From sign to sound: survey on instrumental musical reading

"From sign to sound" is a research project aimed to investigate some peculiar features of the musical reading with reference to instrumental performance. Its purpose is to extend the present knowledge about cognitive, musical and pedagogical aspects of the subject, pointing out, if the results will allow it, problematic issues and solutions significant for the young musicians' music performance education.

The main study profile, which differentiates it from very few existing international studies on the subject, arises from the particular situation of the Latin countries (to which some other latin american countries must be added) that adopted, starting from XIX century, the syllabic designation of notes, abandoning the alphabetic one.

We are not faced with a simple substitution: in some pedagogical practices the use of syllables is connected not merely with note naming but with the playing itself, accompanying the performing act in real time. The syllables are sometime meant to be the condition of playing, by means of a close one-to-one association between the note name and the key to press or the hand shape to be adopted.

This frame is reflected at the same time in other pedagogical areas, not directly instrumental, in which, e. g., a strong importance is attributed to syllabic reading in the rhythmic education.

The study developed in two phases, the first consisting of a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 73 professional and non-professional musicians, the second in a semi-structured interview conducted with 8 professionals. The collected data, quantitative in the first phase and qualitative in the second, have been processed with some promising results concerning the connection between the syllabic designation of notes and the playing performance.

Two, at least, are the possible consequences of this issue. On the one hand the syllabic one-to-one association creates a performing automatism characterized by the seems to lead to some sort of performing automatism, with a fragmentation of the musical reading process, without any reference to the context nor to the hallmarks of the musical language being employed in the work.

On the other hand, and under more purely cognitive profile, the assignment of syllables causes a "double decoding" operation that inhibits the musical reading with a further process. In both cases, pedagogical decisions could be taken in order to improve the effectiveness of reading processes.

The aim of the research is to clarify (a) the extent to which the outlined situation is widespread in Italian and European instrumental teaching, b) what are the prevailing opinions about it, and c) whether different perspectives can be found on the basis of instrumental families or educational schools.

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