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Pedagogies of Song: Music as/in Adult Education

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Abstract

We argue for music's power in promoting adult learning about democracy and social justice. Drawing from the literature and our own experiences conducting and studying music, we focus on community choirs to illustrate how the unique properties and experience of music can awaken personal creativity, reclaim voices, encourage wide and inclusive participation, and provoke radical visions of an alternate world. We describe examples of music used as a pedagogy for community building and critical education. Then we link these to social justice, examining the relation of music and particularly community choirs to activism and solidarity learning. We conclude with recommendations for educators interested in exploring musical expression and participation with learners.

Introduction

While arts-based approaches to research and practice have finally started to receive the serious recognition they deserve in adult education literature (e.g. see Butterwick & Dawson, 2006), we remain concerned that music may be overlooked. Most emphasis seems to be placed on the visual and spoken expressive arts: from photography, graffiti, and quilting to poetry and drama. Particular in educational contexts, songs may be reduced to lyrics, with focus on the meaning conveyed in the text. Musical expression and participation itself, outside the creative act of composition, can easily be misunderstood as a technical process of

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mere reproduction with little inherent possibility for learning, inquiry, and political activism.

In this article we seek to reclaim the importance of music in cultural animation and learning connected to social justice. Our focus is on song and processes of singing, particularly in groups such as community choirs. Singing is one of the more inclusive forms of musical participation, requiring no special equipment, environment, or able-ness (deaf choirs are common). It is holistic in practice, uniting breath, vibration, language and synchronous connection with others. Some adult educators have come to recognize music as a valid way of knowing (Kaltoft, 1999), and music has been used to enhance learning in formal, informal and nonformal settings (Bell, 2004). Many educators acknowledge the powerful role of song in social justice histories, such as the African-American civil rights movement and the North American labor movement. Internationally and historically, song has established for itself a core role in building solidarity, shaping rhythms for collective activity, mobilizing social resistance, and actually energizing activist movements. This is in addition to the unique processes of sharing cultural, political and social information that occurs through participation in music. Holmquist (1995), for example illustrates how singing creates an insider language, a sense of musical community, and peak musical moments. Bell (2004) concludes, from wide studies of adult singing, that such musical participation is significantly linked with community solidarity, intellectual stimulation and lifelong learning—as well as musical literacy itself.

We are both musicians as well as adult educators. Author 1 began her working life as a musician, conducting vocal groups and directing musical shows. Author 2 is a musicologist and vocalist who has conducted ensembles and used music therapeutically with hospice patients. In developing our argument, we draw from examples of community choirs (the Gettin' Higher choir in British Columbia; the *Notres Dame de Bananes* labor choir in Alberta; the *Trots Allt* choir in Sweden; the Syracuse Community Choir in New York; and Crescendo-Tampa Bay's Women's Chorus, in Florida). We also draw on choral literature and our respective experiences facilitating vocal groups and studying song. Couched in a critical context, we explore how song is a way of knowing and learning, and the relational dynamics of musical participation, called "ensemble." Then we link these to social justice, examining the relationship of music, and particularly community choirs

to activism and solidarity learning. We conclude with recommendations for educators interested in exploring musical expression and participation with learners.

Song as a Way of Knowing and Learning

Song is a familiar and accessible medium that can transcend boundaries and communicate across communities. It is also one of the oldest forms of musical communication in everything from religious practices to entertainment to education. Singing is more than just the physical, vocal production of sounds that carry pitches through the air; it is an integration of emotion, thought, spirituality and physicality that binds human voices in a shared aural space. But what is it that makes song such a powerful force across cultures and times?

One area of research has focused on the body's physiological response to singing and song. Couched in scientific and medical terminology, the focus is often on the production of sound (i.e.: body mechanics, breathing, tone modification, auditory response, etc), and is discussed in terms of vibration, pitch, frequency and cardiophysio response. Researchers have measured music's physical effects (Bartlett, 1996; Gomez & Danuser, 2004; Nyklicek, Thayer, & Van Doornen, 1997). Heart and respiratory rates correlate directly to the arousal level of the music; simply, music with faster tempo, louder volume, driving rhythms and dramatic changes resulted in higher heart and respiratory rates, while more restive, sedate pieces revealed the opposite. In fact, Gomez and Danuser (2004) found that the level of human skin conductance was linked with the arousal level of the music; the higher the arousal level of the music the higher the skin conductance level, creating sensations of chills or hair standing on end. Classical Greek thought held that certain sounds or pitches could elicit specific emotions or moral behaviors. Today, studies examine the impact of physiology, imagery and the subsequent emotional response. Nyklicek et al. (1997) showed that music is capable of inducing a wide variety of affective and bodily reactions. Increased tempo (musical speed) for example, tends to be associated with joy or agitation and can produce increased heart rate and breath flow. Imagery in music also plays a role, intensifying both emotional and physiological responses (Nyklicek et al., 1997). Thus, song, with its embedded musical and textual images offers a potentially powerful emotional and physical stimulant for both performers and audiences alike.

Song also has the capacity to reach across cultural boundaries and articulate the human experience. Juslin and Laukka (2003) studied the accuracy of the transmission of emotion (via vocal expression and musical performance) across cultures and found a high level of cross-cultural congruence. Musical structure is also integral to its communication, embedding cultural history and emotion through elements such as rhythm and tempo, shape of the melody line(s), harmonic voicing, contrasting timbres and textures, as well as the words. For example, increasing volume dynamics as the melody line ascends is a common way to build intensity and emphasis, climaxing where the melody peaks. Or rhythm can echo heartbeats and conjure collective memory: triplet rhythms in gay dances, hard-driving lightning syncopation in “hot” jazz, or striding 4-beat tempos in work songs.

Communication through musical structure ultimately is about who is included in the audience as well as in the choir. McCarthy (1999) emphasizes the value of live performance, indicating its ability to illuminate shared ideals and commitments. Audience participation (i.e. singing, dancing, and clapping), walking among the audience, mixing voice parts, and converging around important community issues are just some of the ways in which choirs build unity.

Song in Ensemble

For many, music is viewed as an esoteric art. Its language is unfamiliar, and its performers are believed to require special talent and years of study. Sadly, many adults have decided (or have been told) that they “cannot sing” and they have accordingly silenced their own voices. Choral music, like many forms of so-called classical music, is historically associated with hushed concert halls or churches and a repertoire that may be criticized for reproducing middle class values and cultural tastes. In contrast, community choirs usually strive to bring music to community gatherings, and to present music that amplifies or stimulates listener engagement in issues that challenge the status quo. Musical participation offers the opportunity to reclaim one’s voice in a political act of resistance to the mass production of pleasantly homogenous popular music. The community choir movement has set out to help adults rediscover joy and confidence in singing and the personal sense of empowerment that one’s own voice is valuable. These choirs often have a social justice itinerary, and tend to be based on solidarity, trust, and collective responsibility (Bogdan 1995, Holmquist 1995).

One example is the Gettin' Higher Choir in Victoria, British Columbia, which "seeks to re-integrate singing into the daily routines of life" (Shivon, 2005, ¶ 4). Started in 1997, the group now numbers about 250 voices and is led by Shivon Robinsong and Denis Donnelly. No auditions are used, and no ability is required to read music or produce song in a particular way. In fact, Robinsong particularly welcomes those who think they cannot hold a tune, and Donnelly declares one of the "Rules for Ensemble Singing" to be "a wrong note sung with authority is an interpretation" (Donnelly, 2005, p.1). Singers learn to become comfortable with the sound of their own voices through humming together, experimenting with different notes and combinations, playing with volume and color, and listening and throwing back sounds. Tunes and harmony can be learned through this sort of echoing known as call-and-response style. In one workshop led by Robinsong and Donnelly, we watched as over 300 people who had never before sung together (many were firmly convinced of their non-singer status and had to be coaxed to make any sound at all) sing rich harmonies and complex syncopated rhythms within 30 minutes. Participants were smiling; singing out loud with no visible self-consciousness. Later, some remarked on how "good" it felt to sing. They said they felt energized and alert, likely not just from the increased oxygen and neural blood flow from the expansive breathing, but also from the intense imaginative concentration and aural stimulation. The leaders continued to emphasize listening to the individual sounds of the voices on either side, to the rich overall vocal blends, and to one's own voice as a unique contribution to that blend. It is hard to describe the sensation of taking part in filling a large space with big, warm harmonies—moving as one with the voices of all those surrounding you, utterly immersed in the energy and expression of the collective as it climbs vocal lines and senses tempo changes together. This is the magical experience of ensemble, and it is powerful learning about community. As Robinsong declares, "singing is our birthright; an essential activity for personal and community health and vitality" (Shivon, 2005, ¶ 1).

Song in Social Justice Learning

Clearly the experience of music as a holistic way of learning that is uniquely embodied and emotional is well-established, despite its relative marginalization in mainstream adult education debates. It is interesting to speculate why music may not be so well recognized in promoting social

justice as other arts by adult education research and theory. Perhaps the actual content of music is difficult to analyze—few non-musicians understand its vocabulary and logic sufficiently to theorize its potential interrelation with research, learning or social justice. In addition, instrumental music does not position itself directly as commentary, and concert-style songs (opera, *lieder*) rarely explicitly address social justice themes. This leaves popular songs, which are to concert music what quilts are to painting, in the debates about what constitutes art (Felshin, 1995). Yet most will acknowledge the powerful role in historical social movements of popular protest anthems such as “Blowin’ in the Wind” or “We Shall Overcome” and classical musical activists such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. More recently we can hear social justice musicians such as anti-globalization singer Stephen Smith, anti-racism hip hop artist Boots Riley, and country musician James McMurtry singing to protest the Iraq war, homelessness and other social problems. In Canada, rap artists K’Nan and K-Os sing of the destruction of Somali, and indigenous musicians are using music to revive their own culture and language.¹

Just what such songs lend to social justice movements and critical social learning in general is hard to pin down. Some like Chang (2000), argue that the social importance of protest music has been muted in recent decades, partly because it bears little effect on policy change. Arguably more so than visual art forms, the commodified construction and distribution of popular music has become increasingly complex, so that these songs cannot be analyzed separately from their economic production and manipulation by powerful agendas in mass media. Despite all of this, music undeniably stirs emotion and enables a collective expression; it can bind individuals, mobilize identification, and stir the emotional energy that catalyses and sustains action. Krajnc (2000) is among those who maintain that 1960s songs helped spread progressive ideas into mass culture and drew attention to the Vietnam War, women’s issues, and the nuclear debate. She also shows that the next wave of music in social justice was mass events such as the 1980s Live-Aid/Band-Aid concerts with large reach to otherwise inattentive public audiences through mass communication media. Certainly Bob Geldof’s 2005 success focusing media coverage on huge Live-Aid concerts to concentrate public attention again on Africa’s oppression and famine testifies to the powerful potential of music amplified through mass media to push a message. Krajnc (2000) argues that for progressive social learning that has real impact on civil society, arts must be teamed

with the “media mind-bomb,” which has agenda-setting power and ability to change world-views and behavior. But she adds, in her third dimension of an arts-infused social learning model, that art must also be generated in opportunities for people’s personal participation if they are to be truly mobilized to feel, think, and act differently. Overall, Krajnc claims, music is under-appreciated in its critical roles which link culture and learning for social change.

Yet music shares with other arts the unique contributions to learning that Butterwick and Dawson (2006) claim are a key to democracy. Arts awaken personal creativity, encourage wide and inclusive participation, and provoke radical visions of an alternate world. Arts mobilize ordinary people to create for their community a voice, collective identity, and development (Butterwick and Dawson, 2006). Clearly music offers these possibilities for new visions, expanded voices and democratic participation. Community choirs, our focus in this article, include groups such as the Gettin’ Higher Choir and members of the peace choir movement in Canada such as Spirit’s Call Choir in Manitoba, as well as, in the US, Mystic Chorale, Rainbow Chorus, One Voice, Concord Choirs, Sacred Fire, and Laughing Spirit, the Sheffield Socialist Choir in England, and *Trots Allt* in Sweden. All share a commitment to inclusion, community building, and social change. These radical community choirs can be viewed as collectives whose members learn solidarity through the experience of writing and singing social justice music, and teach others by sharing their music personally. The Syracuse Community Choir in rural New York was begun in 1985 to sing songs of peace and social justice at community events such as Earth Day, AIDS Survivor Benefit, and International Women’s Day. Its special focus is inclusion, integrating persons with physical and developmental disabilities as well as members mixing among ethnic and class groups. Its goal is full and inclusive participation for all. According to the director, the important learning is working through all the issues related to diversity. Building inclusive community is difficult, uncomfortable and continuous work:

The choir is about singing and it is about community. The two things go together. By being together and creating a sense of doing something together community begins to form. It is also what the audience feels when it is with us--community. We do a lot of community building in our concerts. Sing alongs and other stuff. We sing about oppression. (Bogdan, 2005, ¶ 33).

In Canada, an example is the Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto, a 70-voice, multicultural, non-audition choir formed in 1999 that describes itself as promoting social justice and community through music. It declares its aim as presenting “songs that reflect the real lives of ordinary people” and speak to the “full cup of life—birth, death, joy, sorrow, struggle, triumph, work, play, love, community, celebration” (Common Thread, 2005, ¶ 2). The emphasis here is less on political change and more on cultural diversity reflected in its musical content and membership. One of their songs is “Torn Screen Door” by David Francey (2005, ¶ 6) depicting the hardship of Canadian farmers:

Had a life that they tried to save/ But the banks took it all away
 Hung a sign on a torn screen door/ Nobody lives here no more
 They worked their fingers/ To the bone / Nothing left /
 They can call their own...

A more radical and informal group in Edmonton Alberta, the *Notre Dame des Bananes* choir has been performing songs of peace, freedom, and equality since its beginnings in the early 1980s. Its website declares that “members are from diverse backgrounds and include different political philosophies-- communist, anarchist, social democrat, green, but all are firmly committed to struggles against a rapacious capitalism” (Notres Dames, 2005, ¶ 1). Billing itself as the only left-wing, radical choir in Alberta, *Notre Dame des Bananes* sings on picket lines, at political rallies and community celebrations such as organized labor’s May Week. Its songs are intended to explicitly name forces of oppression and to help mobilize solidarity among listeners—to challenge corporate power, government inaction on social issues, and human rights abuses. Some are classic labor songs found by choir members, and others are written by individual or group members.

Trots Allt is an explicitly radical Swedish choral group that originated in 1968 among a group of university students concerned about impending cuts to the social welfare system. This was a period when many social justice choirs emerged in Sweden, and student protests were being staged across Europe initiated by the May uprising in Paris. While many of these radical choirs in Sweden eventually declined, *Trots Allt* has sung continuously over the past 35 years, today numbering about 25 members – at least 10 of whom have been with the group since its origins -- singing in four parts. The group’s name *Trots Allt* (“in spite of everything”) is a play on words, and the choir continues to write its own

lyrics to well-known songs that “spite” policies and conditions it wishes to protest. Anna Holmgren, one of *Trots Allt’s* long-term members, explains that the group meets weekly in members’ homes. Together the members explore social-political issues and then play with music. The choir presents its songs without charge for political meetings, for labor gatherings, and for the community (personal communication, August 19, 2005). During the referendum for the European Union for example, *Trots Allt* toured meetings singing its satirical lyrics to the popular song “Embrace Me” to drum up anti-EU sentiment:

Let me in, you are my hope and my everything,
I want to rest in your arms, your embrace makes me so beautiful and rich. Towards a united future the road is safe, I am blindly in love...” (Holmgren, 2005)

The group deliberately tries to raise critical awareness and provoke community attention to social problems. These range from increased multi-national ownership and unemployment to the treatment of refugees in Sweden. Satire is their trademark. Here are their lyrics to *Vem du än är* (“Whoever you are” – English translation by Anna Holmgren), about the hardships of new immigrants:

Whoever you are, you can be happy you made it,
Here you may live in barracks, in the country(side) -
you get a quick lesson in our language, you get orders not to start a fight.
So hear us / you should be grateful you could cross the border.
Maybe you will make it in the competition/ the market in the world is now in rule /
It is good at “*people-taming*” . . . (Holmgren, 2005).

In each of these examples, musical participation emphasizes slightly different purposes of social justice. In the Syracuse Community Choir, the meaning of diversity in community is continually foregrounded through deliberate inclusion of differently-abled members who might normally be excluded from a performing choir. The choral requirement of close listening to one another and achieving collective harmony demands an intimacy that forces people to confront and work through tensions of difference at very personal levels. The Common Thread Community Chorus similarly emphasizes community-building in

the actual experience of choral participation, through its multi-ethnic membership and its songs focusing on the everyday stories of people's lives within social structural inequities. *Notres Dame des Bananes* and *Trots Allt* focus more on provocation of the external community through their own musical creations presenting radical social critiques.

But in all four choirs, critical education occurs both internally and externally, through both the singing process and the content of songs for social justice. The singers, whether they actually create the songs or not, *learn* in the very process of participating together to plumb the spirit of a song's message, then develop musical expression that engages listeners. In this engagement, listeners *learn* through an immersion in sound that moves emotions of outrage and longing, rouses critical awareness at deep levels of being, and opens imaginations to new possibilities.

Recommendations for Adult Educators

Song provides adult education with an effective pedagogical medium, one that does not require years of training or special aptitude. Instead, it calls for educators to approach their content area with a critical eye and a keen understanding of the intricacies of social relationships. Song has been proven to enhance the educational experience of many adult learners, regardless of format or mode. Adult educators could incorporate music into their educational activities in four ways: subservient integration; co-equal cognitive integration style; affective style of integration; and social integration (Bresler as cited in Mark, 2002). Each method creates the opportunity for group discussion and allows for new insight about and/or reinforcement of the learning objective.

By far, the most common educational use of music is subservient integration, or the directly referential use of music. Instructors arrange learners' engagement in music, presenting stories or commentary extending the issue under study. Learners need encouragement to develop personal and critical responses, to analyse their own and appreciate others' responses, and to reflect on not just the song's text but its musical dimensions contributing to its communicative power.

Another pedagogical approach is what some musicians call the co-equal cognitive integration style. This involves both the teacher and the students analyzing the relationship of the music to the topic. This moves the learners beyond the literal word to what is implied or represented by musical content, examining the effect of melody, rhythm, and of

instrumentation on the message. Popular songs and music scores in film clips can be analyzed for their intended and actual emotional effects. Further, these sometimes invoke ironic commentary or problematic representations. The film music for *Dangerous Minds* starring Michelle Pfeiffer, for example, can be critically analyzed for creating cultural hierarchies and racist stereotypes. Tinari and Khandke (2000) describe using music to teach economics. By analyzing songs they self-selected, students were able to glean not only concepts about economics, but also about the interrelationship between their area of study and other aspects of their lives. These uses of music are most effective when the texts chosen or performances attended address social justice issues. Educators should encourage critical, democratic dialogue among the learners. This should encompass not only the subject at hand, but also the choice of musical venue and inclusion (or exclusion) of specific works. Discussions should involve the recognition of what may *not* have been represented musically, as well as how these musical ideas may comment on other facets of social life.

The third style, the affective style, involves using music to stimulate a mood. Music listening or singing can relax, energize, create humor and induce nostalgia. Dialogue can allow learners to begin to critically examine their responses to music and compare their own to others' responses. Analysis can extend to songs comprising learners' environments, from radio to grocery-story muzak, and examine the effects on one's identity, values, and choices.

Actual singing activity is an important approach to the fourth style of using music in education, social integration. Here, music is actually used as a means to create a community. This requires an attention to detail, realization of the complexities of sociocultural factors, and the need to facilitate the process, not control it. Author 2 once attended a workshop where everyone began by singing "good morning" in their own language, then sang again to one another in a language different from their first. We each had to listen closely to one another and think as a group. Educators themselves can lead singing, or local community choir directors are often approachable to conduct workshops or class visits to create this experience. Actually participating in community song—rediscovering one's voice and confronting one's fears and pleasures in using it—is a very effective way to open dialogue about the power and the suppression of our authentic voices in contemporary western culture.

Olsen (2003) observed that "Music can allow individuals to view life more critically, challenging assumptions and biased values that

they came to regard as accepted reality through their own community experience” (p. 113). Singing is a powerful medium through which we can learn, confront hegemonic power structures, reclaim all voices to build inclusive communities, and confront social concerns.

Conclusion

We have focused in this article on music in general and community choral singing in North America and Europe in particular. We have shown that people actually make meaning and communicate meaning in unique ways through the poetry of song and the experience of singing. The physiological dynamics of singing—of merging one’s breathing with the rhythms and arc of a musical phrase, of virtually taking the tune simultaneously into one’s lungs and ears—is an experience that weds spirit, body, emotion and imagination. To be surrounded by the sound of others, vocalizing precisely the same message simultaneously, listening intently to all while being listened to, is a powerful relational encounter of transcendence and solidarity. The community learning offered by community choirs such as those we have profiled here is also unique. These choirs deliberately set out to mix people of diverse social groups and ability to foreground the process of learning how to be in community.

In an art form that has garnered a reputation for exclusion through its esoteric language and virtuosity, community choirs subvert conventional notions of musical talent to include everyone as full participants. We have also argued that participation in the creative processes of writing social justice songs and music as well as preparing their musical expression constitutes important critical learning. And finally, the content of the songs themselves engage audiences in confronting conditions of inequity and injustice, envisioning alternate possibilities, and daring to consider their personal responsibility. This message is not unlike the offerings of visual arts, dance and drama in social justice: but music engages listeners through the unique medium of tune, harmony and rhythm, stirring people at deep levels which somehow lie beyond visual and poetic imagination.

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