Flow in the Music Classroom

A Response to Kautny

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Students feel flow when it's present, regardless of their socialization: whether they play an instrument, consider themselves (un)musical, or have little to no experience with music. Often, flow is something they can't articulate in words, but they immediately notice when it's there. This is a conclusion I've reached over my ten years of teaching. In what follows, I will connect several aspects from Oliver Kautny's text with my experiences teaching music at a secondary school in Southern Germany.

Flow in Lesson Preparation

Flow is important not only for students in the classroom but also for teachers during lesson preparation. This presents unique challenges when dealing with Hip-Hop. Consider the most common form of classroom music-making, which also occurs regularly in my lessons: singing with piano or guitar accompaniment by the teacher. From my experience, this is most successful when the accompaniment closely mimics the original sound of the song, which poses a particular challenge with beat-heavy Hip-Hop.

With the basic chord structure, I try to first imitate the song's rhythmic structures: the bass line in the left hand and the chords in the right hand. Then I add instrumental intros/interludes/outros (e.g., the catchy sixteenth-note intro of "Hall of Fame" by The Script). Depending on the song, the next step might be to incorporate any secondary melodies. Then, I rap the lyrics to my accompaniment. As with songs from other genres, I mark the syllables that fall on strong beats and slowly put everything together. If I'm not in the flow with my playing, the students unconsciously notice and become more inhibited or uncertain while singing. So, in preparing a simple song accompaniment, it's essen-

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tial to capture and reproduce the flow of the original. A detailed rhythm analysis, like the one Kautny conducted with Beginner or Queen Latifah, is generally not necessary.

Dealing with Problematic Lyrics

Kautny's text drew on his experience as an elementary school teacher. As a music teacher at a secondary school (for students who have completed elementary school), it is in the lower grades where I am primarily confronted with rap lyrics that have problematic content. These lyrics are often misogynistic, sexist, racist, or about alcohol and drugs. Especially in fifth grade, the difference between students is particularly pronounced: while some are still interested in Lego and Pokémon, others are already listening to songs by BHZ, Apache 207, and Mero on their smartphones.

And yet the students who listen to this music rarely question its content and lyrics. They listen to this music "because it's cool," "because my friend listens to it," or "because it sounds good." When I ask more what they mean by "sounds good," it usually comes down to the background beats and the rap flow. So, where else but in music class should they discuss they music they are listening to every day?

I find it important to prepare the learning group for the song, to critically question and contextualize the lyrics. Just as I prepare them to listen to an aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which features a vocal style unfamiliar to them, I point out that we're about to listen to a song containing phrases we need to discuss.

The attempt to offer a middle ground with educational rap songs like "Raphuhn" [The rap chicken] is not only challenging in elementary schools, as observed by Kautny, but has also produced teaching failures for me in secondary school. For elementary schools, I see an alternative in artists like Deine Freunde, DIKKA, or Sukini, who have been successfully integrating German Hip-Hop into children's music for some time. Students feel taken seriously when the music lesson accommodates their interest and what they care about. That's why I find it incredibly important to incorporate Hip-Hop as a genre into lessons from an early age.

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Conclusion

Over the past ten years, I have taught music from grades 1 to 13 and, whether in elementary or secondary schools, one reaction has always been the same: when students are in the flow, they experience an incredible feeling of joy and belonging. "Can we do that again?" they often ask, or "Can you record that for us?" or "Can we do this again next week?" These questions are proof of how much students crave this feeling. Getting there often involves a long journey of practice and frustration, requiring perseverance, patience, and overcoming challenges. It teaches students to listen closely, pose questions, interact with one another, and take responsibility… And that's exactly what we aim to impart to students: to apply these skills in their lives, so they don't lose the flow even after school!

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