

## COMPOSING MUSIC AS LEARNING TOOL IN INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC EDUCATION

### Exposé for a PhD Research Project

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#### Foreword

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I'm a very curious person and research has always fascinated me. I involved it in all my activities, it has always been very stimulant and made me always more and more curious. When I was 19 and I was finishing my violin studies, I started studying also pedagogy and composition. Over the years I have understood that these three fields (violin, composition and pedagogy) were three fundamental aspects of my artistic personality and I started to lead my own creative and research projects, mixing these fields together: performance, music creation and music education. I had the possibilities to lead some of Workshops in many schools on different topic, always referring to the relationship between the above mentioned fields. I presented my projects also in some conferences and I published some scores (Malizia, 2015), DVD (Malizia, 2018) and papers (Malizia, 2018) about creative learning by composing and improvising (cf. 1.2.).

For several years I worked on these topics with children (in different schools and contests), and they've always shown enthusiasm on creative approaches: they were not only more curious and more open to new sounds but above all, these projects have helped them to acquire the skills to more deeply understanding music. In the year 2019 I had the possibility to lead a project at the Joseph Haydn Conservatory in Eisenstadt about "composing on the violin", with students aged 20 to 30. The aim of the project was to teach students how to compose a finished musical piece on the violin, mixing contemporary music with musical materials from Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*. I was happy to see how proud and surprised the students were, at the end of the project, to be able to compose even a few lines of music, with a logical structure, understanding its meaning.

I would like to emphasize the need for research and practice to go hand-in-hand in my current and future career and to start my PhD Project specializing myself in the field of pedagogy and instrumental teaching and learning, with composing as a creative learning tool.

#### 1. Theoretical scientific foundation

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##### 1.1. *Relevance of the topic*

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There have been many pedagogues, musicians and composers who have focused on **the importance of composing also as an educational tool and not only as an artistic goal**: there are already many studies and researches on composing as learning approach in music and instrumental education (Reitinger, 2008), as curriculum subject for every

student (Schmidinger, 2018), as a tool for the development of creative thinking and aesthetic sense (Barrett, 2003, Wiggins, 2003, Hickey, 2003), as learning tool for musical elements (Ernst, 2012), as a link with improvisation (Piazza, 1970) and as a general educational tool for children (Delalande, 2004). If there are many studies and projects who promote composing activities for pupils in early music education, there are not really systematic studies and researches noting the impact that composing can effect on playing skills, in undergraduate as well in graduate context. I would like to “test” this approach by evaluating the different impacts of composing on children and students, observing their develop in music understanding and playing skills. At the end of the research project I hope to be able to produce a quantity and quality of data that can allow an analysis, as detailed as possible, to answer *what, when, how* and *why*, composing music can be used in instrumental pedagogy with multiple purpose. By composing, the students acquire the necessary tools that will make them ever more conscious and autonomous (Montessori, 2000) on the instrument, not only focusing on practice without thinking, waiting for the teacher's feedback and “receiving the new instruction” for the next step (Kruse-Weber 2017). In my dissertation, the connection between “to learn” and “to perform” is also very relevant: focusing the attention on performing arts and not only on learning subject, the learning of theoretical and practical knowledges and skills will be set together with performance purpose.

## ***1.2. Problems***

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To better focus the main problem of my project, it is important to establish a **definition of composition, to better understand the role that composing will have in this educational process**. First of all, the composition does not represent the simple “transcription” or “annotation” of what comes out of improvisation (Ernst, 2012). Composing is a kind of musical thinking (Hickey, 2003) and to compose means to generate musical ideas, the product of musical thinking, and setting them into a context (Wiggins, 2003). Composing can start from the improvisation, but it doesn't have to (Merk, 2009). It requires an organization and a structural awareness of what you are going to write and it requires a clear elaboration in mind and ear of the musical materials and of the structure of the composition. Each composition is a “musical text”, which is usually elaborated in detail and created in several plannable steps. It is regarded by the composer as completed and has the possibility of repeatable performance (Schlotfeld, 2019, Ziegenmeyer, 2016).

Composers are used to imagine in their mind the score they are writing and sometimes they only need a small instrumental support (usually the piano) to focus on some musical elements more than others. Since the students and especially the children have not developed the skills of imaging these elements on the mind without instrumental support, improvisation or rather exploration on the instrument is a fundamental step in composing's critical choice process. In summary, in this project composing means exploring on their own instrument as much as possible but on specific aspects (and not simply improvising) in order to be able to consciously choose the elements that will create your composition, to deeply understand your instrument and the music but also to deepen the playing skills. Although composing is described in literature as a learning field, it is relatively little used in practice and there are also few studies of instrumental teachers who compose in instrumental lessons. The main problem is therefore: **how to develop a methodology that allows multidimensional approaches using composing as a learning tool in instrumental education, deepening not only the musical aspect but**

**also the cognitive and affective one, offering diverse learning opportunities, not only playing but also listening, singing, composing and improvising.**

According on this main problem, it is necessary to emphasis more three specific didactic aims:

- bringing instrumentalists (pupils as well as students) to composing, without having any knowledges or skills in that field;
- bringing instrumentalists (pupils as well as students) to instrumental exploration, without prejudice and without the intent of creating an improvised performance;
- moving from the instrumental exploration to always composing, keeping the focus on instrumental purposes.

### ***1.3. Research Situation***

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There are many authors that have published on the topic of composition pedagogy for learners in different ages, some of these are purely educational projects or perspectives some other are detailed scientific studies with documentation. I will try in this chapter to make a short excursus on the main pedagogical and scientific studies in order to clarify the basis of my project.

- Scientific studies:

Because creativity and creative thinking are two basic elements that play an important role in compositional processes, I find very important to look at some researches on these fields. Barrett (1998, 2003) investigated more than 70 children, collecting observations of the children's music classes, recordings of children's original compositions and notations, children's written reflections on compositions, performance and listening experiences and more data, in order to explore children's aesthetic decision making and musical thinking as composers, as critics of composition, as user of invented notations. She suggested that "a view of composition in music education as a means of developing the individual's capacity to construct meaning from and through encounters with the world provides an avenue to explore what it is to be more human and to endow our life stories with meaning" (Barrett, 2003, p. 24). Wiggins (2003) explained that the "musical ideas are the product of musical thinking, in an educational setting, a composition can show a great deal about a student's musical thinking and understanding. This makes composing an ideal tool for teaching music and an excellent means for assessing student learning" (Wiggins, 2003, p. 141). Hickey (2003) focused his work on the impact that teaching composition has on the development of children's creative thinking. Barrett as well as Wiggins and Hickey then observed the changes in musical thinking and aesthetics aspects in the teaching process of composition in early education. McPherson explained that "the term creative is synonymous with music and music education and applied in a variety of ways" (McPherson, 1998, p. 153).

A lot of studies are focused in early music education field. Burnard (2007) investigated children's musical interactions with the activities systems of group composing and arranging. She works with peer education and the "attention is paid to the complex interrelationships among the various elements of interaction in children's collaborative creative music making as evidenced in group composing (where the activity features generation and revision of new musical material) and arranging (where the activity features creative use of existing musical material) are differentiated tasks". Vandr  (2018) worked

on composition projects in music schools context in order to consolidate the use of composition in music school curricula and to help teachers giving them a sort of guide on how to use music composition in music education. Stephens (2003) has turned his attention on how the compositional process works, searching strategies and models in the teaching of composition and focusing on the importance of exploratory approaches in music education: “in advocating more exploratory and less structured approaches in the teaching of composition, it is important still (through direct and indirect means) to encourage essential progress and development in knowledge, skills and understanding” (Stephens, 2003, p. 118). Reitingner (2008, 2018) analysed the compositional process in detail from pedagogical point as well from scientific point, with a precise data collection and analysis in qualitative research. The research has been focused on childhood education and more on improvisational than compositional purposes. Swanwick (1986) started from the work of Moog and Piaget to propose a sequence of musical development, in order to plane music curriculum and to generate project progression. A later work by Swanwick and Cavalieri Franca (1999) reported a study on the musical work of twenty children at a music school in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, regarding the connection between composition, performance and audience listening. Their research reported a claims of adequate curriculum to support this type of musical approach that includes all three of these activities. Verney (2008) research is about the integration of instrumental lesson in early music education, providing that composing can become an integral part of an instrumental teacher's methodology. His intend was to demonstrate that the creative and the re-creative action are not separate but that they complementary aspects.

We can also find some studies that includes researches not only in early education filed but also in pre-college as well in high music education level. These studies concern the introduction of the subject composition in the academic curricula for all the students. Schmidinger (2018) promoted the subject composition for “everyone”, in a way even involving instrumentalists, with the possibility of defining composition as an optional subject for all students. At the same time he analysed composing both as a pedagogical as well as a scientific discipline, by separating it into historical, empirical, comparative and systematic and by providing a structured research paradigm. Schlothfeldt (2019), guitarist and composer, spoke about the current state of composition pedagogy and about the application of the subject composition in music and instrumental pedagogy. He explained that the potential of composing in instrumental lessons is still to underestimated, he faced the lack of literature that deals with the topic in depth as well as the lack of systematic and continuous application of composing in instrumental lessons<sup>1</sup>. Schwarzbauer (2019) and Nussbichler led together a composition workshop with Pre-College students of the music education study program at the University Mozarteum Salzburg. They worked with questionnaires to collect data and to continue scientific approaches and to offer suggestions for the conception of future composition projects with pre-college Students.<sup>2</sup>

Looking more on the “teacher side” about “how can we help teachers?” or “what do teachers do?” I would like to report the experience and the studies two researchers: Reese and Altrichter. Reese (2003) worked on “teacher response to student composition”. He

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<sup>1</sup> “Das Potenzial des Komponierens im Instrumentalunterricht wird allerdings tendenziell unterschätzt. Insgesamt ist ein Mangel sowohl an Literatur festzustellen, die sich eingehend mit dem Thema befasst, als auch an Instrumentalschulen, die kontinuierlich Komponieren integrieren und mit entsprechenden Übungen oder Aufgaben auf Inhalte des Instrumentalunterrichts Bezug nehmen”. Schlothfeld, M. (2019), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> “Die Grundlagen für weiterführende wissenschaftliche Zugänge darstellt, andererseits auch Anregungen für die Konzeption künftiger Kompositionsprojekte bieten können”. Schwarzbauer, M. (2018), p. 133.

concentrated his research first on the teacher's verbal and musical response concentrating showing the how experienced teacher have approached their teaching of creative work in order to offer teachers structured approaches for responding effectively. Altrichter and Posch (2007) showed the importance of systematic and scientific processes in the daily teaching praxis and shows methods and practical applications, reporting examples of projects, of action research in teaching context. Although not specific in the field of composition, it represents an important step in scientific research in the field of pedagogy.

- Educational projects and perspectives

We can find also different example of projects or pedagogical inputs about composing in music or instrumental education. Delalande (1993, 2004) investigated the impact of creating artistic works on the children's development and their ability to become autonomous. He was focussing his attention not on the product (compositions should not be finished and perfect works) but on the enhancement of the creative process<sup>3</sup>. Piazza (1979) developed a new version of the Orff Schulwerk method in order to use the improvisation as starting point for the Orff-instruments exploration, where composing is the action of "put together" all the invented musical material, almost the final step of the process. Even if a little outdated, Coleman (1922) can also provide didactic input about creativity in childhood education. He also represents a testimony of how, already in the early twentieth century, musical creation was considered an important tool in the early musical education. Ernst (2012) explains the potential that creative acts such as composition and improvisation have in instrumental and musical learning. He explains how these approaches leads to a greater awareness of the musical elements themselves as well as the understanding of music and repertoire. He also presents some ideas for activities to be carried out during the lessons specifying how, after the first activities, the student can be directed to a teacher/composition expert for more specific help.

#### ***1.4. Research Questions***

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- Why and how can composing be implemented in instrumental learning and teaching?
- How does composing affect the instrumental and the creative approach of the learners?
- What kind of impact will this project have on the playing skills of the learners?
- How do the learners need support in composing?
- How far will composing lead the learners to a diverse learning opportunities like listening, improvising and composing?
- How does composing in instrumental field affect the musical understanding of the learners?
- To which kind of results in composing will these project lead the learners?

#### ***1.5. Objectives***

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<sup>3</sup> "Il lavoro artistico, che si tratti di musica o di arti plastiche, rappresenta effettivamente per il bambino un mezzo per progredire come autodidatta". Delalande, F. (2004), p.129.

According with my research questions (cf. 1.4.), it is possible to hypothesize that through composing the learners will deepen their playing skills, focusing their attention not only on the instrumental technical problems and purposes but on related sound, musical and general instrumental implication.

The main specific objectives, that support my research hypothesis, are:

- to illustrate what is the impact of composing in learning and improving instrumental playing skills;
- to find methods and strategies for applying composing as tool in the Instrumental Education;
- to use composing as a starting point for a deeper exploration of the instrument;
- to find and follow appropriate methodologies and strategies in order to make composing accessible to learners, who have no knowledge in music theory (mostly pupils) or any experience in musical creation;
- to change the perspectives on execution and strategies for solving technical problems through the implementation of different ways of thinking;
- to find methods and strategies to make the learners (pupil and student) as autonomous as possible in their creative and instrumental path.

I hope, my research will change a little bit the way to approach the instrumental pedagogy and to consider composing an additional tool for acquiring and/or improving playing skills in the instrumental learning. I hope at the end of the research I will be able to define clearer and to submit detailed documentation on *if* and *how* this method works, in order to encourage further researches in that field. Other instrumental teachers should benefit of the results of these research in order to decide, if they want to use this method and if they can benefit from this approach.

## ***1.6. Research design***

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In this project I will assume the role of the teacher as well as researcher and project leader. I am aware of the difficulty I will have in identifying myself in teacher and researcher, but I will try to report my research as objectively as possible and always to separate the normative with the descriptive approach. There are already other examples of research managed by teachers themselves, who have scientifically observed their teaching activities<sup>4</sup> (Altrichter, Posch, 2007) and I also find very important that pedagogy goes hand-to-hand with scientific research, as research competencies in pedagogical education are increasingly in demand (Kruse-Weber, Marin, 2016).

The design based research will be the guiding thread of the research methodology of my entire project: “educational design research can be defined as a genre of research in which the iterative development of solutions to practical and complex educational problems also provides the context for empirical investigation, which yields theoretical understanding that can inform the work of others.” (Reeves, 2012, p. 7).

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<sup>4</sup> “Lehrerinnen sich nicht bloß als AnwenderInnen eines von WissenschaftlerInnen produzierten Wissen ansahen sondern dass sie selbst forschten selbst wissen über Berufsprobleme produzierten und dabei zu durchaus bemerkenswerten Ergebnisse kamen”. Altrichter, H., Posch, P. (2007), p. 12

Reinmann (2005) analysed the main points that should not be missing in a research process, referring to the application of design based research, showing how this can represent a complete and valid methodology:

1. **Pragmatic research goals:** The researcher should be define theory as well as practice, finding a good synergy between practice and research, propelling the development of practice. (cf. 1.1., 1.2., 1.4.).
2. **Research methodology:** the researcher should define the design process, that has to be conduct in a real world context with social interaction. (cf. 1.3.).
3. **Interactive and flexible research process:** the design based research is based on continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis and redesign, in order to understand *how*, *when* and *why* education innovations work in practice, in order to uncover the relationships between educational theory, designed artefact and practice. (cf. 1.6. and 2).
4. **Integrative research methods:** use methods that permit direct investigation of the question(s). Specific research designs and methods work well for different goals and questions, therefore are multiple methods possible and necessary. (cf. 1.6.)
5. **Contextual research results:** Disclose research to encourage professional scrutiny and critique. Collect documentation, report and profile of the research. Provide a guidance on “how to use the researched principles”.

But how does an educational design research process work? Reeves focused his model of a “specific iterative cycle” on what really happens in an educational project. (Reeves, pp. 74-75):

1. **problem analysis:** “exploring and analysing the existing situation in terms of both current knowledge and current practice”.
2. **solution development:** “design is informed by design principles derived from existing literature as well as existing products and interventions in practice”.
3. **iterative refinement:** “evaluation through empirical testing”.
4. **reflection to produce design principles:** “retrospective analysis to produce theory”

I generated a small graph on the cyclical process of the practical activities that will affect my project (cf. 2.), where problem solving (McPherson 1998) will be the basis of the pedagogical approach.

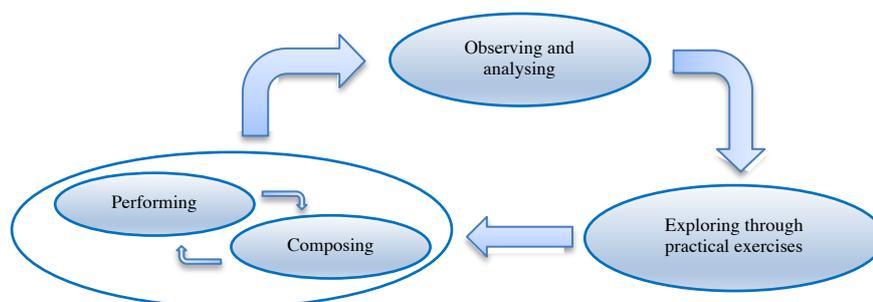


Table 1: creative process

As integrative research methods for generating and collecting data, documentation and reports I will use **interviews, diaries, video and audio recordings of the performed compositions** as well as **scores collection**:

- *Interview*. Interviews are further developments of everyday conversation. Their special value lies in the fact that they reveal thoughts, attitudes and attitudes that are "behind" current behaviour<sup>5</sup>. The goal of an interview is to learn something from a person that is important to you and that you do not yet know. You should therefore think carefully about what and why you want to ask and how. In my project I will conduct interviews with learners at the beginning and at the end of each of the two experiences. In this way, with the addition of the diaries, it will be possible to check the starting and finishing status of the learners and then to explore the real evolution of the project, by observing what it's happened, but also *where, how, when* and *why* it's happened during the different activities. The interviews will be audio-recorded.
- *Diaries*. In the implementation and supervision of the research process, the diary, in which observations, memory protocols, thoughts, plans, etc. are entered, has become increasingly important. I will separate research diaries with pedagogical diaries, in order to separate the normative with the descriptive aspect. Learners will also be asked to keep diaries on their activities, especially to monitor their learning process during self-employment.

## 2. Structure of the work and time schedule

The project is addressed to violin learners (pupils as well as students) and will be articulated both in single and group meetings. A very important prerequisite that every learner must have is the total absence of previous experience with composition and improvisation activities.

- **Group A:** 3 pupils, beginner level (between second and third years of violin studies, between 8 and 9 years old);
- **Group B:** 3 students, advanced level (University Level, up from 20 years old);

I would like to organise my PhD in some activities, not really lessons but a sort of experiments<sup>6</sup>, that will help me to search answers to my questions, verifying my thesis and achieve the set objectives. Basing my project with pupil and students, who have any composing experiences but who already have instrumental experience, at least one year for the pupil and advanced level for the students, my starting point will be the observation (first step) through listening, discussion and analysis of some sounds, some techniques and some musical elements that I/we want to use for the first activity. The observation will lead to the exploration (second step), where the learners will explore on the instrument using the musical material discussed in the first step, of course with the possibility of expanding it during the exploration phase. The creative steps are closely linked to the exploration steps and can bring one back to the other as needed, as the practical execution on the instrument of all that is composed represents an important aspect of the project. For this reason the next step is represented by the performance of the composition. Is therefore the moment when the learners decides that his creative

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<sup>5</sup> "Interviews wie auch schriftliche Befragungen sind eine Weiterentwicklung der alltäglichen Gesprächs. [...] Ihr besonderer Wert besteht darin, dass sie Gedanken, Einstellungen, Haltungen erschließen, die "hinter" dem aktuellen Verhalten stehen". Altrichter, H., Posch, P. (2007), p. 150

<sup>6</sup> „La lezione corrisponde a un esperimento“. Montessori M. (2000), p. 219.

process has concluded and that his product can be considered complete. However, the process cannot be defined as concluded: collective discussions, interviews and the writing of the last diaries must therefore follow. These steps are fundamental for the teacher, for the researcher but also for the learners to verify what has been achieved, what is lacking and where the teaching methods need to be strengthened or changed. For the researcher, however, they are essential to have a complete observation overview, to understand what has happened throughout the process, what has emerged, what has changed, whether the objectives have been achieved. Without this step it will not be possible to plan the new action and therefore the next experience. I am basically planning two experiences, even if the second one is nothing more than a deepening of the actions of the first one, trying to improve/change what didn't work but above all making the learners work almost exclusively autonomously. The first experience will last about 6 months (January 2021 to June 2021), excluding the initial planning periods (November - December 2020) and the final reflection and re-planning periods (summer 2021). The second experience will start in autumn 2021 and will not have precise and structured activities but clear starting and finishing points. The learners will be left to work autonomously and the teacher will just observing and monitoring the activities from outside, possibly providing specific support depending on the situations that will occur. Here two tables about the first and the second experience, with the various activities.

Legend:

Teacher/researcher with the learners	Teacher/researcher alone	Learners autonomously
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**Table 2: First experience (first year)**

<b>Planning the action(s)</b>		Between November 2020 and December 2020		
<b>(Video)-Interviews at the beginning of the activity(ies)</b>		Starting point of the first experience – January 2021		
<i>What</i>	<i>How</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>Verification - Observation</i>	
Observation and Analysis	Listening, observing, discussing about some sounds, techniques, musical elements ...	Two individual meetings for each learner (60') in 7/10 days apart	Knowing/Playing (new) techniques on the instrument. Improving playing skills	Diaries
Exploration	Exploring on the instrument. Trying sounds, techniques, musical elements ...			
Analysing and studying the diaries of the learner to better plan the next activities		Three weeks	Diaries	
Exploration	Collecting material for the composition			
(Probable) re-planning of the next action				
Creation (alternating with and without the teacher) + Performance	Choice/sorting music material. Taking first steps in music writing	Two individual meetings for each learner (60') in two weeks	Tutoring during work in progress	Diaries
	Going on with the work alone	About two weeks		
	Controlling how is going on the work and planning the last steps	One individual meeting for each learner (60')	Analysis of the work / partiture Performance and analysis of the composition	Diaries
	Finishing the composition alone	About two weeks		
Performance + Re-Observation	Performance (with/for the other 2 group members) Discussion about the whole process and about the composition together. Work on any latest changes	One collective meeting for each group (180')	Discussion with the teacher and with the other learners. Performance with Video-Audio recording.	Diaries
<b>(Video)-Interviews at the end of the activity(ies)</b>		End point of the first experience – June 2021		
<b>Reflection on the first experience</b>		Sommer 2021		
<b>Planning the next experience or changes to the experience carried out</b>				

**Table 3: Second experience (second year)**

<b>Re-planning for the second experience</b>		Sommer 2021	
<b>Start of the second experience</b>		September 2021	
<i>What</i>	<i>How</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>Verification - Observation</i>
Preliminary Meeting	To discuss the activities and the objectives of the second experience	September 2021 - One individual meeting for each student	Only after the work of the learners themselves a check becomes possible
Observation + Exploration + Creation	Self-organization of the working-plan by the learner.	About eight weeks	Diaries
Tutoring	Control and questioning, that the learner should solve/answer alone with his next activities.	Individual meetings - Appr. Dec. 2021	Diaries
	Observation – Reflection – (re)planning		
Observation + Exploration + Creation	Self-organization, re-organisation and improvement of the working-plan by the learner.	About eight weeks	
Tutoring	Control and questioning, that the learner should solve/answer alone with his next activities.	Individual meetings - Appr. March 2022	Diaries
	Observation – Reflection – (re)planning		
Exploration + Creation + Performance	Self-organization, re-organisation and improvement of the working-plan by the learner. Preparation for the performance.	About four weeks	
Performance	Performance of the compositions and self-explanation of the musical work and of the working plan.	One collective meeting for each group (180')	Getting Feedback from the other learners. Performance with Video-Audio recording
			Diaries
<b>(Video)-Interviews at the end of the activity(ies)</b>		End point of the second experience – Spring 2022	
<b>Reflection on the second experience</b>		Sommer 2022	
<b>Reflection and comparison of the first and second experience</b>			

### 3. Addition: COVID-19 Emergency

In this period (spring/summer 2020) we are living in a global emergency, due to the spread of the Coronavirus in the world (COVID-19 Emergency). Because of this emergency we are living a moment in which the entire educational and communication system has suddenly and forcibly had to adapt to technology, migrating from "traditional" to distance and online-learning teaching systems. This unexpected emergency has brought some positive aspects in the field of research and education, towards new goals, new competences and especially new forms of communication. Since at the moment it is not yet possible to establish when this emergency will be over, but above all because I see great potential in the use of technology and online platforms in learning context, I am ready to "organize" my research project as distance learning project, using various platforms and programs. This opportunity could certainly represent a challenge and also a potential to develop new methodologies but above all to overcome space and time barriers.

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