

Orff in Finland
Coming Together – Reflections on Pedagogy
Ilke Lea Alexander
July 2016

My pedagogical journey

I can perhaps say that my journey as a music educator began in 2013, when I first attended the San Francisco Orff Schulwerk Course. I had never encountered Orff Schulwerk until that year, and never had any formal music education training, even at university. Everything before 2013 doesn't matter; it's inconsequential.

However, while that's what I'd like to think, it unfortunately isn't true. My journey into music education actually began much earlier, when I started taking music lessons at the age of 9. What came after that, in other words how I was taught, influenced my understanding of what it means to immerse yourself in the practice of teaching music. Certain concepts about music education were being formed in my mind, dealing with questions such as: who can participate in music, how does one participate in music, what does it mean to be musical, what is the value in learning music, and what is my purpose as a musician? Of course, I wasn't asking myself these questions as a young musician, but it's clear in hindsight that when I started teaching others, certain assumptions were present in my mind. These assumptions were reflected in how I related to my students, how certain aspects of myself as a musician were projected onto my students. And suddenly, in 2013, all those assumptions I had developed were examined, opening the door to many questions, and initially, to very few answers. This set me on a path of complete dissatisfaction at how I was taught, and how I was teaching, music. In this paper, I would like to examine three aspects of my teaching that have developed and changed significantly since I encountered Orff Schulwerk.

1. Musical fluency

Dr. Arnold Walter (1977) said, "The Orff approach is the nearest thing to incidental learning a school can provide. It stresses impulse, fantasy, [and] improvisation – characteristics that have nothing to do with the deciphering of printed scores, however valuable that may be in itself". It is not my intention to criticise music education that focuses on the ability to read music, or to disparage the value of being able to read music. It is a highly developed skill that takes a lot of effort to master and maintain, and not less musical than other ways of music-making (a concept that differs in itself from culture to culture). It's one of the many enablers of music making and often the quickest way to create a certain level of musical complexity between players who read notation. But I have started to question how much time and energy should be devoted to this aspect of music making. Before I experienced Orff Schulwerk, musical literacy was an end in itself, rather than one of many means to an end. Writing about principles of music education, Swanwick elaborates on some of the potential

pitfalls of focusing exclusively on notation. He states that “any form of musical notation is a form of analysis and ... any analysis is necessarily partial and incomplete”, and suggests that, rather than emphasising literacy as the end goal, music educators should shift their focus to fluency – being “capable of using a language easily and accurately” (Swanwick, 1999, as cited in Gault, 2016.). Orff Schulwerk has helped me develop an understanding of musical fluency and how it can help my students and myself participate musically in contexts that don’t rely on notation. It has likewise helped me find ways in which to encourage our aural, improvisation, and singing skills to develop toward that goal.

2. Process

Orff Schulwerk training enabled me to experience the benefits of an immersive musical learning environment that is inclusive; accessible on many levels; engages the body, voice, heart and mind; and creates a social experience for the learners through games, drama, movement and creativity. It is a process that encourages musical participation through what each child is capable of and willing to contribute, rather than imposing a set of external standards and expectations on them.

The idea of process being the essence of a musical learning experience means that I am learning how to become more of a facilitator and less of an instructor. To do this, I have to allow a negotiation to take place between student and teacher by discovering what my students already have to offer, and find ways to harness their knowledge and skills meaningfully within the classroom community (Kwami, R. et al, 2003). I have to create a musical environment, using the resources available to us, in which they can express their musical agency. This is one of the most challenging things I have faced in my pedagogical journey, because it requires a certain level of spontaneity, musical skill and imagination. It is initially frightening not to have a printed sheet of music that you can place on a stand in front of a student, and to proceed by allowing their creativity to guide the lesson rather than focusing on eradicating mistakes and insecurities in their playing. I have learnt that a successful Orff Schulwerk class does not rely heavily on the independent practice of students outside of lessons, but rather on the collaboration between student, teacher and environment. Arnold further expresses this view by stating that “an Orff teacher need not be a dancer, a singer, poet, a percussion expert, an arranger and a composer rolled into one (thought a bit of all that helps); but he must know how to improvise. Without fantasy, without creative instincts, he would be lost: any attempt to teach the Schulwerk mechanically will only kill it”.

3. The significance of the Schulwerk to me as an African.

I am from South Africa, yet the music education that I experienced as a child was completely Western in its approach and content. “In pre-democracy South Africa (before 1994) the study of non-Western European music was excluded from school music curricula...[it] disregarded the multicultural and multilingual reality of South Africa” (Kwami, R et al, 2003). Being at the tip of Africa we have access to many forms of oral/aural traditional music-making, including a very rich vocal tradition. At least officially, the post-Apartheid curriculum “celebrates

the plurality of South Africa's cultural heritage and creates an awareness of other world musics" (Kwami, R et al, 2003). While it is regrettable that those African traditions did not play a noticeable role in my music education as child, it is through Orff Schulwerk, and particularly through my experiences at the San Francisco International Orff Course, that I have developed an interest in discovering the entire breadth of what my country has to offer musically and culturally. I am encouraged to see a greater appreciation of non-Western European music among students and teachers alike in today's classrooms. The new curricula encourages greater student participation and "seems to hint at an *emic*¹ approach to music education". (Kwami, R. et al, 2003). Yet my impression is that notation still plays an all-too-central role in South African music education, even today and even when conveying African traditional concepts. From my experiences, the Orff Schulwerk approach is the ideal vehicle through which to convey not only content that is more embracing of an African heritage, but also to create musical environments that are culturally aware and respectful, placing an emphasis on the group experience as well as each individual's contribution to it, and encouraging creativity and expression, regardless of the content used. As Meki Nzewi wrote, "if one person has a voice that is more enthralling as per cultural vocal aesthetic, another person could be a more expressive dancer, capable instrumentalist, mime artist, dramatic actor or organiser. All such capabilities belong to the same classroom performance group that has an indigenous African musical arts philosophy." (2006)

It is ironic that I had to travel from South Africa to America to discover an approach, developed by a German man and woman, to bring me closer to what I now understand as a more African way of teaching and experiencing music. "Of all the contemporary trends in music education, Orff Schulwerk is perhaps the closest to [the] traditional African approach to music. The essentials of Schulwerk which include speech, rhythm, and movement, come rather close to the traditional African concept of music making" (Amoaku, 1982). When writing about his experiences and observations working with traditional Xhosa musicians in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, Dave Dargie stated that the "music learning process took place in the opposite order to that followed in my childhood [classical] music lessons. The incentive comes first; not a certificate, but the burning desire to be fully part of the life of the village". (1996)

As you all know, levels training is a two-week long celebration, with music and dance marking the beginning and the end of our days, flowing into nightlong singing, dancing and playing. This strengthened the bonds between members of our community and created a safe environment for expressing oneself both musically and personally. I could not sit aside and be mere an observer to the social activity. It was in Level 1 that I first participated in music making without my flute: instead, I sang, played percussion instruments and danced. A lot. I needed to have these experiences to realise that there is a different way to be

¹ of, relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied.

musical, and therefore a different way to teach music. Perhaps this Orff course experience is the closest I've ever come to life in an African village.

References:

Walter, A. (1977). Criticism of combining Orff with Kodaly. In: I. Carley, ed., *Orff re-echoes, selections from the Orff echo and the supplements*, 1st ed. Cleveland: American Orff-Schulwerk Association, pg 23.

Kwami, R et al. (2003). Integrating musical arts cultures. In: A. Herbst et al, ed., *Musical arts in Africa*. South Africa: UNISA Press, pg 269.

Gault, B. (2016). Kodaly-inspired teaching: a bridge to musical fluency. In: C. Abril and B. Gault, ed., *Teaching general music: approaches, issues and viewpoints*. New York: Oxford University Press, pg 76.

Dargie, D. (1996). African methods of music education: some reflections. *African Music* [online] Vol 7, no.3, pg 30-43. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30250058?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [May 2016].

Amoaku, WK. (1982). Parallelisms in traditional African system of music education and Orff Schulwerk. *African Music* [online] Vol 6, no.2, pg 116-119. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30249761?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [May 2016].

Nzewi, M. (2006). Growing in musical arts knowledge versus the role of the ignorant expert . In: M. Mans, ed., *Centering on African Practice in Musical Arts Education*. African Minds, pg 53.

Emic. (n.d.) In: *Merriam-Webster* [online] Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc. Available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emic> [Accessed 13 June 2016]