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Voci Corsare - A Musical Journey Between Islands of Loneliness. An Educational Experience Combining Two Kinds of Vulnerability

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***Voci Corsare* - A Musical Journey Between Islands of Loneliness. An Educational Experience Combining Two Kinds of Vulnerability**

Emanuela De Bellis and Federica Galletti

VOCI CORSARE is an educational experience and socially useful activity based on self-expression between young people in the criminal justice system and people with disabilities.

The origins: *Pezzi di Ricambio*

The orchestra *Pezzi di Ricambio* originated sixteen years ago as an experimental and research project in order to characterise the music therapy path of a group of people, giving it a more musical character, proposing a setting of openness and interaction with the outside, while trying to preserve the individual and group creative space.

This project, conceived and coordinated by Fabio Buccioli, a music therapist from Rome, involves people of both genders and different ages, with various disabilities or syndromes with psychiatric associations or with borderline diagnosis. It takes place at a club, relating to the Social Cooperative *Roma 81*, that encourages socialisation. At the beginning of the project, the coordinator wanted an Orff teacher who could support him in the preparatory phase and then assist him with the management.

This project differs from other integrated musical proposals in that it follows a line diametrically opposite: the idea is not to search outside the situations in which the group could fit, rather it offers itself as an alternative creative space where various realities and different potentialities converge, favouring a more complete integration.

It stems from the possibility of bringing a protected context to the outside, encouraging the involvement and participation of all those who sporadically or assiduously will be in contact with this space. In this sense, the idea of integration is not meant to be synonymous with the acceptance of any diversity regarding social context, but the creation of ideal conditions for an equal exchange. The aim is to transform every event into an experience that can create a bridge of communication between those who actively participate and those who intervene as observers. Each one brings their own contribution according to a predetermined role in part, that leaves room for chance and the unexpected, channelled within the repertoire itself. In this way, it will be possible to deal with the issues and to work on strengthening one's inner self through communication and exchange.

The idea of the name "*Pezzi di Ricambio*", which means in English "Spare Parts", originated from the participants at the beginning of the journey in reference to the characteristic of being able to play with the songs in the repertoire, modifying, transforming, removing parts and inserting others from different repertoires. The different contexts where events and meetings will take place, are another "spare part", variable element within a consolidated structure. Precisely for these characteristics, eleven years ago, *Pezzi di Ricambio* was invited

to participate in a project that involved a "solidarity sailing summer school" which included teenagers on 'minor's probation' at the Juvenile Justice Office.

The Italian Government (art. 28 del D.P.R. September 22- 1988, n. 448) introduced a new approach to dealing with minors on trial. The judge can order a suspension of the trial and refer the young person to the Juvenile Justice Services. In collaboration with local authorities they will then be supervised in a socially useful activity or project with the aim of leading to positive development and recovery. Social services develop the project based on the personal, family and environmental resources of each participant who must commit to the content of the project. In the event of a positive outcome, the judge declares the crime extinguished, (at the time of writing the government is making more restrictive changes to the criminal justice system).

The success of the earlier work led the Juvenile Office to ask us to organise another project for other teenagers on 'minor's probation'.

Details of the project

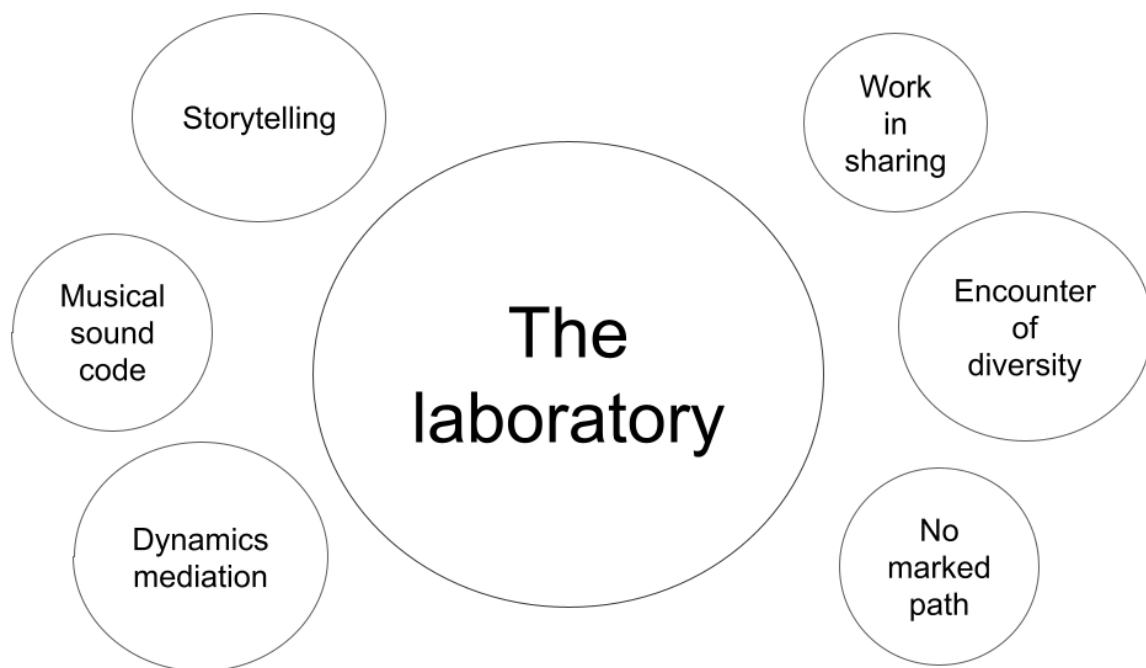
The project started in September 2022, and lasted until the middle of June 2023, when the concert was performed. It was approved and funded by the Ministry of Justice, in order to put the young people with offending history in community services and in an educational training. The project costs between 5.000 and 8.000 Euros per year.

The group, composed of 7 adolescents from minor's probation and 6 adults with psychological disabilities, convened once a week for two hours in the educational and socialisation centre called *Piccolo Mouse*, for 36 meetings. All of them were led by a music therapist and an Orff music teacher, and 10 of those meetings were accompanied by an Orff music teacher who is also a psychologist.

The aim of the coordinator is to bring together two kinds of social isolation, showing the participants (mainly the adolescents with offending history) that they can do something different from what they are used to.

Project targets

- Listening to oneself and the other
- Promoting empowerment and looking towards others
- Stimulating their own qualities and resources, and their own perceived self-efficacy
- Offering a different model of strength, different coping strategies, different ways of having relationships, moderating their own characteristics in relation to the context
- Bringing resources and skills in cooperation towards a common project
- Developing their own personal path to guide the experience in a process of restorative justice
- Creating a product that collects participants' stories.



The lab, while using musical sound code, does not need any specific skills, but is oriented to channel emotional states towards participants' experiences. The result is a story in the form of music and narration that, except for the well-known songs that connect the different parts of the story, was written entirely by the young participants, including title and images. Moreover, it intends to stimulate the personal storytelling of each participant and encourage work in sharing, through the mediation of the dynamics and the encounter of diversity.

The workshop was structured as follows:

- Initial reception phase: a very important moment to begin to establish individual and group knowledge;
- Music literacy phase: with informal scores, or improvising and composing on specific themes. in this phase the periods of attention on oneself, and especially on the group, develop;
- Storytelling phase: the themes developed will be written in the form of a story or a song;
- Proposals for listening to songs by participants: a tool to make themselves known;
- Structuring of pieces: developed and performed in which each participant will play a specific role (vocal, instrumental).

Intervention methodology

The presence of a group of people with disabilities is an additional incentive to get involved, to be able to find different channels of communication and especially collaborate, help, or let themselves be helped throughout the journey. Storytelling, improvisation and composition will be the tools to stimulate their personal stories in a meta-communicative form through musical expression.

Choice of songs: Decomposition and recomposition

For the first meetings, songs already played by the *Piccolo Mouse* team are proposed, in order to show to the young people from 'minor's probation' what they can play, how many competences they have, and how amazing it can be. Then there will be songs proposed by conductors and songs proposed by the adolescents.

One of the fundamentals of the Orff-Schulwerk methodology is the process of decomposing and recomposing in elements that are simple enough to be managed by participants, whatever their age, cognitive level, language, or formal music competencies.

"The attitude, typical in Orff education, to decomposing music material, to play with it, instead of performing it, and recompose it in a form that is functional for the group's needs, and not for your own aesthetic ideal, is what I look for in people I work with"
(statement by the project leader Fabio Buccioli, music therapist and one of the musical conductors of the lab).

The idea of the grid is the main principle of the musical contents of the group: each piece is worked in a container, a network with wide meshes where the limits of start and end are clear and some reference points within the piece. The rest is a game of solids and voids that prepares an elastic and dynamic structure, ready to welcome the sudden elements proposed by the group and the inclusion of surprise elements: a new instrument, a person of the audience, or a sound or environmental external "disturbance", are all factors that make that song unique.

That is the reason that we accept all of their musical proposals: from rap to pop, passing through reggaeton, trap and whatever they already know, and already like. Every musical piece can be deconstructed and recomposed in so many forms, creative, interesting, complex, and significant at many levels. Starting with their proposal, they are in the right mood to explore different genres, our proposals, and they can get, for example, to Mozart. We show respect to their musical tastes, so they don't need to defend their identities. They can share with us, they can explore something different.

For their part, the conductors²⁷ propose songs or themes that lead the adolescents symbolically to a non-place, without connection with real life, so without judgement: songs about escaping, new worlds, rebuilding. The title of the final concert 'Spaceless' represents this core significantly.

The suspension of judgement is fundamental in this kind of work, because it involves adolescents that are suffering precisely from that, even when they recognise their mistakes. For this reason, one of the qualities that are needed to work with adolescents in 'minor's probation' is not only a specified training, but rather a personal attitude to suspend judgement easily when you work, as in many music therapy settings.

²⁷ The project leaders take on different roles during sessions, sometimes leading and conducting, but sometimes a facilitating role.

Movement

Movement apparently does not appear in this work: we never asked either the adolescents, or the guys from *Piccolo Mouse*, to explore music through their own movements: no body percussion, no expressive movements. The reason is simple: they would not have done it, because they are adolescents. In Italy, when adolescence starts, most teenagers stop the connection with their body experience. Generally, it is observed that adolescents, from 12 years old, are reluctant to use their body, they often have a closed posture, many don't practise any sport and much less dance.

But there were two people who moved a lot, the conductors. They make emphasised movements, keep the rhythm jumping, and maintain the musical flow with their body.

Our bodies are always formed by our relationships. The conductors' movements have a very strong body language that is connected with the guys of *Piccolo Mouse*, because it has been built over years and years of relationship. When the conductors are together, so many years of their work and friendship relationship are evident, and their bodies seem like one body. This offers a big opportunity: never losing the general pulse of the group, which remains the main entity and priority that moves and modulates on the sound and emotional tracks of the path. Moreover, the management of the laboratory, entrusted to a male and a female conductor, allows the alternation and the choice of the figure on which to rest or live the conflict, and gives a containment, a greater complicity and completeness in the construction of the quality of the relationship.

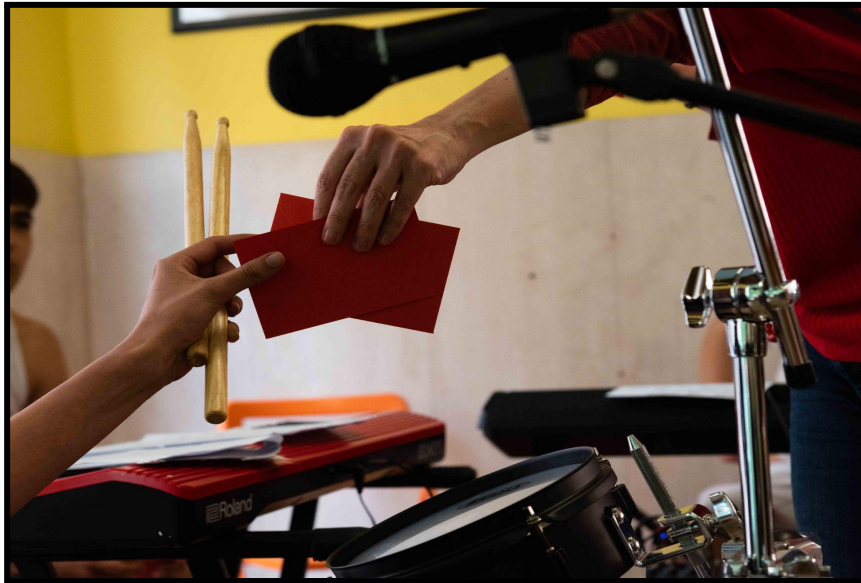
When they move, all the conductors move their eyes, their arms, and their heads. And also, the adolescents, imitating them, start to follow the conductors with their eyes and their minds. So, when they are more confident, they move a little bit, for example when they sing. This kind of movement is not only a conduction strategy, but it's a way to stimulate the bodies of the participants without a direct request, and also to connect the intention of the participants to the attention of the audience.

"Our movement brings the energy flow of the guys together with the audience's" (one of the conductors in an interview).

What has a psychologist got to do with it? Narration and self-identity

When the coordinator started to look for a psychologist for this project, he wanted to work in a strong way on the moods, feelings and thoughts of the participants: he was quite worried because they were younger than usual, so the awareness of the feelings and the communication could be more problematic. In fact, it could be more difficult for such young people, probably coming from families with difficult social situations and cultural levels, to elaborate on something as complex as playing with adults with special needs, cooperating and also creating a common artistic project. In short, he wanted to facilitate the "emersion" of feelings, but also difficulties, in the encounter with people so different from them. There was also another reason for the request of a psychologist: in all past editions of the project, there had never been a narrative report of the course. He wanted to have somebody who handles the care and the memory of the project.

Narration is a crucial dimension of self-identity: in post-rationalist psychology, we consider all the psychopathologies as breaks in the narrative self-identity. But what exactly does it mean? All of us live constantly meeting the world, the otherness, and moving through emotions. Every instant we react to the otherness, passing through an emotion, every encounter with the otherness makes us “move” (from Latin, E=from, Motion=move): we can feel emotions only when encountering the Other, so we need the Other to feel ourselves. Otherness is necessary, essential for Self-realisation.



Every encounter changes us a little bit. Even if we can predict our reactions and our feelings, sometimes we encounter someone, and our reaction surprises us: we can learn something new about ourselves, we can elaborate it in a verbal communication, in a narrative form. If we can tell it, it becomes part of us. Otherwise, it will remain something we can't explain, we can't recognize. Psychotherapy, but also the vast majority of education, prevention programmes, support programmes, self-help programmes, conflict management, are mainly based on narrative aspects. This is the baseline of psychological work.

When we work in a group, the implications of narration become even more complex, because every participant, when they talk about their lives, contribute with their narration to the collective story. Thus, giving meaning to their background, they influence everyone's perspective. Every contribution changes the collective narration, making it more and more complex: something more than the simple sum of previous tales. Storytelling is very powerful: sharing our tales about us makes us become a *Gestalt* that moves as a unit.

A psychologist with an Orff background has the competencies to see what happened during a music session, in the creative process and in the relationships around it, and she can find a way to facilitate this exchange of narrations. She leads the storytelling, becoming the “minstrel” of the musical journey.

Orff and Psyche

In a work like this, with young adolescents with difficult backgrounds alongside adults with

psychic disabilities, so many emotions pass through musical activities. Initially, often there is a lot of anger and shame. The adolescents are forced to participate, because of what they did. They feel themselves as wrong, or violent, different from what is expected.

"We stand for the violence, don't we? These people need gentleness indeed. It's a moral violence. I embraced certain values which have led me to impose myself violently. When you get that label, you stand for that reality" N. (the only girl in the group).

Working with people that are "different" during their entire life, they start to realise what is a lifelong difference, instead of a temporary difference. Then, they start to notice that "different" is not "lesser". They saw that most of those people, with disabilities, can play and sing better than they can. They are more "able" at music. In the meanwhile, they can access music in a way that is calibrated on their resources, and they can contribute to the creative process. It became a mirror play between them. This mirror play makes them resonate with each other, creating a connection between music interplay and relationship interplay.

Thinking about Orff-Schulwerk methodology and its specific elements in music education, we drew a line between those elements and the relational aspects we work on, to show how Orff-Schulwerk has the power to overturn not only the musical structure, but also the relational structure. It's not only about music teaching, it's also what music teaches us: listening, expression, and collaboration.

Imitation

Imitation is one of the bases of music education. When a teacher starts to move, the students start to move with her, imitating her. After they have already seen and imitated many movements in relation to the music she can ask them to explore. It's the same when she plays, for example, a percussion instrument: students imitate her beat, then her rhythms, then they can explore different patterns, exploring macro beats by themselves. Imitation is one of the bases of social and behavioural development. In social learning theory, Albert Bandura (1977) suggests the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. He said that observation and modelling play a primary role in how and why people learn. In his theory, learning is the result of direct experience with the environment, and can occur by observing others' behaviour, if in the meantime attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation are occurring. *"Most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action"* (Bandura, 1977, p. 22). For example, when we found out the composition of the group, and that there will be a girl for the first time in this kind of project, we chose to include a girl also in the group of adults with disabilities, to facilitate motivation, the mirroring.

Imitation moves in different directions. In imitating the conductors, for example, they could observe another model of adulthood, another model of masculinity and femininity. *"Fabio is God. He is who most represents Voci corsare"* R. said, one of the guys, about one of the conductors. They could learn another kind of strength, not violent but constructive,

positive, related with care aspects, even full of energy. Through modelling, they could explore new aspects of culture and music. In the final interview, R. told that he started to listen to different kinds of music: *“Before, I was used to listening only to rap. I listened to Mozart, but it’s boring... because he doesn’t sing. But also... Achille Lauro, and Frank... something... and classical music”*

But the most important consequence of imitation, at a symbolic level, is the easy access to reflecting the other. This is the crucial point of this project. Playing music with people that, for their own condition, are more exposed, that show their feelings, their vulnerability, but also their confidence, leads each one to discover something about himself, that is, his own vulnerability. The guys of the juvenile justice system didn’t have to fight back, because the person who they are playing with isn’t dangerous for them. While helping them, they are made to accept help from them. *“Undoubtedly this thing makes you grow up, doesn’t it?”* G. said.



Mirroring yourself in the other, makes you discover parts of you usually hidden. For example, G., a very quiet, silent guy, was often smiling with the adults with disabilities, very helpful and supportive. He indicated Pier, a man with an autistic syndrome, who never answers a question, as the adult who he had more difficulties to relate to. And for him Ludwig, a man with a difficult past, apparently always angry, and wary, was easier to work with. But, when we asked him which man he was reflected in, he surprisingly chose Pier, the man with whom he had more difficulties. *“Because he is so introverted... I may not seem at the first glance, but I am...”* he explained. In short, he recognized his own closure in Pier, but he felt safe with Ludwig, because he is so bold, and he has become attached to G., so much so that sometimes he did activities only if G. was beside him. *“He comes, he hugs me... and I comply with him, because I also like it, this little cuddle”*. He helps Ludwig to feel safe and, in the meantime, he feels safe with him. During the final concert, one of the most touching moments was a dialogue between them.

This kind of mirroring has led the participants to overturn the meaning of differences: the adolescents from justice system felt different from civil society, and felt the adults different for their disabilities: nevertheless, through this mirroring, they started to feel they were

more similar, so much so that they started to feel together, in the same boat.

F. said in the final interview:

“What is a light bulb?

*It just looks like a transparent container with some interwoven threads forced inside.
Then just a switch and it sheds light.*

Light is beauty, freedom, happiness and equality.

Light is endless and illuminates a place that should exist forever.

*A place accessible to every person who feels in difficulty. To find and discover new
things about themselves. Everything is in there. As if there was a treasure map inside
of us. By constantly digging you can find the chest that contains what you finally
understood. It’s like a scavenger hunt, but you finally realise that the treasure is you.
We are all equal, in short.*

*I see equality,
so freedom,
so happiness”*



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Emanuela De Bellis is a developmental psychologist and psychotherapist and an expert in music education in childhood and in inclusion. Her expertise and scholarship is aimed at creating musical projects oriented to work on relational and emotional aspects, and to increase inclusion.

She has been leading music workshops with children and adults for 20 years, also those with



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