

Selected Pieces of Vera Milanković's Music in the Piano Improvisation Classes

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Summary

The focus of this article is on improvisation – an extremely important component and essential activity that defines the Eurhythmics method by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, on the one hand. On the other hand, this article will present the possibilities of using the pieces of Vera Milanković's music as educational material for teaching all aspects of Dalcroze's method in the piano improvisation classes at the Music Academy in Gdansk. The authors of this article were inspired by Milanković's music for solo piano and voice and piano, as it contains cantilena melodies, folk melodies, and intriguing harmonic solutions. While listening to Vera Milanković's music the listener may experience different emotional states: joy, excitement, amusement, longing, sadness, and melancholy regardless of whether it is a great stage piece or simple pedagogical work. In this context, the authors have made small modifications to the selected pieces by Vera Milanković and created new adaptations to be used in Eurhythmics classes at any stage of the school education process depending on the level of difficulty.

Keywords: Dalcroze's method, piano improvisation, Vera Milanković, improvisation classes, creativity

Introduction

Piano improvisation has a special place in the Eurhythmics method. Its creator – Émile Jaques-Dalcroze – a fine pianist and an excellent composer gifted with absolute pitch – believed that the human body could express both the richness of sounds and the emotions experienced while listening to music. Among many stories told by Dalcroze's students, some describe how his personality features and skills were often helpful in dealing with unexpected situations. Van Scheltema talks about one time when Dalcroze, after hearing the piece only once, could play it from memory, not bothered at all by the mess of the musical score pages falling from the piano onto the floor. The student comments on the maestro's behaviour: "The performers didn't notice any incident and heard no difference in the musician's performance. What a great composure Dalcroze maintained then" (Van Scheltema, 1963: 27). His improvising skills are also mentioned in the anecdote about the encounter between young Dalcroze, who was playing piano, and intrigued Léo Delibes (Saint-Germain-du-Val, 1836). The latter asked about the title of the composition he had just heard and Dalcroze replied that it was an improvisation. Delibes, impressed by his talent, expressed hope they could meet again, and they did

meet, indeed, several years later, in 1886, when Dalcroze studied composition he learned from Delibes' himself. Dalcroze later improvised whenever he only could. When a student came into the classroom late, in the middle of the exercise, Dalcroze changed the way he was playing, mimicking the body language of the person. He was constantly developed his undeniable talent and daily practice made him the master of improvisation (Saint-Germain-du-Val, 1836).

He continued to practice his improvisation skills too, particularly focusing on improvisation for eurhythmics purposes. He firmly believed that eurhythmics did not need especially sophisticated or modern improvisation. The improvisation invented by the eurhythmics teacher may be simple. It still has to be rhythmic, musical, invigorating, and spotless. Indeed, many subsequent eurhythmics teachers improvised in a very simple manner yet taught their students so much (Saint-Germain-du-Val, 1836). Improvisation is the underlying element in the Dalcroze's method. Its importance is confirmed by the words of F. Marin: "Improvisation is the basis, nothing more and nothing less" (Brzozowska-Kuczkiewicz, 1991: 41).

Piano Improvisation in the Dalcroze's Method

Through its many forms, piano improvisation constitutes the most significant and influential element of the education process. Alongside eurhythmics and eurhythmic ensembles, it constitutes a significant and formal shaping element of Dalcroze-based education. Piano improvisation as a school subject is considered to be one of the most important ones in the education process conducted according to Dalcroze's method, and as such is featured in the curriculum of the music school of the 2nd degree and continues at the subsequent level of music education – BA and MA studies Faculty of Eurhythmics at Music Academies in Poland (Gdansk, Lodz, Poznan, Katowice and Krakow) and at The Chopin University of Music in Warsaw. Such is the perspective that the authors reflect on while sharing their experiences: Anna Galikowska-Gajewska – is a professor teaching multiple subjects in the Eurhythmics method spectrum and Dominika Massloch – is a MA student and an intern.

Piano improvisation should be an inspiration to express the emotions triggered by the subject matter brought by the music. There are two types of issues that originate from Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's method that need to be included in teaching improvisation, both part of eurhythmics as a school subject:

1. The ability to construct musical sequences expressing metro-rhythmic problems;
2. The ability to create free musical forms (etudes, miniatures) with a view to express emotions carried by music with body movements.

Polish dances and songs complement the curriculum for the Piano Improvisation subject (Galikowska-Gajewska and Wiśniewska, 2023).

The teacher of improvisation at the first stage of the education process works with the pupils on melodic and harmonic materials that are not very complicated – a foundation and inspiration for practicing metro-rhythmic tasks and free musical forms.

At this stage of the education process, it is vital to encourage pupils to do systematic work to develop their skills and acquire materials. Another important issue is to stimulate creativity in students, whatever their level of technical skills and expressive abilities might be. The most desirable and superior aim, however, is to develop and liberate students' musicality in playing the piano.

The importance of Piano Improvisation as a school subject increases at the university level of professional studying the Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's method. The expectations students have to meet are obviously higher. The core curriculum includes topics at a higher level of advancement compared to the previous stages of education, nevertheless, the division into two topic areas remains the same: metro-rhythmics and musical forms/genres.

The primary concepts in teaching piano improvisation within the subject of Eurhythmics can be defined as follows:

1. Preparation for the free improvisation based on exercises reflecting E. Jaques-Dalcroze's method, including such components as:
 - inhibition and incitation exercises;
 - melodic and rhythmic themes in a quarter note and eighth note meter;
 - diminution and augmentation of melodic and rhythmic themes;
 - transformations of themes from quarter note to eighth note meter;
 - chains of theme execution in a quarter note and eighth note meter.
2. Preparation for the improvisation in games and exercises for preschool children, expressed through musical illustrations.
3. The development of creative potential and musical imagination expressed in the form of piano pieces characterized by free metro-rhythmic structure.
4. The development of creative potential and musical imagination expressed in the form of piano pieces representing the following musical forms: aba₁, rondo, variation, and canon.
5. Improving skills of accompaniment to dances and songs (Galikowska-Gajewska and Wiśniewska, 2023).

The diversity of subject matter in the scope of piano improvisation and the gradual increase of difficulty level are aimed at the comprehensive preparation of students for the future role of the Eurhythmics method teachers. Their skills, dedication, and creative approach are the key factors in this role. The teacher improvises, playing music which becomes an impulse for the pupils and inspires them to make movements. The teacher decides on the musical form of the piece that is played, the musical nuances, and its nature. The pupils let themselves go along with the music – they move, to express the music with their movements (Petrović, Milanković, Ačić, Nedeljković, Galikowska-Gajewska, Konkol and Kierzkowski, 2017: 50).

The Eurhythmics method by definition and in principle is an education method characterized by a specific relation between the student and the teacher. Music, as a universal means of expression allows both parties to share the experience based on

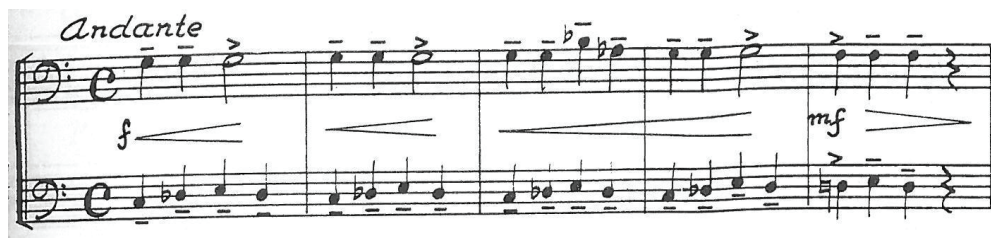
music, for which improvisation is a perfect tool. It is the freedom to act within the scope of defined assumptions: "The role of the pedagogue is to encourage the passion of creation in children to evolve into the passion for life. They must represent higher values and apply them in real life, along with higher order emotions, to be role models for their students." (Konaszkiewicz, 2022: 27).

Piano Improvisation and Exercises Inspired by Vera Milanković's Music

Teaching piano improvisation is a long process, during which the teachers should constantly be asking themselves the following question: How do we constantly motivate students to self-searching and self-developing over such a long period? The answer is stimulation and inspiration. In this perspective, inspiration was provided by Vera Milanković's music. In Eurhythmics, the music itself indicates the character of body movement, so piano improvisers have to be specific, and varied and should play in different styles and techniques to direct the performers. The most important common purpose is a continuous evolution of their musicality. Even a single interval or the simplest rhythm of a composition can inspire an artist to create a new piece. Depending on the specific purpose, in piano improvisation classes, we can either make original music more complicated or easier, we can use shorter extracts or whole sections. Vera Milanković's output offers a lot. My choice of her piano pieces was dictated by various Dalcroze's exercises, from the simplest ones intended for children to the most advanced, ones intended for eurhythmics students. Below is the list of specific Dalcroze exercises based on the selected pieces by Vera Milanković.

1. Introduction to the Lesson

Introduction to the lesson occurs at the beginning of every eurhythmics class, regardless of the educational level, age of students, or topic. It prepares even the youngest pupils to concentrate on the lesson, be fully connected with the music, and listen to the teacher's instructions. This exercise aims to follow the music and immediately respond to its changes. *Medo brundo (Teddy Bear)* was an obvious choice for the first exercise: warm-up walking with a musical pulse (picture 1). The character of the music, repetitive tone g, and the oriental scale motive played in octaves resulted in a great combination for marching. Students walk in different directions. Gradual change of tempo to running transfers to the next piece *Auto "Fića" (Topolino Car)* which contains light, motor motives in the quarter and eighth notes (picture 2). While running, students have to define their space together as one circle. Harmony from *Etide (ni)su dosadne (Etudes are (not) boring,* picture 3) was used in an interrupted canon. The arpeggio in the 17th bar and quarter notes pulse in the 18th indicate its beginning and notify the performers about maintaining proper focus on following rhythms. Students improvise gestures and play the rhythms with body percussion. Return of the quarter note pulse is a signal to resume walking pace (picture 4).



Picture 1. *Medo Brundo (Teddy Bear)* from the collection of children songs *Children stories – the piano pieces* by Vera Milanković (author's edition, 1988).



Picture 2. *Auto "Fića" (Topolino Car)* from the collection of children songs *Children stories – the piano pieces* by Vera Milanković (author's edition, 1988).



Picture 3. *Etide (ni)su dosadne (Etudes are (not) boring)* from the collection of children songs *Children stories – the piano pieces* by Vera Milanković (author's edition, 1988).

Introduction to the lesson

Medo brundo, Auto "Fica", Etide(ni) Dosadne

Dominika Massloch

The musical score is written for piano and voice. It begins with a forte (f) dynamic in the piano part. The first system ends with a measure containing a sharp sign (#). The second system starts at measure 7 and includes an 'accel.' (accelerando) marking. The third system starts at measure 13 and includes a 'p' (piano) dynamic. The fourth system starts at measure 17 and includes 'mf' (mezzo-forte), 'ff' (fortissimo), and 'p' (piano) dynamics. The fifth system starts at measure 24 and includes a 'f' (forte) dynamic and a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking. The sixth system starts at measure 32 and includes a 'rall.' (ritardando) marking. The score concludes with a double bar line.

Picture 4. Dominika Massloch's *Introduction to the lesson* as the compilation of three songs – *Meda Brundo*, Auto "Fića" and *Etide nisu dosadne* by Vera Milanković¹

¹ The movement interpretation can be seen at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNphNQDTmT8>

2. Rhythm and its Diminution

That kind of exercise is suited for high school students but can also be done with younger children who have some experience with Dalcroze's method. For children, it is done by doubling the tempo. Older students are also asked to analyze the rhythm and its diminution by changing the meter or without changing the meter by complementing bars with the same diminished rhythm twice. The first bars of *Pesmica* (*Little Song*, picture 5) were the inspiration for this exercise because of the rhythm and melody aspects (picture 6).



Picture 5. *Pesmica* (*Little Song*) from the collection of children songs *Children stories – the piano pieces* by Vera Milanković (author's edition, 1988).



Picture 6. Dominika Massloch's *Rhythm and its diminution*.²

3. Canon

Canon in Dalcroze's method in Polish called *łańcuch* (which means *chain*) refers to the more developed *echo* type of exercise (*interrupted canon*). The name refers to the construction that resembles interlocking rhythms. To be done properly many hours of practice are required: hearing and moving, as well as understanding the music by one's whole body. It requires diversified skills such as multitasking, focus, precise hearing of music, anticipation, and mindfulness. Students listen to the music played by the teacher and after just one bar (or otherwise, as previously indicated), imitate the rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and character of the music, while the teacher is playing music continuously, simultaneously listening to the next bar played by the teacher. Such exercise was partly inspired by the baseline from *Vetar* (*Wind*, picture 7) as it makes both the music and the movement go forward (picture 8).



Picture 7. *Vetar* (*Wind*) for voice and the piano by Vera Milanković.

² The movement interpretation can be seen at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR_mCazyV2g.



Picture 8. Dominika Massloch's *Canon*.³

4. Diverse Complementation

Just like canons, diverse complementation is one of the most difficult exercises, because it requires multitasking and the ability of abstract thinking and polyrhythm. The base is made of four bars, a long rhythm presented four times. Student's task is to memorize it while moving and, after the fourth time add the complementation i.e.: another type of movement, the base rhythm by steps, or complementation by body percussion. The song *Canzona* with its special harmony (picture 9) was used to make a variation to disturb the calm and melancholic nature of the piece with complementation, giving it a strong and turbulent addition and changing its character (picture 10).



Picture 9. *Canzona* for voice and the piano by Vera Milanković.

³ The movement interpretation can be seen at the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR_mCAzyV2g



Picture 10. Dominika Massloch's *Diverse complementation*.⁴

Conclusion

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze made improvisation the primary tool in the creative teaching process of the Eurhythmics method and placed special emphasis on piano improvisation. Only certain people, like him, have the gift of improvising on the spot. However, Dalcroze was convinced that improvisation could be learned. The existing music literature is an essential teaching tool in this process. Exactly such inspiration for improvising various Dalcroze's music can be found in Vera Milanković's works. Her music is inspirational in many different ways and determines activities that go beyond just listening to music. Based on her output, piano improvisation is the groundwork for many of Dalcroze's exercises dedicated to children and adults, amateurs and professionals, developing hearing, musicality, sensitivity, and expression of movement. In piano improvisation classes, Vera Milanković's music is an excellent choice to develop improvisation and composition skills: melody and rhythm modification, mood and character changes, and decomposition. Moreover, her music is highly inspirational for both teachers and students.

⁴ The movement interpretation can be seen at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcyuDFmYDMg>

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ОДАБРАНЕ КОМПОЗИЦИЈЕ ВЕРЕ МИЛАНКОВИЋ НА ЧАСОВИМА КЛАВИРСКЕ ИМПРОВИЗАЦИЈЕ

С једне стране, рад се бави импровизацијом – веома важном компонентом и суштинској активности која одређује методу Еуритмије Емил Жак-Далкроза. С друге стране, у раду су представљене могућности употребе композиција Вере Миланковић као педагошког материјала за учење свих аспеката Далкросове методе на часовима клавирске импровизације на Музичкој академији у Гађанску. Аутори овог рада били су инспирисани музиком за соло клавир и глас и клавир Вере Миланковић јер садржи кантилене, народне напеве и узбудљива хармонска решења. Док слушалац слуша музику Вере Миланковић доживљава различита емотивна стања: радост, узбуђење, задовољство, чежњу, тугу и меланхолију, у за-

висности од тога да ли је њена музика компонована за сцену или су у питању једноставне педагошке минијатуре. У том контексту, аутори овог рада извршили су мале модификације одабраних дела Вере Миланковић и створили нове адаптације које ће се користити на часовима еуритмије у свим фазама музичког образовања у зависности од степена тежине.

Кључне речи: Далкрозов метод, клавирска импровизација, Вера Миланковић, часови импровизације, креативност