

Musical instrument teaching assessment practices

Práticas de avaliação no ensino de instrumentos musicais



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Abstract: The study aims to identify, explore, analyze, and discuss assessment dimensions, strategies, and tools present in the instrumental music classroom. Carried out in the context of music teachers training in Portuguese higher education, the study employed a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative approach. The results indicate: (i) multidimensional assessment practices/strategies, (ii) the group development and discussion (student-students and teacher-student) of the evaluation process is not visible, and (iii) the non-involvement of students in the development of participatory assessment.

Keywords: assessment; instrumental music; music classroom.

Resumo: O estudo pretende identificar, explorar, analisar e discutir as dimensões, estratégias e ferramentas de avaliação presentes na sala de aula de instrumento. Realizado no contexto da formação de professores de música no ensino superior português, o estudo teve uma abordagem qualitativa, descritiva e interpretativa. Os resultados indicam: (i) práticas/estratégias de avaliação multidimensional, (ii) não é visível o desenvolvimento e discussão em grupo (aluno-aluno e professor-aluno) do processo de avaliação, e (iii) o não envolvimento dos alunos no desenvolvimento de uma avaliação participativa.

Palavras-chave: avaliação; música instrumental; aula de música.

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Introduction

Assessment is a necessary and challenging task for many instrumental music educators (RUSSELL, 2017). Practice and social construction cannot be confused with an exact science because it does not produce certain results. The truth is that assessment can and should be rigorous, credible, plausible, and useful. To be able to evaluate the desired quality, it is necessary to understand the nature of assessment and its most controversial aspects. In other words, assessment is a process that must be naturally integrated into day-to-day activities, and in classroom routines. Above all, it must be understood by all who are interested in it. It is very important to ensure that whatever level of action we may consider (public policy, school, classroom), assessment can be process-oriented towards the transformation and improvement of school realities. Lebler and Harrison (2017, p. 97) claimed that the vital purpose of the assessment should be “not just to certify students’ achievement of learning outcomes, but also to contribute directly to their learning”. Furthermore, it is fundamental to clarify “how the results will be used to improve student music learning” (BROPHY, 2019, p. 921). It is equally important to ensure that the assessment is not perceived as a threat, as a means of punishing or intimidating people. The assessment must be as transparent and consensual as possible, it being especially important that its purposes are clear and understood by all. On the other hand, assessment must be a process whose quality has to be properly assured. This means that the assessment must be accurate, feasible, useful, and ethically solid. To have these fundamental characteristics, the process of collecting, analyzing, and recording information must be diversified and as shared as possible.

Nowadays, music schools and their teachers face several challenges that lead to the reconstruction and reinvention of concepts and practices that have prevailed in music education systems since the 19th century. One of the challenging areas in the field of music learning and teaching is the assessment of

instrumental music performance. This topic has gained great importance in educational research in recent years (BROPHY, 2019; LEBLER & HARRISON, 2017; COLWELL & HEWITT, 2011; RUSSELL & AUSTIN, 2010; LACOGNATA, 2010, 2013; DUNCAN, 2009; ZDZINSKI & BARNES, 2002). Despite this issue being at the forefront of current educational culture, slight research has been carried out in this area. The interrelated influences of many factors present in the multidimensional activity of playing an instrument and the complex issues involved in the assessment of instrumental music performance make this context a complex system. In this context, Russell (2014) highlights other factors/reasons impacting the assessment practices in the instrumental music classroom: (i) limited instructional time, (ii) little to no assessment training, and (iii) large class sizes. The diversity of the concepts, approaches, ways, and tools used to define and measure musical achievement in playing an instrument still make this context an ongoing issue (BERGEE, 2007; CIORBA & SMITH, 2009; DELUCA & BOLDEN, 2014; HALLAM, 2013; MCPHERSON & THOMPSON, 1998). For many music educators, the attention and study of this theme is a necessary and challenging task. However, is mandatory to center the discussion about assessment in instrumental music learning and performance on the role, principles, purpose, and opportunities present in the assessment practices (BROPHY & FAUTLEY, 2017; ELLIOTT, SILVERMAN & MCPHERSON, 2019; SCOTT, 2012; STANLEY, BROOKE & GILBERT, 2002).

The study presented here was carried out in the context of the training of music teachers in Portuguese higher education, focusing on the assessment dimensions, strategies, and tools present and used in the primary and secondary education levels of the instrumental music classroom in Portuguese curricula. The influence of policymakers in the structural organization of the curricula (and associated assessment indicators), music educators' pre-service and the predominant models of teaching and learning in the music/artistic field (and the associated practice) pose a set of challenges for the Portuguese artistic education (in

the areas of Music and Dance). In the case of the assessment of instrumental music in the Portuguese curricula, we see the misalignment and limitations of the predominant models that exist in this field (literature and practice). Many of these prevailing models are imposed by policymakers and regulatory requirements equivalent to other areas of knowledge. It is essential to have a thorough understanding of the realities of artistic education so that strategies and policy measures can be designed to overcome its eventual difficulties and weaknesses. This is important to stress that any process aimed at transforming, expanding, or improving this teaching context must be supported by credible information about its operating processes, projects, ideas (from leaders and teachers), or the results it can produce. But it should also be supported by information regarding the functioning processes of the administration itself that allow it to reflect and set in motion new and innovative ways of relating to a teaching modality that, in a certain sense, is little and poorly known and around from which a set of ideas was built that urgently needs to be analyzed and understood in depth.

Thus, two specific research questions guided this study: (1) What strategies and tools are used in the process of assessment of instrumental music performance; (2) What are the main dimensions and assessment criteria present in the instrumental music classroom?

Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative approach (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2011). A multiple, diverse, and complementary set of specific research instrumental procedures were used. The first procedure carried out a survey of the works (teachers' internship reports), produced between 2017 and 2022 (Tab. 1), as part of the courses in music teacher training (master's degree) at high education in Portugal. The choice of this unit of analysis results from the following factors: (1) its preparation presupposes and requires systematic, reflective, and metacognitive activity; (2) it is a revealing element of professional development

since it combines the formative and evaluative dimensions in itself; and is (3) agent of awareness of professional knowledge emerging from the practices in context. This data collection was carried out through the RENATES platform (National Registry of Theses and Dissertations), of the Directorate-General for Education and Science of Portugal. At the same time, a set of programs from the curricular units associated with instrumental practice, made available by the educational institutions, were consulted.

Table 1 - Data Collection

Area	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Area of expertise: Instrument (*)	48	57	24	8	137
Area of expertise: Instrument - Clarinet		1	1		2
Area of expertise: Instrument - Flute			1		1
Area of expertise: Instrument - Guitar	3	4	4	1	12
Area of expertise: Instrument - Percussion	3	1			4
Area of expertise: Instrument - Piano	3		2	1	6
Area of expertise: Instrument - Horn		1			1
Area of expertise: Instrument - Trumpet	1	1			2
Area of expertise: Instrument - Violin	3		4		7
Area of expertise: Instrument and Ensemble Music	11	15	13	18	57
Area of expertise: Instrument-Double Bass				2	2
Area of expertise: Instrument-Bassoon				1	1
Total	72	80	49	31	232

(*) there is no defined specialty.

After screening, the teachers' internship reports and the programs of the curricular units were analyzed, individually and collectively, to categorize it and their determinant factors were retained for synthesis. Regarding the validity of the categorization systems, we submit the instrument to the evaluation of a panel of experts. This study was developed based on all ethical principles and considerations that guide research designs and practices. When referring to the student teachers we use the term *students*; when referring to students in schools, we use the term *pupil*.

Results

Multidimensional assessment *strategies and tools* have been identified in this study. These include the (i) self-assessment of recorded performances and lessons; (ii) peer-assessment of solo or chamber performances in the final of academic semesters; (iii) reports contain aspects of technique and focus points of interpretation/style of repertoire and (iv) public musical performances. On the other hand, the analyses of the practices show that: (i) group discussion, reflection and sharing (pupil-pupil and teacher-pupils) of the assessment process is not visible; (ii) the non-involvement of pupils in the development of peer-assessment criteria and self-assessment. In fact, the development of these effective abilities (self-assessment and peer-assessment) have many benefits that will impact the musician's future career.

Another prominent factor is that the pupils' assessment has a diagnostic, formative and summative nature, assuming the same functions as the assessment used in the wider educational context. However, there exist many different forms of implementation. The different nature of assessment in the field of instrumental music program are associated to cognitive, attitudinal, and performative dimensions. Each of these dimensions is subdivided into general and specific criteria. The cognitive and attitudinal dimension are associated with the formative assessment and the performance dimension to the summative assessment (Tab. 2).

Table 2 - Dimensions of Classroom Assessment

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Dimensions of Classroom Assessment	Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquisition of essential and specific skills• Mastery of syllabus• Evolution in learning
	Attitudinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Study habits• Responsibility and autonomy• Intrapersonal• Self-confidence, motivation, and posture• Socialization, cooperation, and solidarity
	Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Artistic responsibility• Artistic commitment

Source: Author

Regarding the cognitive dimension (Tab. 3) we find assessment criteria associate to the (i) psychomotor coordination, (ii) perception of pulse / rhythm / harmony and phrasing, (iii) sound quality, (iv) realization of different articulations and dynamics, (v) correct use of fingerings, (vi) reading fluency, (vii) agility and security in execution, (viii) ability to concentrate and memorize, (viii) ability to address the ambience and style of the work, (ix) ability to formulate and critically assess, (x) ability to approach and explore new repertoire, (xi) ability to diagnose problems and solve them and (xii) posture in public presentations (as a participant and as a listener). The tools/indicators defined to measure the acquisition of these skills are divided into individual work sessions and public presentations (at the end of each class period, semester and sometimes annually).

Table 3 - Cognitive Dimension

Dimension	Assessment Criteria	Tools/Indicators
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychomotor coordination • Perception of pulse / rhythm / harmony / phrasing • Sound quality • Realization of different articulations and dynamics • Correct use of fingerings • Reading fluency • Agility and security in execution • Ability to concentrate and memorize • Ability to address the ambience and style of the work • Ability to formulate and critically assess • Ability to approach and explore new repertoire • Ability to diagnose problems and solve them • Posture in public presentations (as a participant and as a listener) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Execution: Progressing through each lesson, mastering the musical pieces necessary for attainment of the designated degree. • Compliance of the music program • Public performance

Source: Author

For attitudinal dimension (Tab. 4) emerge from the data the (i) assiduity and punctuality, (ii) presentation of the necessary material for the class, (iii) interest and commitment in the discipline,

(iv) study methods, (v) attitude in the classroom, (vi) compliance with assigned tasks, (vii) regularity and quality of the study, (viii) participation in school activities (inside and outside the school) and (ix) the respect for others, for school materials and equipment.

Table 4 - Attitudinal Dimensions

Dimension	Assessment Criteria	Tools/Indicators
Attitudinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assiduity and punctuality• Presentation of the necessary material for the class• Interest and commitment in the discipline• Study methods• Attitude in the classroom• Compliance with assigned tasks• Regularity and quality of the study• Participation in school activities (inside and outside the school)• Respect for others, for school materials and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Direct observation

Source: Author

One of the principal dimensions in instrumental music learning is individual performance. In fact, the assessment of the musical performance “tends to be based on a much narrower range of practices” (LEBLER & HARRISON, 2017, p. 99). From the analysis of the data the assessment of music performance (Tab. 4) occurs at the end of a period (three months), semester (sometimes the technical assessments) or in the year study. The assessment criteria are (i) posture on stage, (ii) strictness of the clothing presented, (iii) phrasing perception, (iv) sound quality, (v) realization of different articulations and dynamics, (vi) fluency, agility and safety in execution, (vii) maintenance of the progress determined by the works, (viii) ability to concentrate and memorize, (ix) ability to maintain the work environment and style approach and (x) the ability to diagnose problems and resolve them immediately. It is not clear in the data analysis the dimensions/ categories that are associated with direct observation.

Despite the diversity of the processes and the use of the jury in the technical and performative assessments carried out throughout the year, were not visible the processes of valid and reliable of the assessment (FAUTLEY, 2010). In some education institutions external examiners are used, only at some points of graduation. This practice makes the assessment more reliable and helps to reflect on the teaching processes/practices and assessment activities existing in the institution.

Table 5 - Performance Dimension

Dimension	Assessment Criteria	Tools/Indicators
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Posture on stage• Strictness of the clothing presented• Phrasing perception• Sound quality• Realization of different articulations and dynamics• Fluency, agility, and safety in execution• Maintenance of the progress determined by the works• Ability to concentrate and memorize• Ability to maintain the work environment and style approach• Ability to diagnose problems and resolve them immediately	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessment at the end of the academic term (usually the jury is made up 3 teachers)

Source: Author

Discussion

The most important findings of this study lead us to a set of reflections. First, the question of the *participatory assessment* (peer and self-assessment). Although many educational contexts carry out some practices, the results show that there is still a lot of resistance to promoting collaborative assessment strategies and practices between instrument teachers and pupils in the instrumental music classroom. In our understanding, this is the result of the teaching-learning models that characterize the pedagogy of the musical instrument. It is important to

promote and involve the active participation of the pupils in the discussion of the assessment process. If making musicians is a lifelong process, the “ability to make well-founded judgements about work while it is in progress is a core skill for the kinds of continuing development inherent in lifelong learning” (LEBLER & HARRISON, 2017, p. 95). On the other hand, this approach will allow students to develop essential skills so that they can self-assess as they progress towards their artistic and performance goals. In this context, is essential to discuss several aspects ranging from pedagogical assessment to the responsibility of teachers to promote, together with pupils, an assessment that leads to solid learning (with understanding) and is oriented towards improvement.

Second, the gradual change of practices and the implication in the assessment of instrumental music performance. In other words, we are progressively reinventing practices, moving from a paradigm of knowledge transmission to a paradigm of communication of social interaction, where the teacher is no longer the middle of the process. This means that we are/must move from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm. The teacher should think “*what the students are going to learn today*” instead of thinking “*what am I going to teach today*”. Each of these approaches has a very different social, pedagogical, and political meaning. This can have a positive effect on the role, principles, and purpose of the assessment practices. This position promotes and provides an authentic learning experience that stands pupils in good stead for life beyond the music institution.

Another aspect that deserves our reflection, is the need to move away from an assessment to grade and move to an assessment to learn, valuing the students’ autonomous work and assuming in an integrated way the three founding processes in education and training: teaching, assessment, and learning. The assessment must be at the service of learning. Regular and quality feedback to the pupils is one way to achieve this goal. The importance of this construction ambient of feedback, not

only provide new opportunities for formative learning, but also a great effect on the students' perceived value of the criticism and resulting self-confidence (BONSHOR, 2017). We must promote the diversification of assessment methods, strategies, and tasks. Therefore, diversification led to greater accuracy in the assessment.

The concepts and tools that enable the design and implementation of assessment practices are not an end in themselves. They are essential to provide confidence that the activities undertaken by learners are best suited to the purposes and requirements of each educational pathway, to make full use of their learning potential and to support the professional development of teachers, trainers, guidance counsellors and tutors. The quality and relevance of the way in which assessment is designed and implemented will be more consistent if it is based on an integrated perspective of the different formative components of the curriculum, the characteristics of the knowledge and skills addressed within them, their relationship to each other, and the ways in which teachers and trainers involved in the process align and articulate their representations and practices. Placing students at the center of learning requires teachers and trainers to work together to mobilize the different types of knowledge (scientific, pedagogical, didactic, professional, artistic) needed in the context of education, learning, artistic/professional training, and citizenship. It is important to begin by rejecting the oversimplification and perverse effects of a rigid, stereotyped distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, between practice and theory. Experts argue that even within the realm of theoretical or abstract knowledge, both types of knowledge coexist. Every field of science and knowledge also has its practical dimension, and we are not only referring to applied science, but also to the rules of acquiring and developing knowledge, the distinction between true and false, legitimate, and illegitimate within each scientific field (MULLER, 2009; YOUNG & MULLER, 2014). The combination of both aspects is even more present in school education and, therefore, in vocational education and professional courses.

Mastery of the subject matter that defines the content of a particular school subject is not a direct equivalent of the discipline or scientific field, which further emphasizes the need to draw on other specific knowledge related to the educational process and the organization of learning in a school setting.

The challenges are considerable, given the diversity of knowledge and learning contexts that underpin the centrality of assessment. There is a need to develop integrated assessment practices in these courses, drawing on different areas of education, knowledge, and frameworks. It also requires the creativity of and cooperation between teachers, trainers, counsellors, and tutors, so that assessment is the element that provides unity and a sense of coherence, enabling students to learn more effectively. There is a need for pedagogical interaction that considers the student as an active participant in the construction of his or her own learning. In addition, there is a need for fluent communication based on the data collected during the learning and assessment process, which is essential for the regulation of teaching and learning. For these reasons, it is crucial to reflect as a team on the characteristics of this communication, to make it accessible and clear, and to share it between teachers and students. For the construction of educational success, it is essential for students to have relevant information about their performance and possible ways of improvement to regulate their learning journey.

The collegial work of teachers and trainers is essential in the formative interaction with students in different educational contexts. It is imperative to cultivate the sharing of perspectives and goals and to effectively negotiate the meanings of organizing, setting objectives, framing, and evaluating learning. This concerns not only the specific context of the curriculum but should also include an understanding of how the educational components and frameworks contribute to the final academic, professional, artistic, and civic outcomes. We argue that assessment in the context of specialist and vocational arts education is not only applicable, but essential to promoting more and better student

learning. We also emphasize that the development of formative assessment practices will be more coherent if it is carried out through collaborative teamwork involving teachers, trainers, mentors, and tutors. The cooperation and coordination of all those involved in pedagogical practices, who provide feedback during their implementation, is the element that connects and shapes the learning process. By establishing links between different areas of knowledge, the importance and contribution of different educational components also become evident to students and stimulate their engagement in successful learning.

And finally, it is important to be able to articulate formative assessment with summative assessment. They are not opposites but complementary. The results of formative assessment must be mobilized for summative assessment, supporting students. However, the results of the formative assessment should not be used to classify students. This classification must be done through summative evaluations designed for this purpose.

In the development of quality evaluation, it is particularly important to overcome basic conceptual difficulties that persist among a variety of actors in school systems. Even when talking about concepts such as external assessment, internal assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment research shows that several relevant actors (teachers, school managers, and administration officials) still hold misconceptions about them which, of course, should be clarified. A thorough understanding of these, and other key concepts is crucial if pedagogical practices are to be transformed and improved in a deliberate and sustained manner. For example, it is important to understand that information generated by assessments of a formative nature should not be directly mobilized to assign grades to students. And it is equally important not to confuse assessment, an eminently pedagogical process that should accompany the teaching and learning processes, with the mere assignment of grades. To assess is not to grade, although certain forms of summative evaluation can be used to assign grades to students.

The more formal assessment, that is, deliberate and purposefully organized so that we can come to a judgment about the value and merit of a given object (student learning, teacher performance, school performance, quality of teaching material) tends to follow the so-called logic of the so-called exact sciences. This means that it tends to be criterion-based, strives for objectivity, and uses data of a quantitative nature which, in general, can be collected using a variety of instruments, with particular emphasis on tests, questionnaires, scales, rubrics, and checklists. It is an approach that is usually said to be based on criteria thinking. Consequently, the definition of criteria that reflect what is truly relevant to learn is a complex and difficult, but unavoidable process. Assessment, of course, must have these criteria as its fundamental reference. The criteria, in turn, must consider reference curriculum documents.

But this should not mean that we get bogged down in endless exercises that usually culminate in an unmanageable set of criteria that reflect an overly atomized and meaningless view of what is important to learn. This means that the criteria should translate what is important to learn. And nothing more than that. There is, obviously, a great variety of processes that allow us to verify the degree of achievement of each criterion and, naturally, evaluation has a very relevant and unavoidable role here. We must avoid at all costs getting lost in the definition of endless lists of indicators, descriptors, or other mechanisms of a similar nature. We must place more value on assessments of a holistic nature, developing our ability to learn to look at what students know and can do in a more integrated and holistic way. It is important to distinguish the essential from the accessory, and in this regard, we need to focus on what is manifestly and unavoidably essential. The definition of criteria and their use (which should be eminently formative) should be social constructions, that is, they should be the result of analysis and discussion among teachers and reflect a consensus about what is relevant and unavoidable to learn and know how to do. This is, obviously, a work that has to do with curriculum development.

What we think about is important to learn and what allows us to organize teaching, learning conditions and, of course, the selection of assessment tasks that are both teaching and learning. These are some of the aspects that we must consider to be able to better transform assessment so that it is at the service of pupils and can improve the quality of education.

Conclusion

From the analysis and treatment of data, emerge indicators that emphasize the need to rethink, promote and enable assessment practices that contribute to the construction of a transformative teaching posture in the strategies in the context of the instrumental music learning, where the diversity, flexibility and the multidimensionality of contexts and music training offers can be assumed as contexts skilled in the promotion, renewal and transformation of knowledge, practices, and contexts. It's fundamental that the music educators periodically review assessments and their practices. The promotion of a reflective culture with evident principles about the nature, purposes and values of the assessment will be a starting point for change, transform and apply innovative assessment practices on instrumental music learning through the different places and moments of music performance.

In terms of pedagogical assessment, there are specific challenges for teachers: what assessment criteria can be transversal to the various components? What procedures for collecting information to mobilize so that the various actors can, collaboratively, triangulate information regarding the learning of each pupil and, from there, draw the necessary pedagogical conclusions? How to distribute useful and quality feedback that allows the articulated development of the various skills in the professional, academic, and artistic fields? What procedures should be developed so that the assessment is effectively at the service of improving learning, avoiding

resorting to recovery procedures, and privileging a proactive action, to the detriment of a remedial one and temporarily removed from the teaching period?

A good understanding of the nature and purposes of assessment is a necessary condition for an assessment aimed at improving teaching and learning to become part of the pedagogical routines of schools. But it is not a sufficient condition. Training, as contextualized as possible, and the creation of dynamics of collaborative work among teachers is very relevant actions for the development of more diversified and richer assessment practices from the didactic and pedagogical point of view. Assessment can and should have a relevant role to play in the processes of (re) invention and pedagogical innovation.

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