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“What the Music Wants From us”: Learning Youth Orchestra Music Through Eurhythmics

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In a youth orchestra, there are many borders to cross, for example, different competency levels, cultures, languages, socio-economic circumstances, races etc. Another challenge for beginners is learning orchestra music by only following the conductor's instructions and gestures. On numerous occasions, Eva Nivbrant Wedin, from KMH in Stockholm, has worked with the North-West Youth Orchestra in South Africa, helping them learn their repertoire through eurhythmics. Therefore, this basic qualitative study aims to understand what meaning youth orchestra members ascribed to their experiences of learning orchestra music through eurhythmics. We collected data through interviews, which were thematically analysed. Six themes emerged: social interaction, enjoyment, better understanding, empowerment, expression, and improved performance. Therefore, we argue that eurhythmics can be used to cross borders in youth orchestras, thereby creating understanding between members of different languages, ages, and cultures and improving their musical understanding and performance of orchestral works.

Dans un orchestre de jeunes, il y a de nombreuses frontières à franchir, par exemple, différents niveaux de compétence, cultures, langues, circonstances socio-économiques, races, etc. Un autre défi pour les débutants est d'apprendre la musique de l'orchestre en suivant uniquement les instructions et les gestes du chef d'orchestre. Eva Nivbrant Wedin, du KMH de Stockholm, a travaillé à de nombreuses reprises avec le North-West Youth Orchestra en Afrique du Sud, l'aidant à apprendre son répertoire grâce à la rythmique.. Par conséquent, cette étude qualitative de base vise à comprendre la signification que les membres de l'orchestre de jeunes attribuent à leurs expériences d'apprentissage de la musique d'orchestre par le biais de la rythmique. Nous avons recueilli des données par le biais d'entretiens, qui ont fait l'objet d'une analyse thématique. Six thèmes ont émergé : interaction sociale, plaisir, meilleure compréhension, autonomisation, expression et amélioration des performances. Par conséquent, nous soutenons que la rythmique peut être utilisée pour franchir les frontières dans les orchestres de jeunes, créant ainsi une compréhension entre des membres de langues, d'âges et de cultures différents et améliorant leur compréhension musicale et leur performance des œuvres orchestrales.

Introduction

Youth orchestras are fertile ground for learning specific music and social skills. However, social skills, such as crossing borders between members from different cultures, competency levels, languages, socio-economic circumstances, races etc., are under-researched (Kartomi, 2018). Furthermore, although we know that eurhythmics is useful in ensemble rehearsals (Wentink & Van der Merwe, 2020), as well as for flautists preparing contemporary music for performance (Ridout & Habron, 2020) and for developing autonomy and creativity in instrumental pedagogy (Daly, 2022), we do not know how members of a youth orchestra experience learning orchestral music through eurhythmics. Greenhead (2016) describes Dynamic Rehearsal, inspired by the principles of Jaques-Dalcroze, as a process of interpreting and improving performance, often resulting in transformative experiences. In a personal email, Greenhead (2022) told us that she has done Dynamic Rehearsal with individuals, small ensembles, brass ensembles, a double string orchestra and large choirs. Mills (1982) wrote an article on eurhythmics for orchestra, but this was within the context of a school orchestra. How one could apply eurhythmics within the context of a youth orchestra, and how orchestra members experience this way of learning still needed to be explored. Therefore, this basic qualitative study aims to understand what meaning youth orchestra members ascribed to their experiences of learning orchestra music through eurhythmics.

Linnaeus-Palme

The Royal College of Music in Stockholm, Sweden (KMH) and the School of Music at the North-West University, South Africa (NWU), have built a fruitful collaboration over the

years. Eva Nivbrant Wedin, from KMH, has been teaching at NWU regularly since 2007, and also started working with the North-West Youth Orchestra in 2011. In 2012 KMH and NWU got funding from the Linnaeus-Palme exchange programme to extend the collaboration and build a program involving student and teacher exchange in both directions. The Swedish government funds the Linnaeus-Palme exchange program to support building long-term relations between Higher Education institutions.

Work with the orchestra

Liesl van der Merwe is one of two conductors of the North-West Youth Orchestra (NWYO). The orchestra consists of more than 40 members and rehearses on Friday afternoons. As part of the Linnaeus-Palme exchange, we started working with the orchestra, combining rehearsals with eurhythmics workshops, during which we worked on the musical pieces they were rehearsing at the time. Every year Liesl chose the repertoire, started to rehearse with the orchestra and told Eva about the difficulties they were facing and what musical aspects she wanted the students to develop. Then Eva planned a workshop focusing on those difficulties, the musical structure, and the musical expression. A second goal for the workshops was to work on the musical aspects in a way that also included the social aspects of an orchestra, such as communication, listening to each other, and bonding.

When we started these sessions, the orchestra first played through the piece and then Eva gave a Eurhythmics workshop for the whole orchestra. After the workshop, they played the piece again, followed by a joint reflection about their experiences. Directly after the rehearsal, we did individual interviews with those who wanted to participate.

We worked with the following repertoire:

- 2014: Danzon No. 2, Arturo Márquez, arranged by Juan Villodre
- 2015: Dance of the Gypsy, Camille Saint-Saëns, arranged by Kirt Mosier
Danzon No. 2, Arturo Márquez, arranged by Juan Villodre
- 2016: Sinfonia Concertante Polonaise by Franz Danzi
Chicago, John Kander, arranged by Ted Ricketts
- 2018: Gershwin by George! Arr. Jerry Brubaker - Feat. Strike up the Band! I Got Rhythm;
Embraceable You; An American in Paris; Prelude II; Summertime; Rhapsody in
Blue
- 2019: Two South American Tangos: 1. El Choclo, 2. La Comparsita
Masquerade suite from the incidental music to Levmontov's play, by Aram
Khachaturian

Examples of activities

During the eurhythmics workshops with the youth orchestra, the whole group was together in the same room, but we switched between working individually, in pairs, in groups of four or everybody together. We also switched between moving to music played on the piano and to recorded music. Sometimes Eva led the movement through drumming or singing.

Most of the time, we focused on "Show what you hear", requiring the instrumentalists to listen to various aspects of the music such as rhythms, tempo, metre, division, phrasing, instruments, solos, staccato/legato, etc. Eva gave instructions, and then the participants worked together with improvised movement. We worked with one aspect at a time, using one part of the music. At the end of the workshop, we put all the parts together and performed the whole piece in the same way and with the same partners as we had rehearsed. Eva planned this carefully in advance so that the transition between the different parts would work smoothly.

In many of the workshops, we used objects such as balls, scarves, large plastic rings and chopsticks. The use of objects helps to improve focus. It is also a tool for making the music visible, for example, bouncing a ball for marking accents or using a scarf to show the length of a phrase. If this is combined with different colours for different instruments or if the objects are passed from one person to another at the beginning of a new phrase or a new part of the music, it can help orchestra members to gain a better understanding of the musical structure.

Gershwin by George!

This medley consists of seven parts in different tempi and characters. To make it easier for the students to change between those styles when playing, we practised the work using different kinds of movement. Special focus was placed on quick changes between the subdivision in straight eighth notes and the “jazz feeling” of the triplets.

We worked with one section at a time in various group constellations. In some sections, we focused on the rhythmical aspects, and in other sections, we focused on the character of the solos or on the different voices and instruments. The solos were shown by objects, and some rhythms were performed with chopsticks.

Two South American Tangos: 1. El Choclo

In this piece, we focused on direction, rhythmical aspects and on understanding the style of a tango. One activity was walking in pairs in front of each other with hands together and gently pushing each other backwards and forward in straight lines. While facing each other, one person in the pair walks backwards, and the other person in the pair walks forward. This walking back and forth should then follow the phrasing, first only walking on the beat, but later walking the rhythm of the bass line.

Waltz from the Masquerade suite

The workshop started with exploring the waltz character and swinging in different ways. Then we moved to rhythms and accents. One of the motifs is repeated many times in the piece. In this motif, two voices take turns, with a series of running eighth notes like a question and answer and ending on an accentuated note together. In pairs, the students followed different voices, taking turns running beside each other. The intention was for them to reach the same point on the final accent so that they could clap the accent toward each other.

Dance of the Gypsy

First, we worked individually, then in pairs and finally, two pairs formed a group of four. We started showing the length of single notes played by the piano and continued with the length of a phrase, first by drawing lines in the air and then by using meter-long elastic band loops. After exploring the phrases two by two with elastic bands, we continued in a group of four.

In the second part of the piece, the groups of four improvised a dance together, following Eva's directions; for example,

- “Walk this rhythm while changing places with your partner.”
- “Show this rhythm with your arms and focus on the difference between the long and short notes” (as prepared at the beginning of the workshop).
- “In this part, you fly away from your group like butterflies but listen to the music when it is time to return to the group.”

By following the instructions, the musical structure was made visible and clear, and when a part was repeated but changed from minor to major, Eva asked them to show this change in tonality. At the coda, they had the freedom to decide how the piece should end.

Danzon No. 2

The first year we worked with the Danzon, we only focused on some difficult parts where the students struggled rhythmically. The meter changed between 4/4, 6/8 and 7/8, sometimes with only one bar at a time written in each meter. For each time signature, Eva showed an easy clapping pattern, which emphasised the division. The patterns were played on different parts of the body, but always with a downward direction on the first beat. We wanted to show the students a way of working that they could also use when playing other pieces, and therefore we used patterns that can be performed while sitting in an orchestra. After learning the patterns, we went through the difficult part of the piece, only clapping the meter, not focusing on the rhythms or melodies. When they could perform this, we added the rhythms by reading their parts aloud while clapping.

Procedures

Approach

We followed a basic qualitative approach. We believe that knowledge is socially constructed and that we make sense of our experiences through social interaction. As is typical in basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), we were interested in the following:

1. How did the youth orchestra members interpret their experiences of learning orchestral music through eurhythmics in a group?
2. What meaning did they ascribe to their experiences?

Data collection

More than 40 members of the NWYO participated in the annual eurhythmics workshops. However, only those who were willing, were interviewed, or commented during the focus group interviews. We worked in this way for five years, and we have interview data from three years, 2015, 2018 and 2019. Some participants, like Simon, Khune and Melinda, participated in more than one interview.

Table 1: The interview and participant distribution over the years

19 Interview participants	Individual interviews pseudonyms	Instrument family	Focus group interviews pseudonyms	Instrument family
2015: 5 Participants	Kathy	Percussion	Selene Ruben Basimane Tebogo	Woodwinds Percussion Strings
2018: 7 Participants	Jennifer Donathan Teresa Khune Bianca Simon Thandi	Strings Woodwinds Percussion		

2019: 11 Participants	Melinda Heather Simon Khune Kenny Cara	Strings Percussion	Janice Melinda Ernest Simon Anne	Strings Percussion
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Eva conducted interviews (Table 1) with orchestra members after learning the orchestra music through eurhythmics. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti 22 (Friese, 2019). A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) revealed the emergent codes, categories, and themes. These themes helped us understand what meaning the orchestra members ascribed to their experiences of learning orchestra music through eurhythmics.

The six themes emerged as a result of analysing the transcribed interviews. We followed Creswell & Poth's (2016) data analysis spiral. Firstly, we organised the data in ATLAS.ti. Secondly, we read and wrote memos about emergent ideas. Thirdly, we described and classified codes into themes. Fourthly we developed and assessed our interpretations of the data, and lastly, we represented the data in the following findings section.

Findings

Theme 1: Social interaction – “They just opened up completely.”

In the eurhythmics sessions, “we all moved together”. While we moved together, “we were aware of each other” (Janice, 2019) and “attentive to what they do” (Teresa, 2018). Khune (2018) explained that eurhythmics “helps with interacting with other people as well as learning to meet people in a new way, like in music. It is unusual.” Simon (2019) enjoyed how everyone “opened up completely.”

Theme 2: Enjoyment – “You see their view of the music; it was very much fun.”

The orchestra members gave three reasons why they enjoyed the sessions. Firstly, “It felt more energetic. We felt more alive and one with the music” (Melinda, 2019). Secondly, Cara (2019) explained that “it is fun to do something different than usual”. Thirdly, many orchestra members said that they enjoyed becoming aware of the other parts. “Now you can actually hear this person has a solo, and that person has a solo. So, for me, it is inspiring, and it is so much fun” (Teresa, 2018). Melinda (2019) said that, while moving, “you see the other people’s part, and you see their view of the music. So, it was very much fun”.

Theme 3: Better understanding – “We understand what the piece wants from us.”

Becoming aware of the other parts gives a better understanding of the music (Bianca, 2018). Orchestra members noted that they “got a much better holistic view” (Ruben, 2015) since the movement changed their memory of the music (Heather, 2019). The difficult transition passages, especially, became easier (Tebogo, 2015) because they could anticipate the larger structure of the music (Ruben, 2015). Not only did the orchestra members’ holistic understanding improve but their understanding of “the rhythms have [also] improved, it is easier to hear where they are supposed to be” (Donathan, 2018). Bianca (2018) said, “I really understand the rhythms better”. Simon (2018) pointed out participating in eurhythmics “made us think of the music in a different way”. Eurhythmics “helped us understand how to play the music and how the music wants to be played. So, we understand what the piece wants from us.” (Jennifer, 2018).

Theme 4: Empowerment – “I felt more confident playing it.”

Eurhythmics empowered the orchestra members with confidence (Bianca, 2018) to the extent that they wanted to impart it to others. Heather (2019) stated: “I went from having

absolutely no clue to being a really strong student. I understood what was going on, and I absolutely loved it. So, I want to go further in this, and I want to learn more about it, and I myself want to be a Dalcroze teacher one day because I have learned so much". Similarly, Khune (2019) said it has "been amazing because I have been using movement for teaching. I teach little kids. I go to public schools, and with special needs kids, it really comes in handy."

Theme 5: Expression – "You played as if you were the music."

Eurhythmics "made us feel the music much better" (Jennifer, 2018) "It felt as if the music became part of you. So, I kind of felt the music inside. You played as if you were the music" (Kathy, 2015). We became "one with the music" (Melinda, 2019). Khune (2019) explained that "motion evokes emotion. So, I think moving around brings up the energy".

Theme 6: Improved performance – "You listen more."

Eurhythmics increased musical awareness. It "helps with keeping time and listening to people around you" (Khune, 2018). "Where I was previously just focused on my part, I could now listen to the other students and music instruments playing" (Bianca, 2018). Simon (2018) summed it up by stating that "it made us think of the music in a different way, which just made us play better".

Discussion

Crossing borders in a multicultural South African youth orchestra refers to bridging social capital, the connection between orchestra members who are dissimilar. Connections develop that link orchestra members across societal divides, such as language, race, class, or religion (Claridge, 2018). In the youth orchestra, friendships develop between people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and ages. It was interesting to see the role that eurhythmics and working in different group constellations played in crossing borders. Participants became more aware of each other; they synchronised, got to know each other, and opened up to each other. Orchestra members listened to each other socially and musically. The enjoyment of becoming aware of other musical parts opened orchestra members' minds and helped them to understand the music better. This aligns with Fredrickson's (2013) broaden and build theory. She explains that positive emotions open our minds and increase our perceptual abilities. Both the social aspect and the better musical understanding led to better musical performance. Therefore, we argue that eurhythmics is useful for crossing borders and learning music in a youth orchestra.

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