

Searching for intercultural music experiences within a Brazilian children choir

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Abstract: This article discusses the development of intercultural music experiences among the children and student-teachers of a Brazilian children choir. Using the ideas of Narrative Inquiry, the researchers have gathered information and observations that demonstrate strategies about how to promote the increase of interculturality, by embracing a diverse repertoire and different music learning processes and practices, while considering the songs as starting points for dialogue and interaction among different cultures, as well as exploring their commonalities and differences.

Keywords: Interculturality. Children Choir. Diversity. Music Learning.

Procurando experiências musicais interculturais em um coral infantil brasileiro

Resumo: Este artigo discute o desenvolvimento de experiências musicais interculturais entre crianças e monitores de um coral infantil brasileiro. Utilizando ideias da Pesquisa Narrativa, os autores reuniram informações e observações que demonstram estratégias sobre como promover o aumento da interculturalidade, abrangendo um repertório inteiramente diverso e diferentes processos e práticas musicais, considerando as canções como pontos de partida para diálogo e interação entre culturas diferentes, assim como explorando seus traços comuns e suas diferenças.

Palavras-chave: Interculturalidade. Coral Infantil. Diversidade. Aprendizado Musical.

1. Introduction

Created in 2015, UFRN's Children Choir is a project spearheaded by a Chinese-Canadian professor teaching at a Brazilian university, in collaboration with student-teachers from its music education program. Its main objectives are two-folded: to develop the researchers' and participants' intercultural sensitivity and competence (CUSHNER & MAHON, 2009) and to provide a laboratory for music education students to engage in a children choir within this intercultural framework, in order to assess how it can be used to enhance these students' learning and contribute to their future careers. Our goals endeavor to move children and student-teachers in a continuum that goes from one's own monolithic cultural system to the acceptance of the existence of multiple perspectives and the legitimacy of other cultures, and, finally, to the ability of consciously and fluidly shifting perspectives and engaging in interdependent relationships originating from the intercultural encounters (KING & MAGOLDA, 2005).

Our curriculum and learning processes intend to overcome the traps of what Westerlund and Karlsen (2017) named “professional ocularcentrism” – “a one-sided way of understanding diversity that has prevented music educators to seeing our biases” (p. 78). As part of our project, we aim to comprehend songs as starting points for identities to develop from their encounters with cultural artifacts. We avoid a mere token multiculturalism by emphasizing the meanings – both literal and hidden – behind the songs, and using images, stories, videos and dialogues in order to contextualize them. Whenever possible, cultural-bearers from each song's region share their experiences with the choir, and help the children better connect with songs. Our project's ultimate goal is for the choir members to gradually partake in Coon's (2000) ideal of “pan-humanism”, in which one perceives that people from multiple origins and beliefs are actually “all on him or her team” (p. 86).

Our methodology uses Narrative Inquiry (CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2000) to understand the data accumulated through video-recordings, observations, journals, dialogues (both online and face-to-face), interviews and spontaneous testimonies. We have observed both the children's extraordinary learning ability, as well as their capacity to be emotionally affected by songs from multiple origins, which have become part of their (and their family's) daily musical fabric. As an outreach community project, the choir's high retention rate, and positive appraisal from the parents also demonstrate that its work has been appreciated and valued by its members.

2. Critical multiculturalism and interculturality

In a globe filled with growing religious conflicts and increasingly disfranchised populations, the advocacy for critical multiculturalism and interculturality in the society is an urgent need that should be addressed internationally by governments and institutions around the world. As Queiroz (2017) affirms, to be able “to see, hear, perceive, recognize, respect and interact with the other (...) enable us, even if we are linked to the networks of our cultures, to be able to perceive, understand and, above all, interact with the culture and the uniqueness of the other” (p. 99, our translation).

Music education is uniquely poised to help achieve this noble goal, but it depends on how it is conducted. As Bowman (2018) argues, teaching music “can open minds, but it can also close them” (p. 167). He emphasizes that music making is a fluid endeavor that serves human social needs in this everchanging 21st century; however, one of imperatives to achieve this is to incorporate truly diverse musical practices into one's teaching context. The process of making an intercultural curriculum for a children choir, while also developing a

practice-based university curriculum for pre-service teachers acquiring intercultural competence, is one possible answer to this necessity.

Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) propose a categorization of five multicultural positions: conservative, liberal, pluralist, left-essentialist, and critical multiculturalism. The first type simply expects minorities to assimilate into the mainstream culture, which is considered superior. Both liberal and pluralist multiculturalism accept a greater cultural diversity, but still under a hegemonic framework, their difference being that the former kind emphasizes the commonalities between different peoples, while the latter focuses on their differences, but only as a kind of “cultural tourism” that perceives “non-whiteness as lesser, deviant and pathological – but concurrently more interesting, more exotic, more natural, and, therefore, more commodifiable than the ‘white bread’ norm” (p. 18). The fourth type, left-essentialist multiculturalism, in an attempt to overcome long-lasting oppression, “merely stands the traditional canon on its head, producing a dominant-culture-is-bad marginalized-culture-is-good inverse dualism” (p. 20-21). It does that by essentializing its own condition, i.e., by choosing some specific characteristic(s) as its defining feature(s), thus creating an over-simplification that ignores individual differences within its own group, and that mimics similar generalizations traditionally done by majority groups in their depiction of Otherness. Critical multiculturalism, on its turn, is clearly related to the theory of critical pedagogy, which advocates the power of education to be a transformative experience, and also emphasizes the importance of bringing the students’ world into the classroom, “recogniz[ing] and incorporat[ing] the differing cultural knowledges that children bring with them to school” (MAY, 1999, p. 32).

Whereas the term multiculturalism might “be limited to the recognition of the multiplicity of cultures, without promoting any kind of relationship between them”, interculturality stands for an active search for dialogue and interactions, towards the “composition of a multifaceted mosaic of knowledge and shared knowledge” (QUEIROZ, 2017, p. 102-103). It stands for the promotion of integration, “without the establishment of hierarchies and dominations of one over the other”. Whereas most choirs introduce foreign songs to give a multicultural color to their repertoire, what distinguishes our group is that Portuguese and Brazilian language is not more prominent than any of the other languages. We create a boot camp of cultural equality. The goal for an intercultural education is to teach tolerance, open-mindedness, and empathy; to provide an ethical ability that allows people to “recognize themselves in others, and recognize others within themselves” (BRADLEY, 2006,

p. 17). An important implication to music education is the fact that music (and the arts in general) are “powerful agents for developing social imagination” (BAXTER, 2007, p. 268).

Intercultural musical competence is thus fostered by active engagement and dialogue with different musics from multiple origins, acknowledging “the complexity of locations, identities and modes of expression in a global world” (BURNARD *et al.*, 2018, p. 229). It is important to recognize that often people might react to an intercultural attempt with “an unwelcoming gesture”, with an initial resistance, which should simply entice more dialogue and the creation of more bridges (ANTTILA, 2016, p. 306).

3. Reflections about the choir

As a microcosm of our choir’s activities during the past years, in this article we will focus on observations gathered during the 2nd semester of 2018, in which the children learned and performed 8 songs in 8 different languages from 8 different countries: Brazil, United States, Italy, France, Germany, Japan, China, and Mozambique. The first step we always undertake is to provide a thorough translation of each song, both word-by-word and by giving a general idea of its main themes. We also attempt to give the children a glimpse into the culture behind each song, often with visual aids being projected in the screen. We bring guests as often as possible from each country to talk about the songs, and to pronounce their texts. When this is not possible, we search for culture-bearers who can do this and send us recordings by email or phone, which we then play for the children.

Although we cannot generalize any of the comments below to all children, and we will only be able to present a handful of observations in this article, we find that they are representative of part of what we have experienced in our research, and thus warrant discussion. A common reaction among some children is an initial difficulty and reluctance when we present them with a newly introduced foreign song. One of our student-teachers noticed their “surprise when they get in touch for the first time with a new element that is different from what he or she is used to listen and experience. We could notice that facial and body expressions, especially of younger children, seemed to show emotional insecurity and cognitive immaturity when faced with new intercultural songs”. An interesting strategy to get around this situation is to use children's imagination and creativity through games and storytelling about the repertoire we are teaching (using, if possible, legends, myths, historical and/or cultural facts about the songs and their composers). However, as the semester progressed, we could feel this initial reluctance melting away, and the development of the

children's intercultural abilities, according to this student-teacher, was both “fun and liberating”.

Since the beginning of the semester, one child asked us many times when we would sing a song in Japanese. When we asked her why she had this wish, she mentioned that one of her friends liked Japanese *animes*, so we decided to include the song “*Kimi o Nosete*” (Carrying You), from the film “Castle in the Sky”, specifically for her. This turned out to be one of their favorite songs, despite its long lyrics, which took a while for them to memorize. The effect on the parents was no less important. At the final concert, many parents came to talk to us about how the Japanese song in particular moved them to tears. One parent sent us an email later saying, tongue-in-cheek, that he “forbade his daughter to sing this song at home, because [he] cannot hold back the tears”, and that he left the concert literally shaking.

Another student-teacher mentioned that “we often need to undergo a trial-and-error process, molding gradually our teaching strategies to find what we perceive to work best for our students”. Therefore, sometimes we could notice that the students were not enjoying a particular song as much as others, so we had to adjust our teaching in order to bring them to an understanding of that song's reality. One method whose efficacy we have experience repeated times is how it is easier for the children to approach the rhythm of the songs first, especially using body parts to feel it, before trying to add the lyrics, which should be completely digested and understood by then. Another strategy is to also balance in the rehearsal songs that they have already absorbed well and those new ones that they still do not know, not overwhelming their capacity for the new.

The unity and friendship developed among the children in the choir is evident. One of the most heartwarming scenes that we often witness is when children help each other to practice the songs together before the rehearsals. One common observation is about how certain children have developed dramatically over the years. A few children were extremely shy at first, and they blossomed through singing in the choir. Talking to them, we noticed that the ability to sing in different languages was paramount in giving them this extra confidence; they were proud to share with their friends in school, for instance, about their new songs in foreign languages that they were learning. In relation to the development of the student-teachers throughout their degrees, one student-teacher argued that the Music Education curriculum at our university is still too rigid (“*engessado*”) and too limited on Western music (Classical and pop), and that mandatory subjects do not include enough *world musics*.

Interculturality “emphasizes the processes and interactions between groups in relation to each other, as well as to the subject that acts and therefore interacts” (MIETTINEN

et al., 2018, p. 67). Therefore, the fact that the choir conductor is a visible minority herself is already a fact that shakes children out of their comfort zone and makes them step in an intercultural zone, especially since they live in a city that it is not very diverse, and are not used to talking to ‘foreigners’. It is interesting to observe that our choir’s intercultural philosophy has also served to attract children of immigrants; out of 45 members in 2018, the choir had 4 children of immigrants. Therefore, 8,9% of the total number of children, whereas Brazil is estimated to have only 0,4% of immigrants in its population, a far cry from the United States’ 12,3% or Canada’s 20,6%.¹ The mother of one of these children mentioned to us that our choir itself made her move to Brazil worthwhile, which felt like a validation of interculturality in a society that is little diverse. In an effort to help them partake their culture with the other, the choir will be learning in 2019 songs that these children and their parents haven selected from the cultures.

4. Final remarks

This article has provided a brief description of our ideals and observations in relation to our children choir and its explicit intercultural philosophy. To lead a group of children from different contexts and ages to sing in two or three voices and, in addition, in multiple languages is a taxing but rewarding activity. We have observed oftentimes the children’s potential in terms of memory, language acquisition, active listening and singing ability. Our work thus demonstrates that music educators need not be afraid of pushing their students’ boundaries, or of overwhelming them, when aiming to expand their intercultural competence.

For future research from this outcome, we intend to assess in a more specific way the learning process of the children, as well as undertake a longitudinal analysis of this process. Meanwhile, as a consequence of this project, we need to further study how the student-teachers develop their intercultural capabilities as music educators throughout their studies, and how, in their future careers, they may be able to teach within this kind of intercultural framework of music that they have experienced in our choir.

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Notas

¹ Information found in the links <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm> and <https://www.uol/noticias/especiais/imigrantes-brasil-venezuelanos-refugiados-media-mundial.htm#tematico-1>