Multifaceted Concert Performances in Music Schools
Instrumental Students as Music Mediators

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Abstract

Based on Andrea Welte's article "Musikschulen" in Handbuch Musikvermittlung (2023), this paper presents an approach to designing recitals at music schools and reflects on the challenges and the conditions for success mentioned by Welte. The text argues that the student engagement in tandem with limited instructor interference in concept development enables the student instrumentalists involved to participate and collaborate so that they can appear as music-mediating practitioners.

Basé sur l'article « Musikschulen » d'Andrea Welte dans le Handbuch Musikvermittlung (2023), cet article analyse les récitals présentés dans les écoles de musique et réfléchit à leurs défis et à leurs conditions de réussite à partir des thématiques identifiées par Welte. L'approche présentée, dans laquelle les étudiant·e·s sont engagé·e·s en tandem et avec une interférence limitée de l'instructeur·ice pour développer le concept du récital, permet à ces instrumentistes en formation de s'impliquer, de participer et de collaborer afin qu'ils et elles puissent se développer en tant que praticien·ne·s de la médiation de la musique.

Ausgehend von Andrea Weltes Artikel „Musikschulen" im Handbuch Musikvermittlung (2023) wird eine Vorgehensweise zur Gestaltung von Klassenvorspielen an Musikschulen präsentiert und hinsichtlich Herausforderungen sowie der bei Welte genannten Gelingensbedingungen reflektiert. Es zeigt sich, dass die vorgestellte Herangehensweise an die Konzeptentwicklung den beteiligten Instrumentalschüler*innen Partizipation und Kollaboration ermöglicht, sodass diese als musikvermittelnde Akteur*innen in Erscheinung treten können.

Keywords

music school recitals, student participation, collaboration, music school, concert design

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Organizing class recitals is an integral task of music school teachers in Austria. The "general pedagogical-didactic-psychological part" (KOMU 2007) of the Austrian music school curriculum, which is valid throughout Austria, sets out the comprehensive importance of recitals for student instrumentalists at music schools. It states that class recitals should be a given for music school teachers and students alike, and that the amount of work required by music school teachers to prepare and conduct recitals is estimated to be quite high. The class recital is seen in the curriculum as an opportunity to document the respective performance level "under workshop conditions" and also as a chance for the students to prove themselves in front of an audience. To this end, according to the recommendation in the curriculum, teachers should repeatedly enable students to experience concerts by organizing class recitals through "project-like orientation on topics or through cross-class collaboration" (KOMU 2007, 31). According to the curriculum, the aim is for students to have a positive class recital experience. It is also expressly pointed out that recitals should reflect the diverse forms of teaching and that the course of such music school events should therefore not be understood as a series of solo contributions (KOMU 2007, 31-36). However, a still widespread, very traditional approach is as follows: after an introduction by the teacher, one student after the other presents the piece of music they have learned, either as a soloist or in an ensemble. Performances are ranked according to performance level, year of learning or age. If they are ranked according to performance level, this signals to the students that the musical presentations at the beginning of the recital were rated by the teacher as the weakest and the performances at the end of the recital as the best. In some cases, teachers or students moderate in between the individual performances and introduce the student performing or the pieces performed. At the end of the class recital, all students might perform a piece of music together.

In contrast to this traditional form of organizing and realizing class recitals, they could instead be imagined as concerts at music schools. The ways in which recitals can be designed and organized are multifaceted and diverse. Andrea Welte describes music school recitals as part of the "music mediation spectrum" (Welte 2023, 140). In addition to spatial possibilities and the importance of the audience, she points out participation and collaboration as opportunities for students to become "music-mediating actors" (ibid.). Among the conditions for the success of class recitals, she includes "the opportunity to participate in the creation of the concept and preparation that provides security" and "a coherent overall concept with a clear central theme" (Welte 2023, 142).

As a student instrumentalist, I experienced moderated and staged concerts with participatory elements in my piano and guitar courses. Later, during my university

studies, I missed this kind of multi-layered recital organization. In class recitals, which were very traditional, I was always thinking about how such events could be organized in a more engaging way – both for participants and audience members – with the aim of appealing to more senses and stimulating a rich engagement with the music. During my many years of practice as a piano teacher, it was therefore obvious to (further) develop, test, and reflect on a wide range of recital concepts and to involve the students in the project development to varying degrees. In retrospect, one specific approach in which students are fully involved in the concert design would prove to be particularly relevant in my practice: I call it *MuTh-XL*. *MuTh* stands for music and theme, and *XL* refers not only to the amount of time involved, but also to the varying number of students who are involved in the development of the thematically designed recital. The method is presented below using a practical example. It is then reflected on in terms of challenges and the above-mentioned conditions for success (Welte, 2023).

Interactive Recital Design – MuTh-XL

The focus of this approach is the creative development of a recital mainly by student instrumentalists themselves. Students are fully involved in all aspects of the process, such as planning, organization, implementation, and reflection. Over the course of three group lessons, the students develop the thematic design, while I support them if necessary and take on the role of a coach or facilitator. Each group lesson begins and ends with a musical game. In the first lesson, the focus is on finding topics and questions about individual opportunities for participation. Answers to the following questions are collected on four posters:

- How can I get involved in a recital?
- What do I need to enjoy a recital?
- What role can the audience play?
- What themes can I think of for a recital?

The results are first discussed and subsequently a theme is chosen, which is fleshed out in the second group lesson, when the content and artistic/musical aspects are also developed. The aim is to generate a coherent overall concept based on the theme. The students come up with suitable pieces of music and discuss the reasons for placing the works in a particular order on the program. They discuss how they want to open and end the recital and how the audience could be involved.

The third unit is used for finalization: lingering questions are clarified, tasks are formulated and distributed, the course of the recital is discussed and recorded, and required materials are gathered.

As their teacher, I set the organizational framework and assume an accompanying, observing, and occasionally idea-supporting role during the development process. As a

matter of principle, I step back, encourage the students in the idea-finding process, do not evaluate, and deliberately withhold my own ideas. If the process comes to a stand-still, I support the students in finding ideas by asking specific questions. After each group lesson, I summarize the results in writing, and the students receive this summary a few days before the next meeting. I also try to identify possible critical points and how any issues could be resolved, collecting my own ideas as a reserve. In the concert and the preceding rehearsals, the student-generated concept is put into practice. Video, sound, and image recordings serve as lasting project documentation. These can also form part of the reflection and evaluation process, from which conclusions can be drawn for subsequent projects.

Practical Example: Musical Games Recital

This practical example is intended to illustrate what can be achieved in such a development process, and also to create a foundation for the concluding practical reflection.

"Let's have a game night", beams the 11-year-old student, looking at the boardgame *Activity*, which is lying on a bookshelf in the spacious piano room. The class recital takes place in the music school's events hall, which is decorated according to the student's specifications with games and pictures of games. Even the invitations were designed to thematically reflect the decorated concert hall and buffet area. Five students sit in the audience and play various games on their smartphones. Three other students enter the hall. They are loaded with board and card games and walk onto the stage. They call out to the players in the audience: "Put down your smartphones, come and play real games with us". After some grumbling, the student-audience members are persuaded. Finally, all eight are on stage and the games they have brought are spread out on a large Persian rug in the middle of the stage. Directional microphones amplify the performers' conversations. The students now present games such as *Activity*, *Fox and Hen*, *Chess*, *Scrabble* and others in musical-scenic miniatures. The artistic-musical realization of *Activity* is outlined here as an example. The students set up the game *Activity*, in which they have to guess what is being drawn, explained, and mimed. One student draws raindrops on a flipchart and sketches England, while two others play the song *Raindrops* with a piano and saxophone. Three other students watch and guess until one student finally calls out "Raindrops!"; the point goes to her. In the next round, a student plays a tango on the piano and two more students perform the dance. Before *Tears in Heaven* is played, a poem with matching content is recited and guessed. The audience is later involved in bingo and body percussion, which the students lead altogether. Afterwards, all participants round off the recital evening with a buffet. The eight young musicians played 24 pieces of music at this recital, all of them were on stage for the entire performance and played their instruments several times. We needed three group lessons, a main rehearsal, and a dress rehearsal to prepare.

Reflection

This class recital from 2003 was instructive in several respects. I had already been teaching for four years and had gained some experience of concert organization. Before the *Musical Games Recital,* I had also involved the students in the design of recitals, but not to this extent.

Opportunity to Participate in Concept Development

This recital was the result of an experiment that I undertook with my students. My aim was to give them the opportunity to create and develop an artistic-musical event as autonomously as possible. As a teacher, my task was to provide the organizational framework and, where necessary, support the group dynamics. I wanted to reinforce the students' ideas, and therefore hold back my own ideas, assessments, and perspectives – in this way taking on a predominantly observational role. I did not want to evaluate the students' ideas, and where I suspected a need for clarification, I offered to support the students in their collaboration by asking deliberate questions. This approach was meant to provide the students with the necessary freedom to fully engage in the development of the concept. In doing so, I had the simple but instructive experience that the success of a recital does not depend on the ingenuity of a teacher. In the best-case scenario, the lack of ideas-input from the teacher can positively contribute to a deliberately observational, supportive role, which the students perceive as particularly authentic. The challenge for me as a teacher is to engage in a concept development process that is largely beyond my own control in terms of design. This requires confidence, openness, curiosity for the unexpected, and a certain amount of willingness to take risks. It requires leaving my own ideas unspoken and taking up ideas or wishes from students in a non-judgmental way, observing them, only providing advice and support where necessary, and relying on the diverse ideas of the students.

In the first group lesson, there was a key moment that demonstrated my commitment to implementing the experiment. The organizational framework was well set, the poster questions were engagingly answered by the students. When it was time to choose a theme, the decision was made in favor of the concept *game night*. I could not immediately imagine how we would develop a coherent artistic-musical concept for this which would be musically and aesthetically appealing. Despite my uncertainty, I made the decision not to express this skepticism and push for a different theme, but to respect the decision made, trust in the creativity of the group and allow myself to be surprised. As a result, the theme remained. If I had not stepped back for this decision, I would have cast doubt, at such an early stage as the first group vote, on my intention to let the students develop a project as independently as possible.

All the students were able to participate in the concept development. As an adult looking back on this recital, Teresa expressed the fact that she felt the project was her own, and something special, saying: "We always felt like we had created something extraordinary". Whether everyone wanted to participate in the concept development,

how they experienced the participation during the process, and what elements of it had a lasting effect cannot be answered due to the lack of professional evaluation.

Preparation Provides Emotional Security

It was important to me to communicate the organizational framework well to students and parents, to prepare all materials for the group lessons thoroughly, and to provide the results of the group lessons to the students in the form of written summaries. During the rehearsals, the students considered what was needed to ensure a high sense of emotional security during the concert. For example, they realized that too rigidly defined spoken texts lead to more nervousness. For this reason, although the content of the individual statements was discussed and practiced during rehearsals, there were no specific text guidelines and the moderation was improvised, based on agreed keywords. To avoid confusion regarding the order of pieces of music and games, these were written on paper and clearly displayed on the stage floor for the performers to see. With all of this, the students themselves found solutions to increase their own sense of emotional safety. A student from the recital, Alexandra, reflects on this as follows:

> What stuck with me was a feeling: I was always so incredibly nervous at recitals, and it always helped me enormously when the whole evening was tied into one topic. In this case, we were already together on the stage before the game so I wasn't alone and I was in good hands during the performance. So I felt extremely comfortable and safe that evening – at least that's how it feels looking back.

Alexandra highlighted a particularly striking aspect of this project: the authenticity and ease with which the participating students moved on stage. They had developed a concept in which they acted continuously on stage, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background. This not only required a high level of concentration, but also meant that the stage became a more familiar environment for the students involved.

According to Alexandra's words and observations, it can also be assumed that sufficient preparatory work was carried out to provide stability. It should be noted at this point that the thorough preparation of the pieces of music through appropriate support in instrumental lessons – with regard to dealing with mistakes and stage fright – naturally and significantly increases the students' sense of security.

Coherent Overall Concept with a Clear Central Theme

Contrary to my initial skepticism about the chosen theme, a convincing overall concept emerged. The students took various social, board, and card games, combined them with thematically and musically appropriate pieces, and then successfully staged them. They considered carefully which pieces of music should be played, for what reason and when. This gave the pieces of music special significance, as each piece was played for a specific reason at a specific time and each piece was important for the coherent flow of the recital.

The transitions between the playing phases were fluid, similar to the dynamics of a real evening of games. Apart from playing the instruments, the students were able to take on several tasks and slip into different roles. They brought different skills to bear and, as a teacher, I had the opportunity to see new facets of each student.

The high level of attention from the audience also speaks to the coherence of the overall concept. As I was not assigned any tasks during the concert, I was part of the audience as a teacher and able to enjoy the concert. It filled me with joy to see the students so independent, confident and motivated for seventy minutes on stage.

Time Factor

Designing class recitals as described above is very time-consuming and difficult to apply regularly when one must balance a portfolio career working at several music school locations with the associated teaching workload. However, there are countless ways of organizing recitals, including less time-consuming methods. Once students become intensively involved in developing the concept, the experience gained can also benefit less complex follow-up projects. This can sometimes even save the teacher time if students are willing to take on the room configuration, and poster or program booklet design, for example.

Concept Development Group

Depending on the class size and group composition, it is important to decide how many people are involved in the concept development and how this group is formed. One should bear in mind that students can be very different and groups can be very heterogeneous. It can therefore be assumed that some will be more involved in a group and some will hold back. As a teacher, one must keep an eye on both individual needs and group dynamics. It is also conceivable that only one part of the class develops the recital concept and the other students are involved as musicians; even cross-class concept development is possible. For example, with two colleagues from other instrument groups and a total of thirty students, we developed at the music school a mini recital series entitled *To be continued*. During two consecutive weeks, the jointly organized recital took place, each of which was thematically and musically designed by different members of the group.

Summary

The approach presented enables participation and collaboration between the student instrumentalists involved, who act as music mediators. They contribute both individually and collaboratively, use a wide range of skills – which even go beyond musical skills – and develop an overall concept with a clearly recognizable common thread. It is reasonable to assume that their involvement and decision-making has a positive effect on their experience of self-efficacy and self-confidence on stage.

The *MuTh-XL* model presented here is particularly suitable if one wants to involve students intensively in the preparation, and take up the students' ideas in a non-judgmental way, thus unleashing their creative potential for developing concert formats. However, it takes a considerable amount of time, which means that it does not make sense to rely exclusively on this format when developing a recital concept. Despite the many tasks involved in everyday life as an instrument teacher and musician, it is advisable to take sufficient time for the subsequent documentation, reflection, and evaluation, in order to be able to incorporate the knowledge gained into follow-up projects.

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Author Biography

Dagmar Schinnerl studied instrumental piano pedagogy with a focus in music theory (Bruckner Conservatory, 2000), Music Mediation – Music in Context (Anton Bruckner University/ABPU, 2011) and Management in Higher Education (UWK Krems, 2024); further education courses in the fields of music therapy, social work/inclusive pedagogy and research methods. She taught music at the Upper Austrian Music Schools until 2019. Since 2013 she has been a senior lecturer at the ABPU Institute for Music Education (organizational director ULG Music Education-Music in Context) and the Institute for Theory and History. Since May 2019 she has been Dean of Studies for Artistic-Pedagogical and Artistic-Scientific Studies.