

Jaques-Dalcroze Pedagogy: From the Known to the Unknown

Jack Stevenson, Diplôme Supérieur Jaques-Dalcroze

Each lesson focuses on the skills the students already have and then the needs they exhibit throughout the lesson. Classes may begin with physical stretching and warm-ups, which provides time to gather, forget the hustle and bustle of daily life, and ease into a physical-musical experience. As the students continue the warm up or perhaps repeat a given movement, the teacher can move to the piano and begin improvising piano music with the movement.

However, another way to start is by simply saying “I play, you listen.” The students focus on the music, they hear and begin to anticipate what may unfold. This event provides time for each student to focus and become mindful of how the music may be affecting the body.

Once immersed in the music, a simple direction is given such as “step the beat,” “clap the rhythm,” “sing the melody,” “clap the crusis,” “conduct the meter,” or “move through the phrase.” From there, the teacher observes the students and then provides further instructions by gradually layering one upon another and using few words while assessing the students’ responses and ability to perform each task.

Layering is essential in the process. Incrementally, the students go from the known to the unknown, through the teacher’s visual observation of what they are doing in one moment to what they might be able to do in the next. Now, the pedagogical improvisation begins by gradually moving to a more challenging exercise, assessing, then adjusting by taking small steps back to correct problems, or moving forward to more sophisticated skills. At this point, the lesson plan must be adapted to the needs of the student. The goal of the lesson is never abandoned but perhaps delayed so that necessary skills can be learned. Throughout, the focus remains on the students’ experience of music through time, space, and energy, while integrating extra-musical skills such as memory, quick reaction, balance, and coordination.

Stopping the music and interrupting the momentum to give a lecture is discouraged unless students have questions, which are welcome. Most importantly, explanations of concepts, abstract or concrete, always follow the physical experience of the concept.

Therefore, going to the board (black or white) is always the last step of the process. The students must see that whatever is written on the board or distributed in a hand-out has already been experienced in depth. The printed page must always be a map of a road already traveled rather than a guide to where they are going.

It is simple to place words, written or spoken, or note values and pitches printed or verbally defined, before the musical experience. An intellectual approach to teaching music is always quicker than a Dalcroze approach because Dalcrozians take the time to create a unique atmosphere where students can create links between particular physical sensations and specific musical parameters. Obviously, this method requires not only more time but also creative thinking and specialized skills.

A word of advice, avoid using extraneous objects such as hoops, balls or scarves. The objects often become a visual distraction that may diminish aural awareness, sensitivity, and above all musical accuracy. Another piece of advice would be to insist on teaching movement technique. Teach students how to walk, skip, run, flex and point, move from the core, proper posture, balance, and alignments, plus physical awareness. If the body is the musical instruments, and it must travel through space then, the physical technique to move through space must be honed to receive authentic musical experiences.

When planning lessons, seek to construct a complete music experience. Think of the experience within the context of a musical form such as Sonata Allegro. Create an exposition that presents the material through the improvised music in the appropriate meter, tonality, and tempo. Next, plan a development that engages the student physically, musically, and intellectually. This section may conclude with the presentation of the music score if teaching a piece of music in the lesson. Finally, devise a recapitulation that pulls everything together into a culminating experience that carries the lesson to completion. This section could include a short choreography or other activities that require the use of the score.

Perhaps by following these guidelines the students will exit the classroom saying because I have I experienced, I know.