

LIVING FREE IN HARMONY: CONTRASTS AND LEVELS OF INVOCATION IN THE PICTUREBOOK PICCOLA CON PICCOLO

Diana Zalar, Faculty of Teacher Training, University of Zagreb, diana.zalar@ufzg.hr

Tea Sesar, Faculty of Teacher Training, University of Zagreb, tea.sesar@ufzg.hr

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Abstract: The paper explores the picture book written by Croatian author Bruno Mezić and illustrated by Klasja Habjan, published by Mala zvona (2021). Croatian children's literature about music (Ž. H. Vukelja, Lj. Šimara etc.) starts from different topics; the importance of hard training, overcoming fear before a performance or the characteristics of a musical instrument. This picture book raises some provocative questions about the relationship between practising and enjoying music, and provokes the reader's engagement. First, the picture book has a different and unusual theme: the freedom of creating (composing) music, which is not only possible for adults, but also for a very small girl. This idea corresponds in the picture book with the girl's sensitivity to sounds from nature and the environment. Second, this is a hypersensitive and extremely gifted child, so the picture book can also be viewed from the aspect of encouraging and affirming creativity. The picture book also functions as a small vocabulary in the field of classical music, in a humorous and appropriate way. Third, the illustrator's contrasting illustrations (scenes of formal teaching in a music school and improvisations which Piccola practices alone) are a visual challenge addressed to the reader, while the text has the role of describing different ways of understanding and performing music. The focus of the text is the method of the author's artistic presentation of the previously mentioned perspectives. The authors of the paper were also inspired by the books *The Gifted Learner. How to Help* (Fidelma Healy Eames 2022) and *With Story to Music – Story as a Starting Point in the Musical Upbringing and Education of Younger and Preschool Children* (Željka Horvat Vukelja & Petra Heisinger 2020), as well as functional pedagogy by Elly Bašić and recent research on the discovery of gifted children by Blaženka Bačlija Sušić and her colleagues.

Keywords: picturebook, creativity, improvisation, child, music, gifted learner, functional music pedagogy

By teaching them music, we have taken music away from them.

Elly Bašić

1. Introduction

The interesting topic of incorporating music into the upbringing of children in Croatia is present at various levels. In addition to music schools and academies with classical programs, there is the Elly Bašić Music School, which develops and promotes a comprehensive concept of musical education, the so-called functional music pedagogy. Its founder, Elly Bašić, emphasized:

By teaching them music, we have taken music away from them. Historically, at least from the Scholae cantorum until today, we have not educated and cultivated creative types, but reproductive ones. (...) Instead of putting techniques and knowledge at the service of music, they became an end... (2005, 28)

One of the main concerns of the music school founded by Elly Bašić is the possibility of improvisation and the attitude that without spontaneity there is no improvisation and spontaneity arises when you believe in your own abilities. Bašić explained:

Every child has creative imagination. Every child has a rhythm. Every child has the right to musical culture. Even five-year-olds can be students. Improvisation on an instrument as a free and spontaneous expression of the child, which is not limited by the conscious level of knowledge, is combined with the conscious acquisition of musical knowledge (...) The child, psychologically motivated by the magic of play, is not a reproductive object, but a creator, reproducer and his own audience in one person. (2005, 27)

The picture book discussed in this work artistically confirms the thoughts on which Elly Bašić bases her musical pedagogy. The main character, a girl, achieves international success precisely through the power of her creativity and improvisation in playing various musical instruments.

The Ana Maletić School of Contemporary Dance is another complete music education concept for the new generations in Zagreb that combines two arts – dance and music, with the emphasis on dance. When it comes to pre-school music education, stories and classical music are brought together by children's book authors Željka Horvat Vukelja and Petra Heisinger, who lead music and storytelling workshops for children, which they call Music Room Love. The aim is to improve children's music-making, supported by a story, interdisciplinary activities and the linking of different areas before, during or after listening to music. But no matter what recital or classical piece is presented, it all starts with a story that opens up an emotional and

natural pathway to understanding and learning. This approach also encourages a positive attitude towards classical music and the children's interest in it.

Through the story and art of illustration, the picture book talks about how interest in classical music in young children must be supported by an interesting story, by encouraging the expression of emotions, as well as by encouraging musical improvisations that arise from natural sensitivity to the sounds that surround us.

Željka Horvat Vukelja is the author of two picturebooks on the subject of children and music. *Pianist*, illustrated by Kaća Svedružić, is about overcoming the aversion to hard work and practice, the fear of performing and the satisfaction when hard work is rewarded. *The Flying Piano*, illustrated by Dario Kukić, is an adventurous story about a concert piano that ran away from irresponsible owners until it found a musician who longed for it and deserved it.

The picture book *Piccola con piccolo* is the first picture book published in Croatia that does not talk about the difficulties of making music, nor about the sacrifices of musicians, but about the inner world of a girl who is exceptionally gifted and who manages to offer her gift to the world through musical improvisations. A special topic is the influence of the social and natural environment on a gifted child.

At Zagreb's Exit Theater, director Rene Medvešek has staged the play *And the Tree Was Happy* based on Shel Silverstein's picturebook *The Giving Tree* with professional academic musicians. The performance makes the complex and rather sad message of the picture book brighter through the joy of making music. This brilliant theatrical example shows how the meaning of the picturebook can be enhanced and enriched by musical parts and characters of instruments, improvisation in the characterization of figures and images from the book or relationships between characters. The project has been running for more than twenty years and shows how theater art can be used to introduce children to music and instruments, especially with four types of saxophones: soprano, alto, tenor and baritone.

The picture book *Piccolo con piccola*, from this perspective, shows how a literary work can introduce a child to terms from music theory (with the help of a small glossary at the end of the book), to the characteristic sounds of various musical instruments, to the pleasure of performing and the pleasure of creating music.

Taking all this into account, we can say that the diverse and interesting music concepts and approaches in Croatia are not followed by an equally rich and innovative corpus of children's books dedicated to this topic or topics such as children's music-making, composing or

performing. Therefore, we have determined that the picturebook *Piccola con piccolo* by Bruno Mezić and illustrator Klasja Habjan is of great importance. It attracted us precisely because of the joy of making music. It makes no mention at all of the efforts and sacrifices involved in learning music - for the simple reason that the child in this picturebook does not perceive them as such.

The concepts of the Elly Bašić Music School and the approach of Music room Love by Horvat Vukelja and Heisinger are close to this philosophy. But the artistic scope of the picturebook *Piccola con piccolo* can also be explained in the light of Fidela Healy Eames' scientific research. The little girl Piccola belongs to a special group of children to whom Eames dedicated her last book *The Gifted Learner. How to help*. It describes the characteristics of a gifted learner, different models of giftedness and how to include these learners in the educational process. It is of great importance that we understand the long-term motivation of gifted children and the ways to support their emotional and social development, in addition to providing appropriate help to parents, teachers and caregivers in guiding these children.

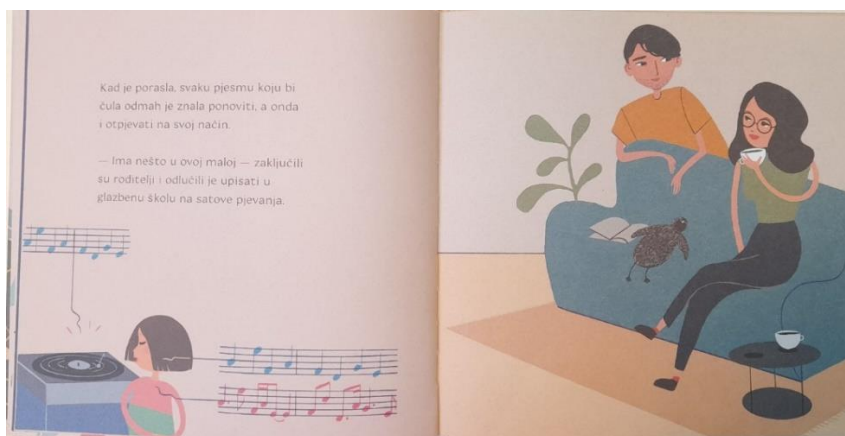
The picturebook *Piccola con Piccolo* is about the exceptionally gifted little girl Piccola, who grew up surrounded by adults who recognized and understood her diversity and specialness, in other words – her talent. Piccola became famous for her flute improvisations and her ease of playing and performing is astounding. It is obvious that this ease comes from her inner motivation, creativity and inspiration. The story and the illustrations speak of talent in many ways. So let us see how the picturebook *Piccola con piccolo* agrees with some of the conclusions of the authors mentioned.

2. Music as a unifying level of understanding – analyzing the picturebook *Piccola con piccolo*

The picturebook *Piccolla con piccollo* is an homage to free music-making, interwoven with nature and its sounds, which inspire the little girl Piccolla. The special feature of the picture book is that the girl hears music in all sounds, whether in the sounds of nature or in the sounds of household appliances and technology, all of which are accompanied by musical notes. The illustration as a narrative level thus suggests that the universal language for understanding the world is music, as it represents the synergy of different sounds using the same musical language and notation system. How do the authors achieve this?

At the beginning, the reader is introduced to the little girl Piccola, a name that means very small or tiny in Italian, who loves to sing, mumble, babble, chirp and screech, and we easily understand that she is fond of

the world of music and sounds. Piccola understands music and is constantly singing different melodies in her head or can immediately repeat the melodies she hears. Furthermore, Piccola never says a word in the picturebook, but speaks in musical notes, which are illustrated in each speech bubble instead of words. One illustration shows her producing a new melody to a song she hears on the radio. In this tiny moment of improvisation and composition, her parents decide to enroll her in music school and her musical journey begins. Piccola begins to play the little flute and becomes Piccola con piccolo (picture 1).



Picture 1

V. Svalina, B. Bačlija Sušić and G. Lapat speak about early detection of musically gifted children in *Primary school teachers' opinions towards musically gifted students*. They state:

One of the clues and indications that confirm that musical giftedness appears earlier than giftedness in other areas (at the age of 1 or 2 years) (Winner & Martino, 2000) is children's fascination with musical sounds. Very young children are often fascinated by musical sounds, as evidenced by their responses to music. (...) In most cases, these are children who like to express themselves musically and enjoy singing. They pick up melodies, rhythms and rhythmic phrases that need to be repeated very quickly and effortlessly. Basically, they show a special interest in music and their engagement in music lessons is exceptional. (2021, 135, 144)

The reader of the picturebook is also invited to unveil the beauty of classical music, especially through illustration and artistic language. The authors of this paper argue that there are several ways in which the synergy of sounds is (re)present(ed), as well as different levels of invocation and contrast, which are described in the following sections.

2.1. Synergy of sounds:

a) technical world

The narrator of the text informs us that Piccola used to produce all kinds of sounds that were not to be found in the music book, such as the howling of the wind, the humming of the car, the crackling of the fire or the whirring of the food processor. We can see in the illustration that household appliances such as the cafetière with boiling coffee, the water in the sink, cars on the road and birds in the sky that can be seen through the window are depicted as notes in the same color and design as the music Piccola plays with the piccolo. This is an invitation to children and adults alike: the freedom to create (compose) music, which is possible not only for adults but also for a very little girl, and the freedom of expression with the help of instruments are in line with Bašić's pedagogy, as mentioned earlier in this article (picture 2).



Picture 2

b) animal world – birds

Birds as a symbol of freedom play an important role in this picturebook. At the beginning, the illustrator places the birds on one side and the girl on the other. They see each other, but are not yet together. The girl is alone until she starts to play Piccola. As the story progresses, Piccola and the birds get closer and grow closer, mainly because the birds are attracted to Piccola's play. They come very close to her, for a moment one sits on her shoulder, and it seems as if she is talking to them by playing Piccola, because in each speech bubble the notes are in the same colors and with the same design. Different kinds of birds in all feather colors sit around her on the grass and even on her head. Slowly, the birds evolve from a symbol of freedom to the

illustrator's way of expressing different levels of invocation. Piccola begins to play *Musica degli uccellini* (*Bird Music*), her own composition that even the birds around the world understand. She begins to travel and gives concerts in various cities, always with her piccolo and surrounded by a flock of birds. The further the reader progresses in the story, the larger the birds become, the closer they are to the eye of the reader and the closer the little girl is.

Another unique and special detail of this picturebook are the colored words that readers should pay attention to while reading. They are in Italian, the language of classical music, and their explanation can be found in the color glossary at the end of the book. These words are in the same colors as the birds in the illustration.

c) animal world – cats and dogs

An important moment for the story and the development of Piccola's character, especially in terms of her musical talent, is when she decides to change instruments and play the trumpet. From *Piccola con piccolo*, she becomes *Tromba che romba* overnight. This serves to introduce a few new parts to the story – it adds humour by emphasising the play of language, creates suspense and surprise for the reader, and takes the plot in a new direction. In addition, *Musica degli uccellini* becomes *Musica cannegatto*, imitating dogs barking and cats meowing. From one point of view, a gifted child develops, it needs a change and new challenges, because life is beautiful and full of possibilities, especially life with music (picture 3).



Picture 3

„A child's faculties develop gradually and take shape, but a child is a complete being at every stage of its development. (...) A child is an organism, not an instrument!“ (Supek, 2005, 16).

„Improvisation is not only an important skill to learn, but also a valuable experience to have“ (Korošec, Bačlija Sušić, Habe, 2022, 353).

From another point of view, language and music are linked by their ability to improvise and form neologisms. The word *cannegatto* does not exist in Italian, yet it can be found in the glossary and is explained as dog-cat music. Our perception of the world and the language we use to describe it or our experiences is surpassed by the freedom of creation. Creation precedes language and music-making, not the other way around, and this is a starting point for creative thinking not only in music, but in general. It would be very interesting to contextualize this philosophy within the philosophy of connection between world and language by Peter Sloterdijk, but this attempt is left for future investigation as it exceeds the aim of this paper (1988).

d) animal world – african animals

At the end of the picturebook, after she has played the trumpet, we see Piccola picking up a new instrument – the pipe with a plane ticket to Africa attached to the bottom. The elephant and rhinoceros are evoked in the reader's mind by the long, deep tones produced by the pipe. At the top is Piccola's mirror image with a smiling face, heralding new adventures, new discoveries and new music. It is up to the reader to invent new words. We find it very interesting that the three instruments chosen belong to the wind instruments, a category of instruments that use air to produce sound. Just as we use air to breathe, making music is just as important to Piccola as breathing. Or: for Piccola, making music means breathing. Just as air currents and winds mean life for birds.

2.2 Levels of invocation and contrasts in illustrating

This picturebook is a lively and colourful demonstration of the evocation of abstract or concrete concepts through the interplay of words and images. However, the method most often used by the illustrator is the contrast of colours, lines and shapes to convey a meaning or add new semantic layers to the existing ones.

a) Invocation of solitude

The reader meets Piccola on a swing, surrounded by nature, trees, flowers and bees. The girl is not alone, as she enjoys the world she sees and imagines, and she is constantly singing or humming. This may refer to the fact that Piccola, who we find very melodious early on, does not

feel lonely even when she is alone, because her music and melody are her company.

b) Invocation of nature

Piccola constantly makes noises and imitates sounds from nature that she hears around her.

I. First contrast in the illustration – contrasting lines and forms in the interior and exterior

The girl's talent comes to the fore as the illustrator simultaneously contrasts scenes in nature and indoors. The first are rich in shapes, round lines, in scenes without frames. The others are angular lines, simple and minimalist, with broken frames or within strictly defined frames. This shows Piccola's urge for creative expression and his free-spirited way of thinking.

c) Invocation of music

Piccola gives the music she hears a contrapuntal melody with her voice. Her parents notice her peculiarities and decide to take her to a music school. Piccola not only learns very quickly and is extremely talented, but she also begins to make and compose her own music.

„It is critical to identify the gifted child as early as possible, before they feel too different, isolated or misunderstood.“ (Eames, 2022, 8)

II. Second contrast in the illustration – contrasting colours to indicate the connection to nature

Piccola sings a new melody to a song she hears. The illustrator contrasts the colours for the music she hears and the music she creates, which together create a new melody. This expresses the positive connotation of her musical talent, but also that she is playing when she sings. Composing, singing, whistling and other ways of producing sound are like playing for Piccola, because she does it effortlessly and spontaneously.

Nurturing creativity in gifted children is vital for their development and happiness. It improves self-esteem, helps them understand and accept their talents, and provides permission and vehicle for self-expression. (2022, 17)

Piccola is on the stage of a concert, the birds are in bright colours, as is the little girl in the scene. The birds are like listeners in the dark, they have the same colours as the notes that come from Piccola and allude to the *musica degli uccellini*.

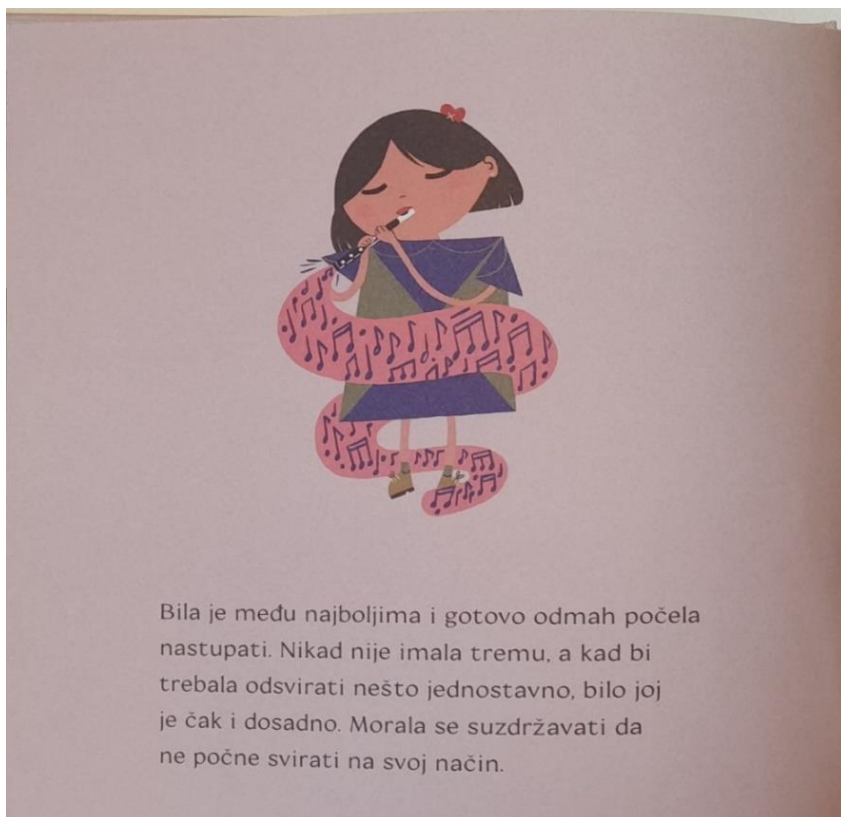
III. Third contrast in the illustration – interplay of meaning and colour

Piccola's parents are at home and the girl is exposed to the media and journalists - Piccola and the "flock" of black microphones in contrast to Piccola and the flock of white birds who are together in the forest. They are like a single being, the forest has the shape of a big baby surrounded by green.

d) Invocation of improvisation

Like a soft shawl made of notes, music becomes a "protective shell" for the little girl. But mostly she makes up her own music and is not afraid of the performance. *The bird music*, as the little girl calls it, is created without any shyness. In the illustration, we can see that she is already playing with full confidence in front of her teacher, who has the time and willingness to listen to her improvisations. Maestro (the teacher) decides to encourage her way of expressing herself in music and understands her bird music. Once again, improvisation resonates as a creative act within Elly Bašić's functional music pedagogy (pictures 4 and 5).

According to T. Buzan (2000, 2004), M. Čudina-Obradović (1991) and M. Vučemil (2010), after starting school, or by the age of ten at the latest, most children experience a "decline in creativity", which could be interpreted in various ways: due to the acceptance of imposed rules and regularities that help them understand the environment, which eliminates the need for independent research and creation, due to the reduction of the ability to freely and holistically approach a problem in favor of logical and verbal instruments of thought, due to certain pedagogical methods (emphasis on accuracy, logic, evaluation, criticizing the quality of answers, failure to develop openness to more possibilities...). If we take this into account, the picture book about Piccola is a strong warning about the danger of stifling creativity in older children.



Picture 4



Picture 5

Conclusion:

The picturebook *Piccola con piccolo* is an affirmation of language and musical creativity as well as the human connection to nature. It is also a tribute to free music making, as it promotes the importance of improvisation and the boundless spontaneous expression of children in the world of music. A quality way of teaching music also requires teachers to be competent in conducting musical activities, which includes identifying musically gifted children. The illustrator's contrasting illustrations (scenes of formal teaching in a music school and improvisations practiced by Piccola alone) are a visual challenge for the reader, while the text has the task of describing different ways of understanding and performing music. In this way, the picturebook raises some provocative questions about the relationship between practicing and enjoying music, provoking reader engagement and different ways of socializing through music. The authors have tried to show that *Piccola con piccolo* uses music as a unifying language and that music can lead to a harmonious life, both literally and figuratively. The picture book is in accordance with the concepts of teaching and performing music by Elly Bašić, Željka Horvat Vukelaj and Petra Heisinger, as well as the scientific studies of Blaženka Bačlija Sušić and Fidelma Healy Eames.

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ŽIVJETI SLOBODNO I SKLADNO: KONTRASTIRANJA I RAZINE INVOKACIJE U SLIKOVNICI *PICCOLA CON PICCOLO*

Rad istražuje slikovnicu hrvatskih autora Bruna Mezića (tekst) i Klasje Habjan (ilustracije) u izdanju zagrebačkog nakladnika Mala zvona (2021). Hrvatska književnost za djecu o glazbi (primjerice slikovnice Željke Horvat Vukelja) polazi od različite tematike. Nerijetko su u središtu pažnje imperativ napornoga vježbanja, svladavanje straha prije nastupa ili karakteristike glazbala. Međutim, ova slikovnica ima neuobičajenu temu, a ta je sloboda stvaranja (komponiranja) glazbe koja nije rezervirana samo za odrasle, već u njoj uspješno uživa posve malena djevojčica. Slikovnica je djelo koje postavlja neka provokativna pitanja o odnosu između vježbanja i uživanja u glazbi i izaziva angažman čitatelja. 1. Ova ideja korespondira u slikovnici sa senzibilnošću djevojčice prema zvukovima iz prirode i tehničke okoline. Sinergija zvukova je predstavljena u slikovnici na različitim razinama, kao i zazivi koje djevojčica osjeća. 2. Ilustracije produbljuju značenje teksta inovativnom uporabom boje i eksperimentiranjem oblicima. Autorice skreću pažnju na razine invokacije čitatelja i kontraste izražene ilustracijama : u prvome je riječ o invokacijama samoće, prirode i same glazbe; u drugome o kontrastiranju linija i oblika vanjskog svijeta i svijeta u zatvorenim prostorima, uporabi boje koja postaje komentar povezivanja djeteta s prirodom i igri značenja i boje. Slikovnica se stoga na više razina može promatrati s aspekta poticanja i afirmacije kreativnosti, a funkcionira i kao početni pojmovnik iz područja klasične glazbe, na šaljiv i primjeren način. 3. Kontrastni postupci ilustratorice (primjerice prizori formalnoga učenja sviranja u glazbenoj školi i improviziranje koje Piccola uvježbava sama) vizualni su izazov upućen recipijentu, dok tekst ima funkciju podrške različitim načinima shvaćanja i izvođenja glazbe. Autorice su posebno nadahnute dvjema knjigama: studijom *The Gifted Learner. How to help* Fidelme Healy Eames; priručnikom Željke Horvat Vukelja i Petre Heisinger *Pričom do glazbe – priča kao polazište u glazbenom odgoju i obrazovanju djece mlađe i predškolske dobi*, kao i funkcionalnom glazbenom pedagogijom Elly Bašić i radovima Blaženke Bačlije Sušić i njenih kolega o otkrivanju i poticanju glazbene nadarenosti u djece.

Ključne riječi: slikovnica, kreativnost, improvizacija, dijete, glazba, nadareni učenik, funkcionalna glazbena pedagogija