

# Active listening, expressive communication and cooperation in music learning

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## Abstract

This research aims to analyse three dimensions of the interpersonal competences – active listening, expressive communication and cooperation particularly – in students attending the third course of elementary piano studies in conservatories in Spain to find interconnections with music learning. The case study investigated three students, all 10 years old. The study involved the implementation of a set of activities intended to develop the interpersonal skills of students throughout an academic year. The activities were introduced in the piano and ensemble playing curricula in parallel with the musical tasks. The implementation was carried out through an action research process. Interviews, teacher's diary and video recordings collected qualitative data at different points over the course of the implementation. The study identifies potential for promoting active listening, expressive communication and cooperation within the classroom to enhance students' engagement with music and therefore, to improve musical skills.

**Keywords:** Conservatories of music, musical performance, emotional skills, interpersonal skills, music education.

## Introduction

The educational practices developed in music conservatories are often based on traditional methodologies, which usually focus on the intellectual and technical-interpretative aspects of performance (Poza, Bautista & Torrado, 2008), at the expense of emotional issues (Campayo & Cabedo, 2017a). However, a growing number of studies suggest that the development of the individual's emotional skills could have a positive impact on their performance and well-being (Goleman, 1996; Haymovitz, Hauseal-Allport, Lee & Svistova, 2018; Miyamoto, Huerta & Kubacka, 2015). Music conservatories may provide suitable environments for working with these skills, given the inherent connection between music and emotion (Juslin & Sloboda, 2013).

Emotional skills – the ability to be aware of our emotions and manage them appropriately in everyday circumstances – can be divided into

interpersonal or social skills and intrapersonal or personal skills (Bisquerra & Pérez, 2007). This paper focuses on *interpersonal skills*, which are defined as the capability of understanding others and influencing them according to our own intentions (Hernández, 2002).

Although there is a research literature on the effect of emotional development on academic performance at different levels of general education (e.g. Barchard, 2003; Extremera Pacheco & Fernández-Berrocal, 2004; Gil-Olarte, Palomera & Brackett, 2006; Inglés, Benavides, Redondo, García-Fernández & Ruiz-Esteban, 2009; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004; Pérez & Castejón, 2007; Petrides, Frederickson & Furham, 2004) and on music education in the secondary school (Marín & León, 2009), this subject has not been addressed in the context of music conservatories (Campayo & Cabedo, 2017a; Nagel, 2009; Stern, Shalsa & Hofmann, 2012).

## Music education and interpersonal skills

There is a bidirectional relationship between music education and the development of interpersonal skills: music education provides an excellent forum for the enhancement of interpersonal skills (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010), especially when students play music together (Edgar, 2013; Pellitteri, 2006). On the other hand, interpersonal skills are particularly important in music education (Gooding, 2009; Jacobi, 2012), since musical development involves social experience (O'Neill, 2006). Belonging to a musical group can enhance social cohesion among the different members of the group and generate positive attitudes, greater confidence and greater awareness of others (Hallam, 2010), all of which are essential elements of good performance (Davidson & Good, 2002). The literature suggests that active listening, expressive communication and cooperation are remarkable interpersonal skills in the context of music practice (Jacobi, 2012; Juslin, 2008).

Active listening is a central interpersonal skill that underlies many others and is essential "to achieve interpersonal success" (Clark, 1999, p. 216). To develop this skill students need to pay attention to what they are listening to and consequently has the capacity to provoke sensations and emotions (Pastor, 2009). Moreover, students who listen actively are more likely to be critical about what they have listened to and, thus, to enhance their performance (Marín, 2003). Active listening helps to develop musical audition, which is considered one of the main skills required to understand and learn music (Elliott, 1995; Haack, 1992). Hernández, Hernández & De Moya (2011) suggest that, in order to promote active listening, teachers could implement dramatised activities such as dance and body expression, as well as accompanying music auditions with body percussion or percussion instruments, among others.

Musical expression is not different to vocal expression, since both share "the same emotion-specific patterns of acoustic cues" (Juslin & Laukka,

2003, p. 797). In musical performance, the ability to express and communicate emotions to listeners is one of the most valued skills (Juslin, 2008). Studies suggest that musical practice itself could help children develop their ability to communicate (Pitet, 2004), and that playing a musical instrument may enhance students' expressive communication (Hietolahti-Ansten & Kalliopuska, 1990). Furthermore, playing music together provides students with the opportunity to share their emotions when they jointly express themselves, such that each member enriches the entire group (Conejo, 2012).

Making music together is an excellent opportunity to foster cooperation between students (Sloboda, 1985). Group music demands team work, so that each member of the group has to collaborate to achieve a common goal (Jacobi, 2012). The teacher should act as a mediator to ensure that every student participates in decision making – as, for example, in selecting different interpretative options (McPherson, Davidson & Faulkner, 2012). The commitment required to make music together can reinforce the bonds between the different members of the group (Jacobi, 2012). However, in order to stimulate the development of all of these skills through music education, it would be advisable to implement appropriate teaching strategies (Campayo & Cabedo, 2017b; Chao, Mato & López, 2015). The teacher is responsible for creating an atmosphere of security that promotes respect and communication between different students (Mishima & Uno, 2004), and the student-teacher relationship can be decisive for students to consolidate their self-confidence (Gaunt, 2008).

Fostering the development of interpersonal skills in students entails maximising teachers' commitment and cooperation (Betés, 2000). To this end, it is crucial for teachers to have adequate training in emotional education in order to enable them to teach emotional skills to students effectively (Bisquerra, 2009; Campayo & Cabedo, 2017b; Edgar, 2013).

This study is part of a wider research investigation (Campayo & Cabedo, 2017; 2020) that aimed to

explore the effects of an intervention addressed to incorporate the work of the emotional skills in the music classroom, explored as a set of case studies of children who were learning to play the piano. It was developed in the context of the elementary music studies in conservatories in Spain. According to the set curricula of music studies in Spain, the elementary level is made up of four academic courses, which are attended by students who are between 8 and 12 years old. The study focussed on the third year of elementary music studies in the speciality of piano. Students who attend this course are 10 years old. The contents related to this third year are organised into four subjects – piano, ensemble, chorus and music theory. All are group subjects except piano, which is taught individually.

Music studies at conservatories in Spain are extracurricular. Consequently, students have to attend both studies, primary or secondary school and music studies, separately and in parallel. The subjects where the implementation was carried out, piano and ensemble, are given once a week, with a duration of 60 minutes each. More information regarding the music studies' curriculum at conservatories in Spain can be found on the Spanish Royal Legislative Decree 1577/2006.

This research aims to explore the role of students' interpersonal skills – specifically active listening, expressive communication and collaboration – in the process of learning music. The study analyses the facts observed throughout the implementation without the purpose of giving scientific evidence of the relationship between interpersonal and musical performance, but offering insights to reflect on the importance of considering emotional development and how this may affect children's attitudes to music making and, therefore, have a consequence on musical performance.

## Method

These case studies were developed as an action research project studying three students. Action research allows data from different cases to be compared in order to detect possible

problems and propose solutions to them (Cain, 2011). Furthermore, this methodology allowed the researcher (1) to adopt the role of teacher-researcher – author 1 carried out the implementation (given the limited opportunity for teachers in the conservatory to receive training in emotional education) and (2) to carry out individual follow-ups on the participating students' progress through the implementation.

## Study design and procedure

The action research process was based on Kemmis' model (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The action plan was initially assessed by an external colleague with experience of action research in the field of education. To gain different perspectives of the action plan through the implementation, it was also assessed by three external critical colleagues – one per term. These assessments were carried out through non-participating outward observation over the course of an entire piano lesson. Critical colleagues were provided with a template at the beginning of the lesson where they were asked to assess and comment on different aspects regarding the plan action's quality, such as appropriateness of the proposed activities or methodological strategies. On the basis of these assessments and the needs of the students that were observed during the lessons, the initial action plan was modified throughout the implementation to enhance the achievement of the objectives.

A set of activities designed specifically for students who study the third year of piano in Spanish conservatories was designed and implemented. The activities were based on the contents of piano curricula for the specific year, along with content related to emotional education. These activities were implemented in parallel to the study of the repertoire in the subjects of piano and ensemble throughout a whole academic year. The characteristics of the subjects are as follows:

*Piano:* This individual subject enables students to develop technical and performing skills. Students attend once a week for one hour per session.

*Piano ensemble:* This collective subject aims at providing students with the same level of instrumental technique – maximum four students per class – with the opportunity of playing together. Students attend for one hour a week.

The activities aimed to develop students' interpersonal skills that could reinforce musical performance – as indicated in the introduction. Their content was sequenced to ensure that they were applied systematically (Bisquerra, 2009). Table 1 shows some of the activities carried out during the implementation.

## Participants

The participants were three students who attended the third year of elementary piano studies in a Spanish conservatory. The criteria for selecting the participant students were: (1) to have similar psychosocial characteristics – all were 10 years old, attending a public school and from economically affluent families with some

educational background; (2) to be classmates in the collective subjects. Data was obtained through the students' personal information collected by the teacher (Author 1) at the beginning of the course.

For confidentiality reasons, real names have been modified. Table 2 gives some specific characteristics of the students regarding their family situation and experience in the context of musical training.

## Data collection

Three kinds of data were collected at different points throughout the implementation:

1. Interview. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted before and after the implementation. The interviews intended to get multiple perspectives on students' interpersonal skills. For this reason, participant students, their parents and their music theory teacher were interviewed. The complete transcription of each of the interviews was realised after the recording.

**Table 1: Examples of some activities carried out throughout the implementation.**

Curriculum's Musical Contents	Interpersonal Skills	Procedure
Musical expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dynamics</li> <li>• Tempo</li> <li>• Articulations</li> <li>• Phrasing</li> </ul> Improvisation	Receptive and expressive communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain the meaning of musical expression indications and their match regarding different emotions.</li> <li>2. Ask students about what they want communicate through their performance and what musical and expressive resources they need for such communication is effective.</li> <li>3. Invent a story that describes what the piece of music means.</li> <li>4. Make facial gestures that show the emotions that the piece of music expresses.</li> <li>5. Carry out free and/or guided improvisation in order to express emotions or describe a specific situation.</li> </ol>
Development of inner ear: Listen to one's own part as well as others'. Listening intended to the dynamic homogenization of articulations, phrasing, etc. Adaptation of the own performance to the whole	Active listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen to the modification of the sound from its production to its extinction.</li> <li>2. A group of students plays a fragment and the rest say what they heard. Then, in reverse order. Finally, students agree on the interpretation criteria and play it together, aware of what they do and how their choice affects the sound.</li> <li>3. Record the group performance so that everyone can listen from another perspective and see if their part is balanced with respect to the whole.</li> </ol>
Interpretation in accordance with stylistic conventions of each musical period	Cooperation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Raise and choose different interpretive options, justifying the reason for their choice. This should show respect for the proposals offered by the different classmates.</li> <li>2. Encourage students, always under teacher supervision, to help each other in interpretive and technical matters.</li> </ol>

2. Teacher's diary. In this document the teacher (Author 1) was asked to reflect in writing on the most meaningful events during the lessons (Porlán & Martín, 1991) regarding students' interpersonal skills and their influence on musical performance. This procedure was used in each session, for both the piano and ensemble lessons, throughout the entire implementation.

3. Video recordings: Throughout the implementation a recording was made each month for both piano and ensemble subjects in order to reinforce the information obtained through the teacher's diary. These recordings could provide data that may have gone unnoticed regarding meaningful events during the lessons.

Qualitative data resulting from the interview, the diary and the videos were analysed. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to code and analyse the data. The information was deductively categorised according to its

thematic nature (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Eatough & Smith 2006), using the MAXQDA 12 categorical system tool. This resource generates a matrix for the different selected categories. The initial categorisation process was independently conducted by two researchers. The default categories were selected from Bisquerra and Pérez's (2007) interpersonal skills classification. Given their importance in music performance, the categories addressed in this study were:

1. Active listening: ability to listen to the others consciously.
2. Expressive communication: capacity to establish a smooth communication and be able to listen to the others with interest and to express oneself in an understandable way, both in verbal and non-verbal communication.
3. Cooperation: capacity to perform actions on behalf of others.

Ethical considerations of confidentiality were taken into account during the research through

**Table 2: Specific characteristics of students.**

<p><i>Juan:</i> Juan is an only child whose mother works doing administrative tasks and his father as an operator. He loves talking about himself, what he likes doing, his fears, what he has done at school and so on. It is quite easy to see his open and friendly character; he makes friends easily. He is extremely curious and imaginative. It is for this reason he likes improvising, inventing songs, asking a lot of questions during the lessons and drawing. In contrast, he tends to be distracted when something is difficult for him to achieve and demands effort and constancy. The marks before the implementation show his lack of interest in musical studies. He believes he is not good at playing the piano, which aggravates his absence of motivation towards musical practice. Juan is in the last year of primary school and sees school studies as boring. Juan's main motivation to go to school is to be with his classmates, who he considers his friends.</p>	<p><i>María:</i> As the second of three children, María is collaborative at home, especially in taking care of her little brother when her parents, both doctors, are busy. She shows a great confidence in herself through the way she expresses her ideas and how she faces different difficulties that arise during the lessons. She has a great capacity for work and organisation. She is quite interested in her studies, both at school and conservatory, and as a consequence achieves high grades.</p>	<p><i>Laura:</i> Laura is the elder of two sisters and the oldest of the three participants. As a condition of her father's job as a policeman, Laura has had to change schools several times, which has fostered her development of an adaptative character. She thinks in a mature manner and tends to be very responsible. It is important for her to please her father, who is very demanding regarding her performance in studies. This contributes to Laura always being concerned to obtain good grades. It is difficult for her to put theory into practice, but she is hard-working and persevering, which ensures she achieves what she wants. However, she tends to suffer during this process instead of enjoying. She shows passion for playing the piano; she left the competitive swimming team she was part of to focus all her effort on music studies.</p>
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authorisation from the parents and the educational centre and safe storage of data from all participants.

## Results

The relationship between active listening, expressive communication and cooperation and musical performance is analysed separately on the basis of interviews, videos and teacher's diary.

### Active listening

Students developed active listening in different ways in the subjects of piano and ensemble. In the piano subject, exercises such as realising and discussing the quality of the sound or identifying if two hands sound at the same time were used to assess active listening. In this respect, Juan showed some difficulties:

*Teacher's diary (15/4/15):* I must instruct Juan about the need to concentrate on listening actively, because he usually is very focused on playing the notes correctly and does not pay attention to either the colour and the duration of the sound or whether he is playing with both hands at the same time.

In addition, Juan had difficulty in discriminating whether his performance was correct or imprecise:

*Teacher:* [Juan plays a scale, and both hands were imbalanced]. Have you listened to yourself when you played?

*Juan:* Yes.

*Teacher:* Have you heard both hands at the same time?

*Juan:* I listen to myself, but I think that both hands sound together. [Video. Piano lesson. 22/4/15].

In contrast, it was not difficult for Laura and María to actively listen and detect what they had to improve:

*Teacher:* [Laura plays a scale]. What happened?

*Laura:* Something was wrong with my left hand. It played slower than the right one. [Video. Piano lesson. 1/10/14].

*Teacher:* [María plays a musical work]. Good! How would you improve what you played?

*María:* Playing the left hand more piano [without hesitation]. [Video. Piano lesson. 27/3/15].

Active listening in ensemble lessons focused on adapting the individual performances to the group. Although at the beginning of the implementation all the students showed difficulties with this, a positive evolution was observed:

*Teacher's diary (30/4/15):* There has been an improvement in the interpretation of the duos. They listen and coordinate with each other, and have developed rapport and communication with their partner.

### Expressive communication

In general, all students showed some difficulties in communicating expressively through the instrument at the beginning of the implementation. These difficulties emerged in a different way:

(1) *María:* María showed a marked tendency to play the piano correctly and without mistakes. As a consequence, she focused too much on playing the musical text, leaving aside the expressive part of the performance. Furthermore, it was difficult for her to associate the piece of music with the emotion she had to communicate through it:

*Teacher's diary (31/10/14):* She is too used to perform controlling every aspect she does and not getting carried away by the music.

However, through the implementation, some improvement was observed:

*Teacher's diary (15/5/15):* I have noticed that, little by little, she enhances expressive communication when she performs. I think that the fact of inventing a story about the piece of music she has to play is useful for her.

(2) *Juan:* Juan's main obstacle in expressing himself through the piano was that it was difficult for him to be aware of and differentiate his own emotions. This hampered the communication of an emotion through the musical performance in a targeted way:

*Teacher's diary (5/11/14):* It's hard for Juan to be aware of his emotions. This is evident in the free improvisations: Juan always prefers to improvise based on the description of objects or situations and avoids improvising based on an emotion.

This aspect improved during the scholar year: *Teacher's diary (29/4/15)*: Although it is still difficult for him to be aware of his own emotions, when he is, he expresses them very well through his musical performance, especially when he improvises.

(3) *Laura*: Laura showed a negative attitude to her musical abilities during the whole course. This made her afraid to fail when she performed and prevented her from playing in a communicative way:

*Teacher's diary (29/4/15)*: She plays the piano without getting involved in what she does. She is only an observer, so she does not put the character and emotional implication necessary for the playing to come alive. I think this is because she is afraid of making mistakes and does not trust in her abilities at all.

However, her parents noticed an enhancement in her musical performance during the implementation:

*Laura's father*: I have noticed that she feels the music. I see her more relaxed when she is playing. Last year she was straighter and didn't move. Now she feels the music, plays the piano and feels ... [pause].

Apart from musical performance, students' expressive communication towards their peers was good from the beginning of the implementation. They were open and receptive in telling peers about their experiences during the activities:

*Teacher*: María, how did you feel when you played in public?

*María*: Before ... Nervous. And when I was playing ... I do not know ... quiet.

*Teacher*: Did you have a good time?

*María*: I did.

*Teacher*: And you, Juan?

*Juan*: Before playing, normal. Playing calm because I was doing well, and happy in the end because I played well. [Video. Ensemble lesson. 28/3/15].

## Cooperation

Cooperation was reported within the music ensemble – through teacher's diary and video

recording – and music theory lessons – through the music theory teacher interview – since group subjects are more suitable for the work of cooperation. Different predispositions to cooperation were observed depending on the circumstances and the task to be carried out. The three students tended to help each other when they needed to in non-musical circumstances:

*Teacher's diary (7/5/15)*: Laura has dropped water on the floor without realising and María and Juan have helped her to clean it.

Students' involvement in cooperation was different depending on the kind of musical activities carried out during the lessons. For example, Laura and María were more willing to collaborate than Juan during the activity of sight-reading:

*Teacher's diary (21/5/15)*: We have done sight-reading, which has to be prepared in pairs. The student who was most willing to collaborate has been María. She is quite sociable and is always willing to work in a team. I have observed this willingness in Laura as well, but I haven't in Juan.

It is possible that Juan's lack of interest in sight-reading is because it was hard for him to carry out this task, since this student showed good willingness when he had to perform music with a classmate:

*Teacher's diary (12/3/15)*: Juan and María have been able to work on aspects of the piece in class because they have studied it at home. They are learning to listen to one another, to discuss their own and the other's performance, to coordinate themselves musically, to develop rapport and communication so that partners know each others' intentions, etc. I have noted that they enjoyed doing this.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the role of active listening, expressive communication and cooperation in musical performance in three specific piano students in a Spanish conservatory. The research focuses on three interpersonal skills that, based on the literature (Jacobi, 2012; Juslin, 2008), have been considered as important for musical performance: active listening, expressive communication and cooperation.

Given that this is an exploratory study that considers the development of three particular cases, the results cannot be generalised. However, some connections between the interpersonal skills studied and musical performance have been observed in each student.

According to the literature, the results suggest that active listening is a key skill in learning music (Elliott, 1995; Haack, 1992; Swanwick, 1979) and, consequently in enhancing musical performance, both in individual and group performance. In fact, active listening was the most relevant throughout the implementation and therefore the category with the highest presence in the results.

Agreeing with Marín (2003), the results indicate that active listening could enhance individual musical performance: it was observed that when students listen actively, they are more aware of their performances and, as a consequence, they are more likely to improve their playing. In the cases analysed, Juan showed difficulties in listening actively to what he played. This had a negative effect on his musical performance, since he was not able to detect what he was doing wrong. For the student to be aware of what he was playing, he needed a person to monitor his performance and emphasise listening. Maybe this difficulty was a consequence of his tendency to be scattered and show a lack of attention in what he does. For this reason, Juan's parents decided to hire a private teacher to help him during the study. Conversely, María and Laura were used to actively listening to what they were playing. This allowed them to easily detect where they should improve, so progress in playing was faster than in the case of Juan. In his case, the activities designed to work on active listening were not enough to help Juan develop this skill when played the piano individually.

Since active listening to musical performance in group is intended to emphasise different aspects to those considered in individual musical performance (Goodman, 2002), its development seems to respond to a different process. Juan's case illustrates this statement: he managed to develop active

listening when he played in a musical ensemble. María and Laura, who did not present any problem in active listening when they played individually, did it when performing in-group. Like Juan, they improved this skill throughout the implementation. Thus, active listening could be developed in individual and ensemble lessons through conscious listening to one's own musical performance, sound quality and adapting the own part to the whole.

On the other hand, the results show that the three students initially had the tendency to perform the musical work in a mechanical way, without giving importance to the content to express through it. However, it is desirable that one of the main skills developed by a performer is expressive communication (Juslin, 2008). All students initially showed concern about making mistakes to a greater or lesser extent. The main objective of the performance was not to communicate but to play without errors. This aspect was worked upon during the implementation, and positive findings were observed. Depending on the characteristics of the students, some activities worked better than others. For example, in the cases of María and Laura, the fact of inventing a story that fitted what they had to perform helped them to connect with what they wanted to communicate. However, it was more useful for Juan to improvise based on his own emotions or to describe a situation or landscape with sounds.

The difficulties that each student faced in developing expressive communication were different. For this reason, in each case the work was structured in different ways and even the teacher had to improvise some strategies to make the activity more effective, especially in the cases of María and Laura. Strategies close to the Dalcroze methodology (Odom, 2012) were used to reflect on what the work wanted to communicate in the case of María. Some of them were improvising a dance or creating an imaginary drawing with arms in the air, but in this case, the aim was to help María to control her musical performance. Given that Laura's main obstacle to developing expressive communication

when playing was her lack of confidence in what she did, strategies aimed at reinforcing her self-esteem and confidence in her musical abilities were undertaken. It was interesting to observe that when she played with greater confidence, she enjoyed what she played. In addition, her technique became smoother and she was able to transmit an emotional message through the instrument. This had a positive consequence in the quality of her musical performance. Her enhancement was not progressive, but it was observed in a timely manner in some of the sessions during implementation. Perhaps, it would take more time for these kinds of changes to be established in a permanent manner.

The three students showed good expressive communication when they talked between them from the beginning of the implementation. In this sense, the ensemble subject was a suitable place for students to work on expressive communication with their peers. A space of trust was generated in which students could openly express how they felt regarding their musical studies and the difficulties they had. They could talk about their gifts, their fears and what they liked the most and the least. This skill seems to be connected to aspects such as self-esteem, emotional awareness, self-confidence and control, all of them intrapersonal skills.

Finally, coinciding with Kirschner and Tomasello (2010), a greater willingness to cooperate was observed in the two girls than in the boy. María and Laura were more willing to collaborate in different situations while Juan showed this only in particular circumstances. A possible explanation for this might be that Juan tends to collaborate only in cases which he feels comfortable and/or likes the activity. For example, he felt insecure regarding sight-reading and therefore was not willing to collaborate when the task had to be prepared in pairs. However, he liked making music in group activities. The results illustrate that when Juan and María worked cooperatively, they experienced a greater involvement in the task and a positive progress in their learning.

Two main limitations of this study arise as a

consequence of the intrinsic nature of emotional processes:

1. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the implementation contributed to the development of interpersonal skills and/or musical skills, since different factors could be involved in both emotional processes and development of musical performance.
2. Changes related to emotional processes may require a longer time to be detected and/or consolidated.

Despite these limitations, the results indicate that further studies should pursue research with larger and more varied sample, to perform experimental studies with control groups and to employ longitudinal methods.

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