MY JOURNEY IN MUSIC LEARNING THEORY

by Asli Giray Akyunak

"The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step." Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu.

First introduced to Edwin Gordon's Music Learning Theory[66] by my dear friend pianist, MLT instructor and music educator Erica Fossi, I, like many other people who venture into a new area, was at first a bit skeptical, and not really aware how it would turn out in the end. I had already been teaching and performing for almost 30 years, but as always, still interested in learning and trying out different ways to teach and experience music. The more I learned about MLT and its philosphy, the more I realized how much sense it made in the way it brought forth an understanding of how humans learn music, especially at a young age, and how anyone and everyone can be able to internalize and enjoy music, while training their ears at the same time. And as Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, I had taken a step into a journey which was long and ever-lasting, and would positively affect the way I teach and perform music. Studying MLT in the course offered by Milano Audiation Institute and Olten Audiation Institute in İzmir, Turkey from September 2017 to July 2018, I had the great privilege to study with valuable instructors such as Silvia Biferale and Arnolfo Borsacchi, who inspired me in many ways. As a teacher of Music Theory, history, ear training, solfege and piano, I had used

[66] From here MLT

many different approaches to teaching music. These approaches were formed as an amalgamate of many methods in circulation and others which I had acquired during my higher studies in the United States and England. I applied different approaches, depending on the age, needs and competences of my students, trying to adapt to their mode and speed of learning. Sometimes, this can be very challenging in classroom settings, where the levels of the students are so varied. I almost always included listening sessions, because I somehow innately knew the importance of filling one's ears and head with music, which would become somewhat familiar over time, and help the musical perception of the students. I even put together a course called "Analytical Listening" which tried to familiarize students with different styles and genres in classical repertoire, the timbres of various instruments, rhythmic patterns and World music, as well as the terminology to talk about music and to be able to listen with a critical or analytical ear. Now I realize this should be done in the form of songs, many many songs, which should be introduced in the earliest years of the children.

Now, after having completed the MLT6+ course, I have such a clear Picture of why we do what we do, how we can do it more methodically, more creatively, more interactively, and most of all, more enjoyably. After all, music is something which should be enjoyed and cherished above all else.

Edwin Gordon's research on how music is actually learned, similar to language, opens the path for a world of questions and seeking answers, which can go on for a lifetime. Reading about his work made me look back onto my musical education, as far back as I could go. And truly enough, yes, my musical education had begun with listening to music in the home, through my father's records and singing songs at the piano with my mother who was a music teacher. Now I really understand why that was so important, and why so many other friends, who were not introduced to music so early, were not as interested or competent as I was during music lessons at school. Now I wonder how much my teachers in Philadelphia during my school years knew about Gordon and his research, because I would have benefited much more from piano lessons and orchestral sessions, if more improvisation and aural work had been introduced earlier on. I still feel lucky to have worked with great teachers, both during my education, and later during various courses I attended as a teacher. One thing which correlates closely with MLT is the fact that I continued to listen extensively and to sing in choirs, which clearly improved my audiation over the years. The other was that there was always some sort of physical activity in relation to music learning, such as dancing or rhythmic movements. Now, through lessons with Silvia Biferale, the importance, or better yet, the cruciality of movement becomes clearer to me. And again I wish that I had been more closely engaged in movement in relation to creating communication pathways with my inner self, with my surroundings, and with the people around me, both musically and extra-musically. This would have saved me considerably from the stress of public performance, and possibly made it easier to learn new repertoire, work with others in a more productive way and feel more at ease with my instrument, the piano.

Of course I should also state that not everything I came across during MLT classes were things I had seen for the first time. Some were methods I had personally employed during my private and classroom teaching, especially in the area of developing aural and musicianship skills. As a holder of the LRSM degree in Piano Pedagogy, I had studied with great instructors at the Royal College of Music in London, and much importance had been given to working with aural skills during piano lessons from the beginning. One thing that stuck with me for many years

from these years was: "always sound before sign." However, this was not mentioned in relation to going back to the infant stage, or extend beyond formal teaching to older adults, which I believe is a breakthrough with Gordon. Now after living with music for 50 years, MLT sheds so much light on the actual process of audiation development, and how we can improve it at all ages.

Now, experiencing MLT sessions with valuable teachers from Italy, reading articles and books on the subject, and reflecting on my musical background as well as teaching, I can synthesize this all into a renewed and updated teaching method, which I can implement with renewed energy and new life. I have begun to put MLT into practice in my musicianship skills, music theory and ear training classes, and the joy experienced by students is clearly visible. They are especially grateful for the increase in improvisation, and feel more engaged and active during the classes. Group work, musical tasks to carry out with partners and general joint music-making creates a wonderfully positive atmosphere in the class, breathing exercises and movement creates bonds with others, while allowing them to look into their own bodies and souls.

It is also interesting to see how it is difficult at first to steer away from the standard classical way of learning notes and reading or playing music, as most students, like myself, have been taught this way. It is even more interesting to see how willing the students are to try a new way, another way to experience music, because it is so much more natural. The idea of movable Do makes so much more sense, when I play a major triad and ask "what is this?" Almost all of them (except two students with perfect pitch) reply "a major triad". So names are only names, and the sound is always more important. As Shakespeare said in his play *Romeo and Juliet*, a rose would smell just as sweet if it were called by any other name.

As I wrote at the beginning of this article, the journey through MLT is a long one and has maybe just begun for myself and my students. I am sure, however, that this first step will take me to many new places in music teaching and music making, opening many new and colorful doors with promises of success, creativity and enjoyment. After all, music is an art, and what better way to experience art than to listen, see, experience, create and enjoy. I believe it is best to end the article with a tribute to Edwin Gordon and to thank all other musicians and teachers who have walked with him or after him on this wonderous path. May this inspire all as it did me:

"*My best recommendation to music teachers of the next century is to improvise, improvise, improvise! Get rid of notation. Learn from music learning theory to teach children to make music without the aid of notation or music theory. Follow religiously the process of the way we learn language.*" Edwin Elias Gordon (1927 – 2015)