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Researching children's music making: a look from the in betweens

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Abstract
This piece reflects upon a research at a musical education project located at a neighborhood distinguished by its inequality and social vulnerability, in Brazil. Organized by a family in their own house, the school is dedicated to the teaching of classical music to the peripheral youth, but is also the stage of many other activities that do not concern directly music teaching – the interactions between children and teens, their playing games, commenting between rehearsals, dancing, organizing parties and cooking. These moments become a significant part of their music making in daily life. By observing, pointing and using the engaging of the senses in four situations lived and shared with some of the children during the fieldwork, this piece intends to produce a multimodal account about the subject, also reflecting upon the status of the adult researcher on such an attempt.
In 2013, a family of young musicians in the state of Ceará, located at the northern region of Brazil, initiated a musical education project in their community, in the city of Fortaleza - the state’s capital. With the project functioning in their own house, situated in a “dangerous” neighborhood called Novo Mondubim, the children organize themselves in order to teach, think of the repertory, administrate rehearsals and schedule concerts, while the tasks with bureaucracy and daily issues are mostly done by their parents – filling in papers, arranging food, getting in touch with other institutions and popularizing the project at funding programs. Their aim is to promote youth’s “social integration” through the study of musical instruments and the playing of classical music. Most of the students that go there are children of the same age - from age 8 to 18 - and from the same neighborhood, and many of them, during the day, attend the same school.

I've been going to the project first as a researcher, looking at how (and if) that certain kind of music-making was somehow mediating childhood in those specific settings of violence and vulnerability¹. Then, somehow, as a student: during this period, I started to actually play with them, in both senses: during presentations and rehearsals, when we shared performances and practices, and during the breaks, when lots of games would also come up: hide and seek, truth or dare or even just throwing the ball. These dynamics proved to be challenging for me, especially by addressing and changing my own position in the field. That might sound obvious - after all, isn't that what anthropology is all about?

Figure 2
I could never agree more. It has been a while since considering the paradigm of reflexivity in anthropological research as a means to access different realities has stopped being a loud and polemic enterprise. Exploring both the objective and subjective implications of the anthropological encounter gained more importance. Going beyond that, getting in touch with the researcher’s lived experience, its wounds and affections can also inform us of a great deal of subtleties that make all the difference in our understandings of a particular context - not by making us metaphorically closer to it, as one with representational purposes might want, - but by bringing the boundaries of experience, itself, to the surface.

Being an adult researching children can make some interesting aspects of that matter emerge. Many authors (Lancy, 2012; Pires, 2008; Cohn, 2002; Christensen & Prout, 2002) have thematized this subject, mainly focusing on the methodological approaches that one could engage with in order to do justice to our challenging interlocutors: drawings, storytelling, roleplaying or other ludic activities – many of them, interestingly enough, would involve artistic languages as a form of gathering and mobilizing their sensibilities. Most of the times, however, these activities were conducted by the adult in the scene: the researcher, directing them in order to collect data and materials that could help in the approach of their symbolic and effective universe. It is worth saying that these methods are more than valid and have produced great possibilities for analysis and interpretation.

The first attempts I made to work with these kinds of materials were never, in any sense, profitable. The kids were not interested in what I would present as exciting activities and would hardly engage in them. I decided to turn it the other way around. The experience of being with them and following their endeavors over the course of the days, without directing them through specific questions or any kind of inquiry, in any form, around my own research interests, shifted my own notions of what was taking place there. As children, their constantly shifting attention started to guide me towards another form of experimenting, the research itself. Suddenly, I could pay attention to a song that would sum up life for a few of them, as one of them would tell me. They also led me to sense the unquietness that the smell of food starting to rise up during rehearsals generates – marked by the shaking legs that cannot stand to be sitting and playing anymore. I could understand the rush that, when the rain would fall, combined the euphoria of finally cooling the hot weather and the disgusting feeling of the sewers around the neighborhood.
(and the school) being flooded – when they would all run from the rehearsal room straight to the street outside, start to jump and play under the rain, smiling and goading each other to step on the dirty water that would form slops on the ground and splash it around. I also felt a strange paralyzing fear when someone would knock heavily on the school's door at night, when the rehearsals would happen, just to find out it was nothing serious - then they would all scream in excitement and joke about it. Also, I could now see that the playing before and after presentations was never a distraction or a way to “kill time”, but it was, actually, the main attraction of the day.

These situations, however fortuitous they might be, summarize that in this particular case, the best way to try to approach their experiences as kids growing up in those circumstances was to open myself to the feelings and sensations that they were constantly inviting me to access. What they were actually teaching me was to be there, with them, with my whole body. Doing that would also mean that, at some point, I would even feel like a kid (without, of course, turning into one – having passed the illusion of “becoming the native” a long while ago). What I realized later is that, in fact, the kids were inviting me into multimodality.

The topics that follow are reflections resulted from brief moments that I shared with some of them and that, under this light, point to greater aspects than just the isolated instant might suggest.

**Breaking strings and freedom**

We were already on our way downtown to buy some violin strings for the school - they say the kids are never careful with the instruments while tuning them, so they have to keep the string stock always full, which wasn’t possible every time, since that kind of maintenance is expensive (considering the frequency within which it would be needed).

Tuning is indeed a delicate thing to do. I caught myself thinking when and how did I learn not to break the strings while tuning the viola - where was the exact point when I would know that I should stop tightening the string up? There is something about developing a certain kind of hearing that means you would recognize if you’re going too far from the pitch, of course; but there’s also the ability to notice its textures and sense the tension that is dragged from the instrument straight to our skin moments before the string breaks, usually followed by a small jump back and the squinting of the eyes as if trying to avoid seeing a tragedy. During that car ride, I shared this thought with her, one of the young girls that was opening the doors of her life to me, adding that I don’t remember ever being taught how to tune - it seemed to me that it just happened, as if it would be something you could read and learn.
from music sheets, and she promptly said “It makes no difference, in this case, if we would teach them how to do it or not. They just need to test everything, it’s a sort of freedom. You know when you are about to make a mess with your life, and you kind of know it, but you still go on with your thing, because it also feels good?”

The line stuck with me: I could surely relate to both situations - breaking strings and making a mess of life, and she was right - both of them came with a funny thrill. Which one here was the actual subject of our conversation, though?

Freedom is not a noun I would use to refer to these kids routine.

Which one would I use, then?

Still? now, I have no clue.

Muleque de vila
During that same car ride, a few moments after I was left thinking about the way she applied the notion of freedom both to breaking strings and to making a mess out of life, she turned the radio on, while talking to him. He was sitting by my side in the car, on the backseat. They used to date before she went to Rio de Janeiro to study the flute. He is now a voluntary teacher in the school. She is the eldest of the six siblings that make that music project happen, each one in their own way – now her way was inevitably from a distance. She looked at us through the front seat mirror from time to time, taking turns in looking backwards and watching herself fix? her dark, straight hair by soothing it with her long skinny fingers. A song started to play on the radio – her eyes grew in size and glow, and she said to me “You know that he was the one that made me like this kind of song?”, referring to him and also referring to Rap.
The song was *Muleque de Vila* (something like Kid from the Hood), from the Brazilian rapper Projota. She started talking about how the lyrics were actually about her life, about the school, about the musical group that she has (or used to have, as she corrected herself right after) with her siblings, and then she went quiet... There we all were: listening to it as the song would install itself in each corner of that car, until it was the only thing occupying it. The dynamics between the constant low beat and the choired refrain seemed to go at the same pace as the car that was crossing the city, driven by the overly cautious mother of a student from the project. At some point, she broke the silence and said

“This song reminds me of my grandfather”.

Her grandfather. The first person I talked to when I started to go to the school was him: this old guy that would just sit on the red chairs at the school, watching the day go by. As the kids would come and go wild around the place, and their parents, most of the time, would be struggling with issues that were always coming up, he would be there, unwavering, as the house's own foundation - Here, instead of saying 'school', I chose to call it a house, being aware that this place is both. As soon as I got to talk to him, I understood that.

Fieldwork was just at its beginning and I was still getting to know its rhythm. His big and alive eyes were, all the while, comforting for this new and weird presence that I know that I was being at the time. He would call me “Young Lady”, make the sign inviting me to sit with him and engage me in a long conversation about his origins, about being poor, about music. At his young age, he was a self-taught guitar player in a *Forró* band – a traditional musical genre from the Northeastern region of Brazil -, but it was never enough to make a living, he said. I remember him turning his head up, looking at the ceiling, aiming at Heaven, and thanking that his grandchildren had chosen a better path in music – the path of transformation. “That's our secret”, he confessed, as a precious thing that he had learned by heart along his life and would only share it with the ones who would really be worth it. By then, I had not understood it, but remained aware of a feeling of something special being entrusted to me as a reminder.
Knowing her grandfather, it felt funny that a rap song would even remotely evoke something in him – that old man from the countryside wearing a hat made of haulm that was dwelling in my memory. I asked her why that was, then, curious. She would stare at the street, as we were getting close to where we were going – a music store downtown – with a contemplative intensity. She was still thinking of an answer when she started to sing a part of the song. It was not the proper answer yet, but it reached me as one:

After singing, she said, almost surprised to have this answer to give me: “I guess it's because he was this Kid from the Hood his whole life”

He passed away in the middle of April 2018. All his grandchildren played at his funeral.

Figure 8
**Hide and seek for the nutcracker**

The clock was announcing noon by the time I got there. That day we were going to play at two public schools, one in the morning and another one in the afternoon. Both presentations were arranged by one mother of a student in the project and had the purpose of showing the school and its work to kids from other neighborhoods.

I was about to take the bus to cross the city and get to the school where we were going to play that morning and, with no surprise, the bus lines were all late. By the time I arrived there, they had already played and left to stay at a house nearby and wait for the afternoon presentation. I asked people for some directions and went towards the house where they were staying.

The clock was announcing noon by the time I got there – I rang the doorbell and waited by the gate for someone to open it. One of the kids answered me with a low voice, almost whispering, and a little bit anxious, “Who's this?”. I entered the joke, and whispered back “You have to guess!”. He turned off the buzzer and I could hear his now screaming voice from outside: “It's Paula, let's run to open it and then hide back again, quick!”

I got into an environment filled with energy. They were all alone in this huge and almost empty house running around and screaming with excitement. The first thought that occurred to me was one of the grown-up kinds, of course – as it usually is -, although it might not seem sometimes: Why would all those kids be left alone in this house, in another neighborhood? Whose house was this?

I started to place myself there, while they would all go back to their hiding places, since the one that would have to search for them was still counting (he had to count to 100 before opening his eyes and go searching for everyone that was playing). I dropped the viola case on/by a couch and walked around the place.

The whole house went silent all of a sudden, and all I could hear was the progressive counting that the searcher was advancing on. Going up the stairs, I heard giggles of tension spreading around the rooms. The trumpet player was hiding underneath a table and, as I was passing by him and probably making more noise than the loudest kid would ever do in those circumstances, he got me by the hand and told me to “Shush!” and hide there with him.

I did. While we were there, waiting for the *momentum* to start running, he asked me why I had not showed up in the morning. I explained about the buses, and that it made me really sad. He looked at me confused, then looked the other way to check if there was someone coming, and, said back to me while still looking to the other side: “Sad? It's always the same thing. I made the same mistakes I always do, and I bet i'm gonna make them in the afternoon too”, with intentional disdain in his tone and clear effort of...
an 'I don't care' attitude. I was not thinking about mistakes and their recurrence when I felt sad for missing our presentation – they were never in the horizons of my concerns. Him bringing that up as a reason not to be sad for it made me think about the significance of those small concerts that would always happen in a hurry, and their actual statute for them, as if, by not caring for making mistakes, he would be defying what was expected from him and, somehow, dealing with the pressure of playing to an audience.

All of this was going on in my mind when we were caught, and I took the blame, justifiably enough.

When we would all get tired of hiding – the hide and seek went on for two more rounds after that from when I first arrived – we would just sit on the floor, in what was once a living room and now only had piles of things gathered in the corners and an empty salon. They started to feel bored and tried to push one another to think of a thing to do while the two Mothers that went out to the supermarket to buy groceries to cook them lunch – as I found out – would not come back. Some of them tried to initiate some other plays – the younger ones -, but it did not work, and their excitement slowly turned into complaints about having nothing to do, feeling hungry and even having to play later.

One of the girls raised up a question to all of us about our dreams. At first she got no answer - everyone had already picked up their phones from their pockets and started playing some virtual games. Until the young cello player – the one that conducts the small orchestra during rehearsals, one of the six siblings that build up the project - interrupted the gaming noises that sounded like a cashier and said loudly “You know what my dream really is?”, facing the other kids in a semi-circle movement with her head. “My dream is that someday we can all play the Nutcracker”.

Everyone laughed. It was the most weird an unreasonable dream one could have – and “What the hell is this Nutcracker thing?”, another kid asked. She went on: “But as things are going, I guess it will never happen”, and then left the room.

She became upset all of a sudden. The kids started to look at each other, and, without saying anything, they were communicating, but I was clearly lost. So I asked what happened, and they all started talking at the same time. What I got from all their speeches is that the concert was not good and she got embarrassed - “In front of her father!”, one of them added with seriousness.

Thinking about their difference in dealing with mistakes, then, made all the sense in the world. For Her, the young conductor of that orchestra, being there was also a sort of job, and she could not disappoint her family – especially ever since the older one, who was originally the conductor, moved to Rio de Janeiro. Several times, during rehearsals, I heard her referring to her sister and feeling less recognized. Although it might be a natural thing to happen between siblings, it stays with me, since then, the feeling that the pressure of this responsibility is way bigger than the one of playing to any audience – unless this audience is her father.

entanglements: Researching children's music making
The afternoon concert went better, they say. I made lots of mistakes. Mostly for following a crying young conductor.

Figures 11: See HTML version for accompanying video content

Playing to belong
She sat by my side and got her viola out of the case. I would finally have a violist partner, I thought to myself.

We were getting ready for the Christmas concerts, the last ones before everyone goes on vacation. This is usually the moment of the year when they call people that have been through the school at least for a while to participate in the orchestra as much as they can, because it's important to make an impression, and volume – as in number of members – is the most desirable thing in these situations, as their father told me once. So this is why she arrived totally out of the blue, sat by my side, got her viola out of the case and settled herself naturally and acquainted to the whole thing. She was not a new student there, but it was the first time she would play at the orchestra.

Figure 12

As herself, there were at least six new kids that had never rehearsed with us and had to prepare to play within a week.
Orchestra rehearsals in the school are never a simple thing – I don't actually think they are simple in any case, but in this particular one I can assure that. During rehearsals, the kids weave their regards about all sorts of things. They go from how well they are going at school or promoting internal and anecdotal polls about who's the best teacher in the family, to wondering and pointing who could pay for a pizza round later on (just as a provocation, because they know no one ever can). All the while, there are actually some songs that need to be played. My violist partner started to guide me in one of those, sharing her own strategies with me so to get it right very quickly, as she had never played those pieces before: “In this part I'm just gonna make some noise. I guess this other one I can sort it out.”, pointing at the notes and making marks with a pencil, writing it down in order for it not to get more confusing.

I tried to follow her strategies, knowing, deep down, that I would not be able to do it that easily, since I was too attached to following the written music. Another piece of advice came: “If in doubt during this part, you can just unleash the G that fits”. It did fit quite well, indeed. Suddenly, it all became much more fun. Somehow, during that week of rehearsals, I felt like I was learning to play that instrument again, with another attitude and a much more exciting method, I would say. The playing of instruments, once a very serious business for myself, became, also, a sort of play.

On our last day of rehearsal, she said “If nothing works, you can just pretend you are playing, ok?”. I asked her if, in the end, it wouldn't be too weird and obvious, to which she quickly answered

“No.
The important thing is to look like we belong”
Notes
[1] This research is a part of my master's study about the classical music making at the peripheric surroundings of Fortaleza, made possible with the support of CAPES. The main research also integrates the thematic research group Musicar Local, coordinated by Suzel Reily and Rose Satiko, supported by FAPESP.
[2] Expression coming from “To eat the bread that the devil kneaded”, which means to suffer more than one could bear.

References


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