

# Teaching the Music of the Other: Lúcia Caruso and the Castanets

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**Abstract:** The main goal of the present paper is to expose pedagogical and cultural issues involved when the music belonged to a culture is taught by an individual of another culture. The participant observation of Spanish castanets classes taught in London by a Brazilian teacher was part of this research. As a result, it was observed that there can be hierarchical conflicts between student and master when the music taught in the classroom belongs to the student's culture but not to the master's. To support this research, the author has been studying texts about interculturality, teaching the music of the other and the castanets in the Spanish culture.

**Keywords:** Music. Teaching. Spanish castanets. Interculturality.

**Ensinando a música do outro: Lúcia Caruso e as castanholas**

**Resumo:** Este trabalho tem como objetivo levantar questões pedagógicas e de conflito cultural envolvidas quando a música de um povo é ensinada por um indivíduo pertencente a outra cultura. Para este estudo, houve a participação-observante durante as aulas de castanholas espanholas oferecidas por uma professora brasileira. Os autores estudados durante o trabalho discorrem sobre interculturalidade, o ensino da música do "outro" e a castanhola na cultura espanhola. Durante a pesquisa observou-se, por exemplo, a ocorrência de conflitos hierárquicos entre estudante e mestre quando a música ensinada pertence à cultura do aluno e não à do professor.

**Palavras-chave:** Música. Ensino. Castanholas espanholas. Interculturalidade.

## 1. Introduction

In 2010 I was looking for castanets classes when I found Lúcia Caruso, a flamenco and castanets teacher in her 50s who has moved to London from her native Brazil in 2005. I was especially looking for a Spanish teacher, but Lúcia seemed to be the only castanets teacher offering classes in a weekly basis in the city. I already had an academic interest in flamenco but, as Bruno Nettl says, "in any society, the way in which music is taught and transmitted is an integral part of the musical culture" (2005: 400), I wasn't sure of how much of the Spanish musical culture I was going to pick up from taking castanets classes in London with a Brazilian teacher. But I wanted to have a familiarity with the instrument anyway, so I attended her classes for a couple of months.

I am far from suggesting that is not possible to dance well a music that is not from our own culture. However, there may be some peculiarities in the way that people learn how to

dance their music that is proper from their culture and in a sense it cannot be easily picked up by people from a different culture.

Studies of women and the body...have suggested that girls and women are taught culture-specific performances of the body...the idea of the body as a site of struggle for meaning and the construction of the body as a political entity are notions that are key to feminism analyses across intercultural communication, dance, music, and cultural studies research (LENGEL 2005: 7).

On the other hand, people that learn other people's music may miss these "culture-specific performances of the body" in a way that the non-belonging to the group could be revealed. This is just one issue about learning the music or dance of the other. My focus in the present fieldwork project is in the teaching of castanets in London by Lúcia Caruso. My aim, apart from experiencing fieldwork, is to expose some intercultural issues related to teaching other people's music.

## **2. Methodology, ethical issues and first approach**

Lúcia Caruso's classes are held at Danceworks, West End, on every Saturday from 12.30pm until 2pm. As I have decided to do my fieldwork project in Spanish castanets, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2012 I went to Danceworks to talk with Lúcia about my project. She promptly allowed me to watch her classes in February and March and in the first class she informed the students why I would be there and I reinforced it, explaining about my project.

After this first class, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February I watched a class to write down general lines about the structure of the castanets class. On the 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of February I did some ethnographic work, writing down everything that I could about the classes. On the 3<sup>th</sup> of March I brought my castanets and my flamenco shoes to attend a class. Finally On the 10<sup>th</sup> of March I did some recordings and ethnographic work as well. Apart from watching the classes, I had an interview with Lúcia on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February at hers.

At Danceworks, there is the teacher's fee and the fee paid for the space. Lúcia said I didn't need to pay her while I was doing the research, but of course I paid her for the class that I attended during my fieldwork as a student. And I paid the Danceworks fee every Saturday, as I was using the space to do my research.

## **3. Lúcia Caruso and the castanets**

According to Oxford Music Online, castanets are

percussion (strictly concussion) instruments of indefinite pitch, primarily associated with Spain. They are classified as idiophones: concussion vessel clappers. Similar small clappers were used in ancient Rome and in the Middle Ages...In Hispanic countries and wherever they are used for their original purpose of accompanying the dance, they consist of two pairs of small shallow cup-shaped pieces of special wood, usually chestnut (*castaña*). Each pair is drilled to receive an ornamental cord which is most commonly looped round the thumb... the pairs usually differ slightly in pitch: the lower is called *macho* (male) and the higher *hembra* (female). The higher-sounding pair is usually held in the right hand. The cups hang downwards and are manipulated by the fingers. (BLADES & HOLLAND: Grove Music Online).

In Spain, castanets are a traditional musical instrument used for dancers when performing some Spanish dances as sevillanas, bolero and flamenco. Lúcia Caruso holds two different classes at Danceworks: flamenco and castanets. In the castanets classes Lucia teaches what is called in Spain *clásico español* (classical Spanish dance). *clásico español* or *danza estilizada* (stylised dance) is a free choreographic composition that makes use of elements of ballet and traditional Spanish dances including flamenco. It is a hybrid style of dance generally danced by a group of women where the use of castanets is very typical. *Clásico español* uses orchestrated musical compositions basically. It is very common to make use of arrangements for orchestra by Albeniz, Lecuona, Granados and Manuel de Falla's instrumental pieces. Lúcia says that anyone can learn to dance it as something beyond any nationality. I would not take it as a statement of truth, but probably the mix of different types of traditional Spanish dances with Western classical music pushes the local to a wider space, making it easier to be assimilated by some other cultures.

But what Lúcia's castanets students are looking for by doing her class? Every Saturday around ten women ageing from 30 to 70 years old attend the castanets class. All of them do dress up for the classes in a Spanish character with very long skirts, scarf, roses in their hair, very bright colours - preferably red - and vests. All of them have their own castanets and flamenco shoes and they are from different countries: Egypt, Italy, Spain, England, Germany. I did not interview them, but I asked Lúcia whether her students have something in common. She said that they are "office girls". They work hard during the week and they attend the castanets classes to escape from their stressful work. Some of them have lived in Spain, others have Spanish partners. Their personal attraction for the castanets classes may also be related to the space created in the classroom: a space where they can expose all their vanity without being judged. Lúcia once told me that the ego plays a big role in flamenco. The students want to admire their femininity in the big mirrors. "The view of women working with musical instruments, the transformation of the body into a vocal

instrument, and the intersections of music and dance are in contention with traditional notions of femininity.” (LENGEL 2005: 9).

Lúcia Caruso started taking *clásico español* classes when she moved to Madrid in the late 1980s. She had her first contact with castanets in Rio de Janeiro City when attending a class called Spanish dance. Lúcia is “carioca da gema” as she said. It means she was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro City. She started taking ballet classes at the age of 13 in a dance school where she was introduced to Spanish dance. In 1981 she watched Carlos Saura’s film *Bodas de sangre* in the cinema. Lúcia said that while watching this film, she felt in love with flamenco and she wanted to know everything about it. From there she started looking for a flamenco teacher in Rio de Janeiro. Flamenco classes seem to not exist at this time in Brazil, at least with this name. What she found was a Brazilian teacher of Spanish dance in the Botafogo area whom introduced her to the castanets.

After some time studying castanets, an Argentinean entrepreneur discovered Lúcia and invited her to make part of his flamenco company. For six years she travelled through Brazil, performing for this company. All dancers were Brazilians and the owners were an Argentinean couple that learnt flamenco from a Spanish family. She said that was in this company that she learnt “the real thing”: what flamenco means, its *palos* and energy. After working for this dance company, Lúcia decided to live in Europe to “drink flamenco in its fountain”. In Madrid she attended *clásico español* classes and improved her knowledge in castanets. Lúcia was the only foreign student in this class and besides of not being Spanish, she never felt any kind of prejudice towards her nationality. “People assume that Brazilians know how to dance...I have cases of Spanish people coming to my classes and feeling ashamed because they don’t know how to dance flamenco and I am a Brazilian teacher...” (Lúcia Caruso intvw 06<sup>th</sup> Feb 2012). If there isn’t any prejudice really, I would say that a power struggle related to whom retains the knowledge does exist. I have witnessed an event in my fieldwork that turned my attention to it.

There was one Spanish girl attending the castanets classes. She is Lúcia’s regular student. The last class that I watched, Lúcia was teaching some steps for a new choreography. In the seventh beat of a 12/8 bar the castanets started to play an off-beat syncopation and the feet were marking the beat. In a first moment most part of the students couldn’t coordinate feet and castanets as they got disturbed by the syncope. So the Spanish student said to the teacher that she was *doing wrong*: feet should follow the castanets. She

spoke with authority that feet should come together with the castanets in the ninth and twelfth off-beats. Lúcia couldn't explain to her why it should be like she was asking them to do. Without so much hesitation, Lucia changed the footwork and did as the Spanish student suggested. Of course that change made the choreography easier, but it lost its rhythmical characteristic. And made the Brazilian Lúcia subordinates decades of knowledge in Spanish dance to the advice of a student – but it was a Spanish student. Nevertheless, the fact that Lúcia couldn't explain why it should be in the way that she was teaching wasn't helpful. She has an oral knowledge in Spanish castanets learnt from decades of practice and learning. By experience she knew how she should combine footwork and castanets in that excerpt, but she didn't know how to explain it to her students.

Lúcia uses to mention that playing castanets is a challenge. Arms, neck, footwork, castanet. The level of independence that the dancer needs to achieve between different parts of the body is highly increased by the addition of castanets.

Castagnettes des danseuses espagnoles ou musulmanes, frappelements de mains de leurs auditoires, par ces deux faits symétriques nous voyons s'ajouter au rythme du corps, à la musique du corps dansant un « accompagnement » qui peut être plus ou moins indépendant de ce corps, de ce rythme. Que cette indépendance s'établisse entre les parties d'un même corps ou entre celui-ci et le chœur formé par l'auditoire, la musique acquiert identiquement de nouvelles dimensions. (SCHAEFFNER 1968:57).

Attending the castanets classes as a student I could experience how difficult it is not just as a consequence of the independence between the rhythm of what you are playing and the footsteps, but because of the coordination of all body movements. From watching videos of Spaniards dancing with castanets and from Lúcia Caruso's classes I noticed that basically what is played by the dancer follows what is happening in the guitar or in the orchestra: rhythm, dynamics, arpeggios, articulation. And the footwork is mainly linked to the bit and the *palo*. In flamenco castanets, the dancer follows the guitar with the castanets, but with much more musical freedom. In *clásico español* the dancer plays almost exactly the rhythmic line played by the orchestra. In this case, the castanets are more like a dancer's accessory to embellish his performance. I would not agree with Schaeffner when he says below that footwork and castanets compete between them - at least not in the classical Spanish dance, neither that the footwork could be the imitation of what is played by the castanets, as they have different tasks in the performance.

Ces détails montrent — et les castagnettes d'Espagne en témoigneraient tout autant — qu'un jeu instrumental s'exerce là presque à l'état pur, bien que mêlé à la danse. Très simple d'aspect, la castagnette est un instrument évolué, dont le maniement parfois subtil pourrait se passer de la danse. Du moins cette dernière ignore-t-elle de pareilles nuances d'intensité, de pareilles divisions de rythme, — exception faite du zapaleado, de la danse de « claquettes » où le battement étonnamment rapide et

expressif des pieds rivalise avec celui des castagnettes et n'en est peut-être que l'imitation. (SCHAEFFNER 1968:58).

Coming back to Lúcia and the castanets, her classes at Danceworks have a standard structure with some occasional variation: in the beginning of the class the students – positioned in front of the mirror and with castanets already on hand – do some stretching exercises. The body movements are very gentle and elegant, similar to those of the dance. After stretching, Lúcia starts some arm movements while playing the castanets: in front of the chest, with open arms, above the head, in the back and mixing movements. Other body movements are added during the castanets exercises: neck, walking, trunk rotation.

Memorisation during the classes is very important, not only because of the choreography but also because of the castanets exercises. The students need to memorise the sequences and they do it through the repetition of the same exercise again and again. The knowledge is orally transmitted with the support of the following conventional use of syllables to determine sound elements: *ta* (sound produced by the middle finger of left hand), *pi* (sound produced by the middle finger of right hand), *ca-rre-ti-lla* (a sequence of four sounds produced by the little, ring, middle and index fingers respectively), *riá* [*carretilla* played very fast (*ri*) followed by *ta* (á)], *pan* or *tian* (*ta* and *pi* played together) and *posticeo* (clash of castanets). For example, one of the exercises was *pi ta pi, ta pi ta, pi ta pi, ta pi ta, ...* and so on. A comma means a rest. Lúcia usually practices with her students an average of ten castanets exercises per class, making use of some of them in their choreography in the end of the class. During her class, although English is the main language she also makes use of Spanish words, either when counting the beats or to express a feeling to push the class up.

In my ethnographic work participant observation happened naturally. Besides of experiencing a class as a student, several times Lúcia asked me to help her in the class, from controlling the volume of sound in the stereo, marking the beat during some exercises to explaining to the students some musical terms used in Western classical music.

#### **4. Conclusion**

After watching, recording and doing ethnographic writings in castanets classes I thought that would be easy to write down about what I have done in my fieldwork. However, I had too much material and not enough space, besides the fact that my subject involves immigration, interculturality, genre, dance and music, and I didn't know where to start from.

Lots of data from my interview are not here and I can say that my biggest difficulty was related to which information should I select. So I tried to focus in intercultural issues and in the ethnographic description of the classes. Other difficult point is the lack of academic writings about castanets and Spanish dances in general. In relation to the fieldwork itself, the fact that Lúcia and I are from the same country made me feel very comfortable with the ethnographic work, considering of feeling inhibited sometimes, for example when I was watching the classes and she suddenly turned to me with questions of musical nature, expecting from me an explanation to the whole class.

Finally, to finish it I want to comment Patricia Campbell when she says that “for a maximal effectiveness...oral/aural technique requires a teacher who is either born and bred or (if nonnative) intensively trained in the musical tradition, and who is committed to transmitting it live-and-in-person to the students” (2004:10). A teacher intensively trained in someone’s musical tradition as Lúcia Caruso will produce something different from a person born in the tradition, perhaps not in the technique, but I would say in the style. In fact, what matters for Lúcia’s students is not how close they can get to Spanish music/dance culture through her. London is a wide laboratory for intercultural communication. Lúcia Caruso’s castanets classes are just a sampling of what happens in the city: students from different nationalities learning Spanish musical tradition taught by a Brazilian teacher. However, students and teacher have an intersection point: they are all women. The castanets classes offer elegance and strength in the movements, a very femininely and extravagant dress up element and the charm and power of playing a musical instrument while dancing. A woman’s perfect space to give herself a break from her new roles played in a contemporary society, without losing control.

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