

Observation as a research method in the collaborative piano field: designing a protocol to generate qualitative data

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Abstract. The topic of this paper refers to observation as a qualitative method for collaborative piano research. The paper highlights how the use of observation as a qualitative method is rarely employed in collaborative piano research. Due to the pertinence of this method to preserve the liveliness and flow of collaborative music performances, the author advocates for a protocol that provides validation of data gathering. A literature review confirmed the scarce number of investigations with protocol procedures, and illuminated relevant elements for observation in collaborative piano: musical and linguistical dimensions of the vocal coaching sessions; the inclusion of attitudinal knowledge that may emerge between pianists and singers; and a brief report to be filled out by willing participants. The discussion contributes to the methodological preparation of researchers in the collaborative piano field as well as in larger contexts in music education.

Keywords. Collaborative Piano, Vocal Coach, Research Method, Observation, Protocol, Qualitative data.

Título. A observação como método de pesquisa no campo do piano colaborativo: elaborando um protocolo para gerar dados qualitativos

Resumo. O tema deste artigo se apoia na observação como método qualitativo na pesquisa em piano colaborativo. Destaca-se como a observação, enquanto método qualitativo, é raramente empregada na pesquisa em piano colaborativo. Devido à pertinência desse método em preservar a vivacidade e a fluência em performances musicais em conjunto, o autor advoga por um protocolo que promova a validação como instrumento de coleta de dados. Uma revisão de literatura confirmou a raridade de pesquisas que incluem algum protocolo de observação. Ao mesmo tempo, a revisão trouxe elementos relevantes para a observação nas investigações em piano colaborativo: dimensões musicais e linguísticas em ensaios no formato vocal coaching; a inclusão de conhecimentos atitudinais que eventualmente emergem entre pianistas e cantores, e um breve relatório a ser preenchido pelos participantes — se assim o desejarem. A discussão contribui para a preparação metodológica de pesquisadores no campo do piano colaborativo assim como em contextos mais amplos em educação musical.

Palavras-chave. Piano Colaborativo, Coach Vocal, Método de pesquisa, Observação, Protocolo, Dados qualitativos.





Introduction

Music performance is usually a live phenomenon that involves intentional interpretation of music, shared with members of an audience. Within musicological studies, recorded performances have historically been the foundational, primary source of research (DOGANTAN-DACK, 2012). This author has proposed a different perspective in the field, emphasizing live performances as privileged venues that reveal social and affectionate dimensions of the musical art. Similarly, collaborative piano performances offer creative, inspirational experiences leading to similar, meaningful psychological emotions while interacting with the audience. Due to the live, vicarious nature of music, research in collaborative piano has been recommended to either include qualitative methods in music analysis studies (MONTENEGRO, 2024) or integrate the musical analysis procedures with performance itself (POW, 2016).

Regarding the use of methods in collaborative piano research, musical analysis procedures have been widely embraced; however, the efficiency and validation of that technique as qualitative research has been questioned by Montenegro (2024). The author argues that musical analysis focuses on analytical procedures to describe compositions and, hence, the technique does not describe vicarious experiences nor provide genuine in-thefieldwork data. Adhering to that recommendation, a few scholars have combined musical analysis with punctual qualitative methods. For instance, the musical analysis of Brazilian art song Teu Nome by composer Almeida Prado generated the fundamentals of the follow-up action-research where the researcher-pianist practiced with 4 diverse singers (CAMPOS, 2020). This innovative approach consisted of merging the analytical procedures with the selfinventory – a detailed self-observation of the piano-singer rehearsal sessions. In general, however, researchers have customarily selected one method for their studies in collaborative piano: surveys (CORCORAN, 2011), documents and program notes (MONTENEGRO, 2021; BALDOVINI, 2020; BAKER, 2006), observations (SASANFAR, 2012; SANTOS, 2020; VILLAS BOAS, 2017; CIANBRONI; SANTOS, 2017; CIANBRONI, 2016; SILVA; BARROS, 2014) and interviews (CHRISTENSEN, 2023; SUNDSTROM, 2016; MONTENEGRO, 2013). Adding more complexity to their methodologies, few scholars have designed a larger spectrum of qualitative methods in collaborative piano: document review and journaling (FANG 2024); literature review, recording and performance analysis (CAMPOS, 2020), and case-study combined methods (CHOI, 2023).





Still within the collaborative piano field, commitment to the vocal repertoire is a specialization that requires the pianist both musical and linguistics training. The overlapping between these topics inspired a doctoral research project related to vocal coaching settings where pianists and singers prepare songs to prospective performances on stage. Questions like how the vocal repertoire is prepared during the duo (pianist-singer) rehearsal sessions, and how linguistic knowledge is approached among them are of particular interest for investigation. The nature of these questions requires observation as a qualitative method for the research project, and it is the object of reflection in this paper.

Review of literature: observation as a qualitative method in collaborative piano

Observation is a qualitative research method that is widely employed in the social and education sciences. Traditionally, anthropologists developed their fieldwork with observation, labelling this method as ethnography. However, scholars warn that the presence of the researcher or the need to record qualitative data may be intrusive to the field and their participants. According to the degree of obtrusiveness, Krathwohl (2009), based on Bouchard (1979), indicates a spectrum of observation methods, ranging from covert participant observation (less intrusive) to non-participant observation (the most intrusive).

The observational method normally captures behaviors, actions, social interactions, and whatever other daily occurrences in the work field. It is the researcher's role to interpret all collected data according to the theoretical framework adopted. In fact, qualitative studies are much more dependent on the researcher's role, and Krathwohl (2009, p. 260) states that "Observation is like a flashlight: it reveals only where it is directed."

A recent collaborative piano study was designed as an autoethnography, and the researcher employed participant observation as one of the qualitative methods (SANTOS, 2020). The author investigated the singer-pianist duo rehearsal sessions with a focus on the performance of Brazilian art songs. Santos (2020, p. 229) proposes a prospective rehearsal plan to guide the pianist's behaviors, actions, and decisions regarding the vocal repertoire preparation. According to the scholar, planning in advance contributes to goal-oriented rehearsals, efficient time management, clear communication, and engagement among the musicians. Santos (2020) adopted field dairy entries to register the reflections immediately after each rehearsal with the participants. The study revealed a broad attitudinal knowledge that is decisive for the success and efficiency of vocal coaching sessions. Therefore, the





author endorses that interactions between pianists and singers include: openness, communicativeness, interest, encouragement, curiosity, flexibility, commitment, engagement and self-confidence.

Observation was also adopted by Cianbroni and Santos (2017) to investigate the mobilization of musical knowledge within three distinct collaborative piano practices – instrumental duo, vocal coaching and choir accompaniment. The researchers pointed out two aspects concerning collaborative piano practices and performance: (1) close inter-relations between systematic knowledge and learning sources; and (2) relevant influence of previous musical experiences shared with partners. Even though there is no detailed information on how the observation was conducted in the study, Cianbroni and Santos (2017) proposed six categories for the observation of the musical partners: engagement, communicability, rehearsal attitudes, strategies of collaboration, performance efficiency, and self-evaluation.

An action-research in collaborative piano was carried out by Vilas Boas (2017) who played the piano parts at vocal lessons to four distinct students of singing. The investigation comprised the teaching practical training requirement of a master's degree. While providing piano accompaniment for singers, the author conducted the research itself. The observations of lessons generated a logbook where information and reflection were both registered. Additionally, the participants (singers) were asked to provide comments on they whatever aspects would find relevant, generating a brief report. This strategy seems useful to triangulate data and, according to Krathwohl (2009, p. 285), strengthens reliability and avoids bias.

With the focus on piano sight reading, Silva and Barros (2014) carried out an action-research at an undergraduate Brazilian vocal studio. In that sense, singers were provided to ensure the pianists would be able to sight read in a natural context, i.e., to play with their partners with relatively musical flow. The sessions were recorded, and participants were invited to give any insights about their own participation in the vocal studio. However, no details were given about the observations. In the results, levels of concentration to perform and cognitive aspects of the pianists negatively impacted the sight-reading efficiency (SILVA; BARROS, 2014).

Another research including observation in the methodological design was carried out by Choi (2023). With the aim of investigating how free piano accompaniment broadens musical identities in piano students at a higher education institution in Finland, the researcher approached a study case design with multiple data collection strategies: interviews, questionnaires and observations of accompaniment piano lessons. Meticulous procedures were taken regarding the observations, which were weekly based and covered one school





semester. The study does not provide any observational guide, but the author highlights the importance of taking notes during the observations, providing details on the interactions between the piano students and the teacher. In her words, "Field notes taken while observing each student participant as well as the teacher were thoroughly reviewed multiple times prior to establish recurring themes associated with transitioning musical identities" (CHOI, 2023, p. 37).

Contrastingly, interviews have been adopted in collaborative piano research on a variety of topics: famous collaborative pianists' biographies (SUNDSTROM, 2016; SWICEGOOD, 1997), conceptions of contemporary Korean practices in collaborative piano (LEE, 2019), and collaborative repertoire written by living composers (REGENSBURGER, 2009). Comparatively, interviews are much more common than observations. Interviews are often used when observations cannot reveal what the researcher is studying, such as opinions, beliefs, feelings or senses. However, the scope of the author's research project relies on the behaviors of the subjects, and their interactions.

The author of this paper is currently carrying out a qualitative study on the roles of the collaborative pianist as a vocal coach at two different settings. The purposeful sampling includes one professional pianist and one graduate student. These subjects will be particularly observed while rehearsing with singers. Other selected methods, such as questionnaires and follow-up interviews with the pianists, will compose the case-study methodological design.

Given the context of both the inquiry proposal and the literature review, it is suggested that observational methods are rarely employed in collaborative piano research. Therefore, this article describes the elaboration of an observation protocol, offering narrowed guidance into the observation method applied to qualitative research in collaborative piano.

Discussion: designing the observation protocol for the qualitative research in collaborative piano

The protocol has a two-part division: a general fieldnote guide and a musical-focused guide. The headline includes objective information such as: date, time and location of the observation; the repertoire that is being observed or performed; and the question about how long the pianist-singer duo know each other. These elements are elementary, but contextual to the observation. The indication of the repertoire is obviously relevant to address all musical aspects that will emerge from the rehearsal session. In case the repertoire is not familiar to the observer, a question must be made at the end of the session. Finally, the matter of how long





the musicians know each other will better explain and justify the rehearsal observation, since the familiarity in collaborative duos has relevant impact in their socio-emotional behaviors, leading to either solidarity or tension during rehearsals (GINSBORG; KING, 2007, GINSBORG; KING, 2012).

In the first portion the protocol comprises a chart with: descriptive information of what will be observed; relevant direct quotations by informants; a section to be filled with my impressions, feelings and insights; issues about non-verbal communication such as glances and gestures; and any comments about what does not happen or is different from what was expected. That first protocol section is showed in the Figure 1 below:

Figure 1 – Observation protocol, section 1

•	Observation Protocol (fieldnotes) "Field Notes contain the descriptive information that will permit you to return to an observation later during analysis and, eventually, permit the reader of the study's findings to experience the activity observed through your report" Patton, 2002, p. 303	
F	Date, Time, Location: Repertoire/Songs: How long you know your due partner:	

Descriptive information	Direct Quotations	My impressions, feelings, insights		
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
Non Verbal Communication (glances, gestures): What does not happen?				

Source: by the author

The protocol was generally designed in a fieldnote format. Assuring that observation generates a great amount of data, Krathwohl (2009) points out that fieldnotes help avoid excessive descriptions and address the relevance of what is observed.

Two other elements were included at the bottom of the section 1: non-verbal communication and notes for actions that did not happen or unexpected behaviors. In musical collaborative duos, even though verbal exchanges comprise a significant element to explain the musicians' decisions and the rehearsal strategies, non-verbal communication has not been





included within that context. Ginsborg and King (2012) argue that glances and gestures, as non-verbal communicational elements, are relevant components to the effectiveness of ensemble rehearsals.

The second portion of the protocol includes the musical aspects to be observed in the duo rehearsal venue. Due to group dynamics in ensemble rehearsals, the roles of partnership have gained attention (GINSBORG; KING, 2007a). These scholars carried out an investigation on the cognitive and social aspects of collaborative rehearsals of singer-piano duos. Based on a previous study (BALES, 1999), the authors proposed a handful of labels to analyze data specifically regarding musical dimensions of the subjects (GINSBORG; KING 2007b). That category was found useful to guide the prospective research on vocal coach settings where similar musicians (pianist and singer) will interact within rehearsal sessions.

As Ginsborg and King (2007) propose, three sub-categories comprise the musical dimensions of the duo rehearsal: basic, interpretive and strategic. The basic label includes elementary aspects of music and sounds, such as pitch, tempo, breath, and dynamics. The interpretive label is closely related to a more in-depth musical knowledge, highlighting the musicians' decisions on rubato, phrasing, energy, climax, and sound color. Lastly, the strategic label scratches general aspects of the rehearsal, describing the decisions about leadership other decisions – rehearsing the whole song or parts of it, repeating smaller parts with different criteria and/or getting slower tempo. This second portion of the protocol is reproduced in the Figure 2 below:

Figure 2 – Observational protocol, section 2

MUSICAL DIMENSIONS OF Ensemble Rehearsal (adapted from Ginsborg & King, 2007;2012)

En Cor	n, Tempo, Technique, Breath, semble, Rhythm, Harmony, nposition, Dynamics, Words, lotation, Meter, Figuration	Rubato, Dynamics, Words, Tempo, Articulation, Phrasing, Energy, Climax, Color, Pedal, Harmony, Meter	Whole song, Repeat bar/phrase, Learning strategy, Slower tempo, Rehearse by phrase, chord and vocal line, Rehearse by verse, Rehearsal time/pace, Rehearse by bar

Source: Adapted from Ginsborg and King (2007, 2012)





Since this protocol is intended to be used for a prospective investigation focused on vocal coach settings, some slight modifications were made. The label "words" was replaced by diction/pronunciation (basic dimension) and translation/semantics (interpretive dimension). The presence of the text in the vocal repertoire has gained relevance in the literature, and the semantics analysis of the poetry reveals close relations between poetry and music (CAMPOS, 2020). In the literature, pianists and singers are advised to profoundly understand semantical aspects of the songs or arias that are being prepared. When analyzing the literature on the performance of vocal music, Ballestero (2014) questions the standard prioritization of music during rehearsals, and the scholar suggests the study of linguistics beforehand. It is a new paradigm that strengthens musical performances of vocal repertoire. Additionally, pianists are advised to carefully come out with poetry interpretation, revealing eventual metaphors and personas depicted on the piano part: introduction, interludes and postludes (HADDAD, 2020).

Conclusion

This article described the incipient use of observation as a qualitative method in collaborative piano research. Thus, a protocol was proposed to guide observations in the author's research project. As demonstrated before, live musical performances, as objects of investigation, need to coherently preserve their live characteristics, involving musicians and diverse audiences in a "spatio-temporal continuum" of artistic experiences (DOGANTAN-DACK, 2012). Thus, the combination of standard musical analysis techniques with qualitative methods are advantageous to reveal the liveliness of music performances in detail and with relatively uninterrupted flow. Accordingly, prospective research in collaborative piano is advised to include these features when methods are being selected.

According to the author's research proposal, diverse piano-singer duo practice sessions will be observed. The observational method will comprise a broader research design with questionnaires and interviews. The focus of this paper, however, was made on the observation as a method and the outline of a protocol.

The observational protocol was designed to comprise both fieldnotes and annotations. Because the technique is roughly used in social and educational sciences, an adaptation to collaborative piano research was necessary. In the music performance investigation, scholars Ginsborg and King (2007) have conducted studies regarding





collaborative rehearsal settings, and the musical dimensions proposed by them seemed coherent to my project proposal since the subjects (duo piano-singer) and the practice sessions are alike.

Within vocal coaching situations, focus on the vocal repertoire is inevitable. Therefore, an overlapping between music and linguistics is a determining factor to be considered for this sort of investigation. The literature review pointed out the possibility of adopting a previous model¹ of an observation protocol for collaborative piano investigation, attaching new elements to it: linguistical and attitudinal knowledge that may emerge from the participants. Also, the inclusion of brief reports on the participants' feedback definitely increases the reliability of data gathering. The comparison or confrontation of perspectives between the researcher and the participants avoids bias during data analysis. Finally, diverse attitudinal knowledge aspects² may emerge from the subjects (pianists and singers), which will better guide how researchers methodologically prepare themselves to enter the field.

While reflecting on the nature of the object of study and the appropriateness of a scientific method, this paper intends to contribute to the trustworthiness and reliability of observation as a valid method in collaborative piano qualitative research and further music education contexts.

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¹ Based on Ginsborg & King (2007)

² with the same meaning as in Santos (2020)



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