

The role of the Conductor of children's choirs in the improvement of Interpersonal Communication through Music

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Abstract: *Choral singing is a complex and multifactorial activity, it is a group activity in which participants are actively involved through music and are able to transmit varied touches of human psychoemotional states. The conductor of a children's choir must have a complex personality, he must be a passion-filled musician, a teacher, a psychologist, he must have psychosocial competences and leadership abilities. In the conductor-choir relationship, the interaction of the conductor's self with the members of the choir is of distinct importance. In order to increase the quality of said relationship, which is the basis of a remarkable artistic performance, a new method has been approached: the Johary Window model, which can be applied by the conductor in order to obtain a viable communication between the members of the choral ensemble.*

Key-words: music education, children's choir, Johary Window, conductor, interpersonal relationships

1. Introduction

Musical-artistic education has an active, efficient and formative role in the education and the development of the human personality. One of the priorities of music educations is the vocal-choral singing which is capable of broadcasting different touches of human psycho-emotional states. Choral singing is a complex and multifactorial activity; it is a group activity in which participants are actively involved through music. Whether it takes place in school, or it is part of extracurricular activities, choral singing promotes values, skills, aesthetic attitudes and influences communication, interpersonal relationships and the integration in society of children and young people. There are two categories of choirs: equal voices and mixed voices, which can be composed of both amateurs and

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professionals. The first category includes children's choirs, women's choirs and men's choirs. The conductor's strategy differs from choir to choir, and the conductor has the responsibility of organising activities or choosing a repertoire based on the needs and the artistic interests of the ensemble.

A children's choir must be assembled with professional responsibility, and the members must be selected after testing their musical skills. The age of the children is important. The choir that is the subject of this study includes girls and boys aged between 9 and 14 years. At these ages, the sonority of the choir gains force, glow and wide expressiveness, the voices are formed, the vocal range is wide and can be extended. The conductor's concern for the evolution of the choral voice, able to give meaning to the musical interpretation, involves the attainment of the choral vocal technique, individual and collective, as well as the bonding of a homogeneous and unitary group. The conductor, through his style and personality, through the science of building and leading the choral ensemble, has a decisive role in obtaining the interpretive performance. Therefore, conducting mastery is very important, being the result of several attributes, such as musical skills or human and pedagogical qualities.

On this subject, music literature contains numerous studies on aspects of choral singing at different age levels but very few studies to address ways to improve interpersonal communication in children's choir through music and how this is reflected in the performance.

2. Literature review

There are studies that say group singing aids in improving social and individual resources, reducing stress and meeting spiritual needs (Eriksson and Lindstrom 2006), it can influence the person socially, emotionally, mentally or can act on mental health and well-being (Clift and Morrison 2011; Livesey, Morrison, Clift, and Camic 2012; Glew, Simonds and Williams 2020). All these benefits can be experienced regardless of age, gender, nationality or social status.

The theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci 2000) states that engaging in activities that involve singing induces *a sense of motivation results in increased psychological wellbeing and social development* by being with others, feeling responsible for someone's learning by getting positive feedback from the audience in shows. In the case of the elderly or those with senile dementia, there is clear evidence of the therapeutic effects of music and singing (Hammar, Emami, Gotell, and Engstrom 2011; Skingley and Vella-Burrows 2010).

The study in which comparisons are made between choral singers, solo singers, band/ orchestra members, solo instrumentalists, team sport players, and

solo sport players (Adam J Lonsdale and Evelyn R Day 2020) concludes that any recreational activity that provides opportunities for improvement and for acquiring a new skill or any recreational activity that awakes feelings of accomplishment has the potential to have a beneficial effect on our well-being. Stewart and Lonsdale (Stewart and Lonsdale 2016) propose that choral singers may forego their need for autonomy when they join a choir, but this apparent deficit might be somehow outweighed by the psychological benefits of belonging to a cohesive social group. Referring to the state of well-being induced by choral singing (Csikszentmihalyi's 1996) the concept of "flow" is defined, which explains that when people perform challenging activities, they can achieve a state of "flow", where time seems to stop, they become fully engaged, and all concentration becomes focussed on the activity. Singing in a choir implies total involvement in the moment of singing, abandoning personal issues and transposing into a state that seems to transcend time and space. In a children's choir, often singing for fun, also has the inherent goals of personal fulfilment and delight. Flow is also involved with the fusion of two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 41). Differentiation is concerned with uniqueness, personal growth and establishing one's own identity; integration is to do with unity with others and a sense of belonging to something beyond the self. However, in order to feel this state, it is necessary to have a balance between the effort that the chorister makes to obtain the performance and the feedback that he obtains after the stage performance. Thus, the concept of flow is similar to Mindfulness, where people learn to focus their attention on the present moment to avoid negative thinking and to cope with powerful emotions (Segal et al. 2002).

The term Mindfulness, originally derived from Buddhist traditions, has penetrated psychology and is widely associated with the mitigation of stress and enhancement of emotional well-being in non-clinical samples. Positive emotion and happiness have also been linked to good health (Siahpush et al. 2008).

Another approach addresses the social benefits of singing in a choral group, such as building friendships, improving relationships and interpersonal cooperation, and creating a sense of belonging to a group (JK Johnson et al. 2013; Clift and Hancox 2001; Bailey and Davidson 2002, 2005; Cohen et al. 2006, 2007; Silber 2005). In addition, the benefits of singing are manifested at physiological and physical levels, having effects on the immune response, oxytocin levels, heart rate, and respiration (Beck et al. 2000; Grape et al., 2003; Valentine and Evans 2001). According to other studies, professional singers who used to take singing lessons have reported increased energy, while amateur singers have sometimes reported an increased sense of self-expression (Grape and col. 2003).

3. The benefits of choral singing at children

Previous research has explained that choral singing can develop musical skills or benefit the practitioner, from musical, **physical** (physical stress reduction, improved breathing and posture, increased blood circulation), **psychological** (improved concentration and memory, raised self-esteem) and **social** points of view.

Through choral singing, children cultivate and develop musicality, musical skills and abilities (vocal qualities, melodic sense, rhythmic sense, musical memory and imagination, musical intelligence). Specialty research has proven that group singing is a leisure interpersonal activity with common goals, favoring empathy and social integration, promotes self-esteem, general confidence and also self-efficacy.

Choral singing stimulates cognitive processes - attention, memory, imagination, thinking - by focusing on both the conductor's instructions and the melodic line, lyrics, rhythm, to which is added the interaction with colleagues in the choir, through music. The spiritual value of vocal-choral singing achieves students' attachment to music and contributes to human development, stimulates pleasure, interest in listening to and singing music, to understand it and to participate consciously in its interpretation. However, the atmosphere and the relationships between the choir members are very important. From the testimonies of the former choristers I noticed that many of them especially remembered the feelings, the experiences experienced during the performances or tours or even the happy moments during rehearsals, the emotions that made the fusion and the homogenization of the band and less the songs sung. The conductor is responsible for creating the sound flow that unites them.

The conductor must not overlook some stardom attitudes, attitudes that mostly appear in children who sing as soloists. Some of these children only participate in rehearsals before concerts, considering that it is a waste of time to come to all rehearsals; this indicates that these people value themselves more than the choir and do not come to choir classes for the pleasure of singing. This attitude is also difficult for other small singers to tolerate. In this sense, we support the idea that the performer must not use musical creation as a pretext to show off, but must form, together with colleagues, a united, homogeneous group, whose common objectives are to transmit the artistic image of musical creation through its awareness and interpretation and convey to the audience the joy of singing.

If the children are rigorously selected according to musical criteria and the teacher deals closely with their vocal culture, with organized, thorough, enthusiastic work, there can be obtained expressive and technical performances through interpretations of a high artistic attitude. If the conductor manages to win the children's trust, to form their artistic discipline and to instil in them a love for music, the satisfactions will match those received from a choir of professionals (Botez 1982, 47).

4. The Johary Window model: a way for the conductor to improve interpersonal relationships

The conductor of the children's choir is primarily a pedagogue through the instructive-educational activity he carries out with the members of the band. He must be concerned with the expressive interpretation of musical works and the management of collective energy. He trains artists but also characters and he is responsible for the structure and the leadership of the choir. The choice of repertoire is an important aspect and must reflect and arouse affinities for choristers.

In addition to a good specialized training, the conductor must be an example of fairness, he must have the gift of understanding and loving his little singers, he must know how to make himself understood, felt and loved by them. It is up to the conductor's talent how he must combine severity with gentleness, authority with permissiveness, sustained work with relaxation and how to strike a balance between the lucidity of the conducting act and the depth of emotion (between reason and affection, mind and heart). So, the conducting act involves achieving a dynamic balance between the intention discovered through individual study and analysis and the collective induction of the creative disposition of sound attitudes, through enthusiasm. (Drăgan, Drăgan 2007, 172)

The communication within the children's choir must be bilateral (the information goes both from the conductor to the choirs, and vice versa, thus ensuring the inverse connection), ensuring an efficient transfer of both sides. This type of communication must be based on the three nonverbal components: mime, paralanguage/paraverbal and eye contact during rehearsals and performances. All these elements contribute to the success of the conductor-choir communication, through "empathic support interventions - nonverbal or paraverbal" - as a result of gestures, postures, looks, sounds emitted during the communication state (Abric 2002, 61). Over time, verbal and paraverbal communication are predominantly conscious and therefore controllable, while nonverbal language is mostly unconscious, and one has little chance of controlling it.

Thus, the components of nonverbal communication are seen not only as acting on the same human physical level, but also as elements that intersect both physiologically and in the semiotic communicative plane (Corniță 2006).

For the conductor, communicating nonverbal messages through his glances is of utmost importance, because it can fulfill different positions in the process of communication by passing on information, completing the verbal statements or compensating for the physical distance in between the conductor and the musicians. Especially during a performance, the young interpreters must understand the message behind the conductor's eyes and respond as such.

All these aspects are necessary in achieving the interaction between conductor and chorister, which appears as "a complex game of mutual expectations, in which subjects form their identity in and through the interpersonal system and in social actions, a complex game in which social reality is built through intercomprehension." (Lohisse 2002, 110)

In order to obtain artistic performances, the psychosocial skills of the conductor are very important, for they facilitate his positive interactions with others as well as the ability to manage the feelings and the emotions of others. It is important to note that psychosocial competence signifies one's ability to control one's emotions, to be able to argue one's ideas, to have the qualities of a good listener, to cooperate and creatively resolve conflicts. The components of psychosocial skills are communication, empathy, assertiveness, gratification, self-presentation, knowledge and problem solving, essential for the success in life of the individual (Vicol 2011, 58).

Psychosocial skills can be very well observed by using a tool of communication and integration in a group, which the choir conductor must know and apply, the Johary Window. It is a model that provides useful insights for improving interpersonal communication through self awareness and understanding, team development, group dynamics and intergroup relations. It is also known as the disclosure / feedback model of self-awareness. This model of interpersonal communication helps conductors and teachers alike to build an environment of creativity and collaborative learning, essential for individual development and has the role of an emitter of information about ourselves - through feelings, experiences, motivations, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, talents, intentions - or about another person - in a relationship with a group.

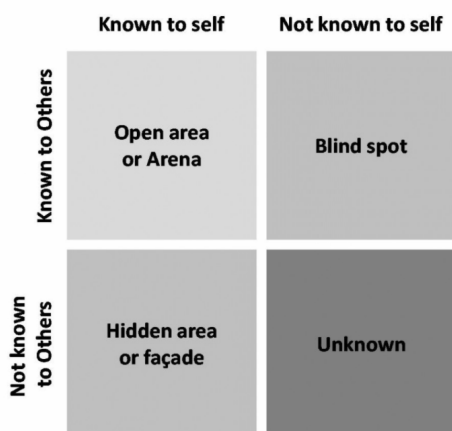


Fig. 1. *Johary Window*

The method was created in 1955 by American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham to be used in their own instructional program related to group processes. The premise from which the two psychologists started was that, in order to increase the performance of a group, it is very important to achieve effective communication.

The Johary Window (Figure 1 above) implies dividing a window into four quadrants, each quadrant having a specific meaning.

The first quadrant called "**Arena**" represents what one knows about himself and is known by others as well ("I know and you know"). For the conductor, this space is beneficial for communication and teamwork. Having a lot of information relevant to the group, he will create a more open atmosphere, which encourages participation and active learning.

The second quadrant called the „blind spot" reveals what is unknown to the person about himself but is known to others ("I do not know but others know"). The information that the conductor receives from the choristers helps him see things with more objectivity and ensures his reception of feedback. Requesting and providing effective feedback is essential for performing an outstanding artistic act and involves a number of essential components: trust, acceptance, openness and concern for the needs of others, components that must be bidirectional: choir-conductor and vice versa.

The third quadrant called "hidden facade or area" reveals what one knows about himself but others do not ("I know but others do not know"). This aspect is important for the conductor in terms of transmitting and receiving feelings and emotions from group members to the conductor and the public as well. It is important for the little choristers to be able to share feelings during the artistic act, and if they will be taken into account, their transmission will be much easier.

The fourth quadrant called the "unknown" is what neither the person nor the others know about said person ("I don't know and neither do the others"). It is the most difficult to explore, because it is not conscious. In this quadrant, one can write down hidden abilities, feelings, skills, experiences unknown to both the conductor and the members of the choir. The conductor must help the choristers by creating an environment that inspires a spirit of self acknowledging, in order to promote constructive observation and feedback in between them.

The four quadrants must be completed by the conductor periodically, in order to compose an effective work strategy but also to facilitate mutual understanding between individuals, within the choir.

Initially, a Johary Window was completed using words from a list of 56 adjectives, but its use has expanded over time to include habits, skills, and all sorts of facts or actions. Typically, to complete a Johary Window, the conductor will complete the first and third quadrants, while the group fills in the first and second.

Together, the parties can complete the fourth quadrant with descriptions or questions relevant to the exercise.

In the conductor-choir relationship, the interaction of the conductor's ego with the choir members and the application of the Johary Window model is very important in order to achieve reliable communication between the group members. For a conductor with pedagogical talent, communication with children is much easier to obtain, especially because for them, the emotional relationships created and the work atmosphere are also important. People from the choir need to feel like family, and comprehensive listening is the fundamental characteristic of their communication, because it focuses on another's way of expression.

In a children's choir, it has been observed that synchronised singing may increase teamwork by consolidating the social bond between the members of the choir. This has been proven by another study (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009), which chimes with the evidence from studies referring to social, psychological and physiological benefits of adult members of choirs. By analysing the feedback and applying the Johary Window after performances, an increased feeling of group membership has been generally reported.

This tool can also be used to assess audience perception after each show in order to see how the choir has been comprehended by the public. Therefore, comparisons can be made between what is desired to be communicated and what the public perceives about the choir itself.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, I believe that the great secret of the welding and endurance over time of a children's or adult's choir is the way in which the relationship between the conductor and the members of the group is established, and how their feelings are reflected in interpretation.

In his activity, the conductor fulfils multiple roles: pedagogue, organizer, manager, artist, etc. who develops skills, shapes souls and characters and forms personalities. It is considered that the prestige of a conductor is ensured through skills, knowledge and behaviour.

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