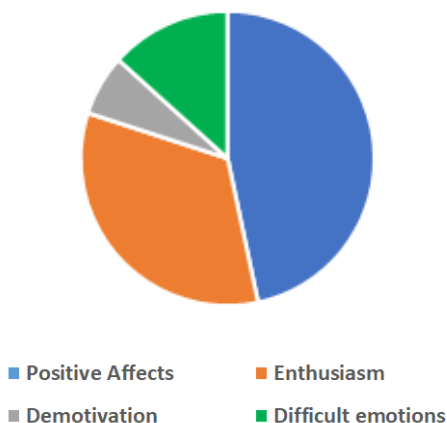
Figure 3 – Still image of the video about the Autumn

The Autumn
*Now we can go out, but case rates are rising.
If we are not careful, the lockdown will return.
We must do something, if we do not go back to April,
when everything was shut down.
We must overcome this situation and get up, going back to
normal.
After a moment of great freedom, the cases are increasing.
We should make a little effort if we do not want to stay at home.*

Figure 4 – Text written by the students on the Autumn



In the final part of the study, the students were invited to prepare a short writing about the musical activities carried out during the project, by filling a free-text box. Each student wrote a text expressing personal considerations on the music lessons. These notes were conceived to give the possibility to summarize and process students' feelings about the overall educational experience by answering one open-ended question: "How did you felt during the music lessons?". The comments were grouped and categorized in four conceptual areas: positive affects, enthusiasm, demotivation, and difficult emotions. Most comments referred to positive affects and a large part to the enthusiasm and enjoyment felt by the students in the classroom and homework activities.



Graph 1 – Categories of words used by the students to describe the emotions felt during the music lessons

4. Final remarks

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of students' emotional status during the quarantine and values the importance of music making and listening at school and at home. Comments in the free-text box were more positive than negative and showed satisfaction with the music activities proposed during the project. Most students demonstrated to be positively involved in the music lessons, especially those focusing on Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The results also provided insight into how music education at the middle school can be renewed and adapted in times of sanitary crisis, starting from the idea that school activities in presence could represent the key to re-organize ordinary lifestyle. The music lesson became a space to put the students in a condition to express the emotions arising from the lockdown and, at the same time, to build a sense of community in the classroom, observing social distancing and hygiene



rules. The students had the opportunity to share their feelings, using music as a facilitator of messages that were difficult to communicate with words. Music represented a nonverbal instrument to promote emotional literacy and to produce narratives and reflections related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, this research emphasized the relevance of group work to favor peer interaction and to valorize the role of music as a means of identification with the others (Gasperoni et al., 2004), facilitating prosocial behavior within the school environment. Even if the results of this study cannot be generalized, since they are only referred to a small educational community and did not represent extensive findings, the successful outcomes of the project demonstrated that music can be a tool to deliver powerful contents, to free-up emotions and to help and improve communication between the students, overcoming distances..

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