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INCLUSIVE VOICES

The role, perspectives and practices of music in blind youths' social inclusion

Our paper, in accordance with our presentation, is dedicated to the memory of our friend Julio Hurtado Llopis, a master and pioneer of discovering the inclusive power of music, the ex-director of Coral Allegro, the inclusive choir of the ONCE, the federation of the Blind in Spain. Professor Hurtado, best known as Juli amongst friends, was a professor of music education at the University of Valencia. We first met at a ground-breaking meeting of Europa Cantat in Budapest. His idea of inclusive singing strongly influences the work we do at the choir of the school for the blind now.

Abstract

Music and playing music is an integral part of our mental picture of blindness and blind people. There have always been acknowledged blind musicians in human history to strengthen the mental image. Therefore, numerous blind children's parents hope music to be their children's future profession. Although it is proven that not every blind child is a born musician, music and the world of sounds are absolute priorities in blind people's lives. In this paper we highlight the inclusive role of music through theory and practice. As for theory, we introduce new concepts such as "blind hearing", approach blindness through a new discipline, and recall episodes from the history of Hungarian blind students music education. Concerning practice, we recollect moments of the former-well-known blind choir named after Homer, and reflect the current tendencies towards social inclusion through music. Finally, we point out the significance of cultural disability studies as well as music in disability studies: two possible devices to assist music educators, choir conductors and professional musicians to include disabled people in playing music together.

Introduction

There are at least two main reasons why culture in general, music in particular and disability are inseparable concepts. Firstly, culture have always provided basic elements for charity to support disabled persons. And secondly, persons with various dis/abilities have always tried to communicate their values through culture (Flamich, & Hoffmann, 2011). Thus, music, being one of the pillars of human culture, has doubtlessly been playing a significant part in social inclusion ever since human beings first made sounds out of the objects at hands.

In order to illustrate the inclusive nature of music, we have designed this paper to be a dialogue between past and present with relevant, influential messages for the future. Concerning its structure, it is built upon the questions it raises, the aims it wishes to accomplish, the historical facts it reveals, the disciplinary basis it relies on, the practices it exemplifies and some possible ways and directions to consider for shaping future tendencies in the field of education.

Besides its theoretical approach, this paper undoubtedly aims to prove the motivating power and inclusive role of music in professional and amateur blind musicians' daily lives through lived-experience-based narratives.

Questions and aims

The complex nature of the topic indicates numerous questions. Taking a closer look at the title, we may immediately discover the following three questions the title implies:

1. What is the role of music in blind youths' social inclusion?
2. What perspectives do blind youths have for social inclusion?
3. What theories and practices can support blind youths' social inclusion?

To answer the questions above is one of our priorities in the hope of suggesting ideas and resources for education policy makers to think over when designing inclusive education policy regarding music education. As to provide further support for their work, one of our aims is to highlight two theoretically-based approaches, two young disciplines: cultural disability studies and music in disability studies. We also aim to call the attention to the need for re-thinking teacher education including that of music teachers. Thus, the focus on musicians' narratives describing their attempts to accomplish inclusion is also amongst our aims. With the help of these examples, we aim at encouraging and motivating people with diverse abilities to play music together and at the same time to be open towards hidden values of people of all kind

Mental images versus blindness and identity

As to understand the significance of the very first question, and give a sensible, rational answer to it, we find it inevitable to investigate what role music has always played in blind people's lives and their "social inclusion" in the course of centuries.

"In ancient times impaired vision was considered a fundamentally debilitating condition, confining its bearers to death or a life of beggary, but even then there were exceptions to prove the rule." (Bolt, 2006:80). Recognizing the special nature of hearing through which blind people, to a great extent, perceive and access the world, and musical hearing which is stereotypically supposed to be one "special gift of God" to compensate people for the loss of vision, have always distinguished the blind from persons with various other disabilities. Consequently, music is an integral part of our mental picture of blindness and blind people (Straus, 2011; Flamich, 2018). The fact can well be proven by the picture of the two blind harpists in the tomb of Ramses III., king of ancient Egypt, reigned from 1187 to 1156 bce (Britannica, n. d.)

In the course of time there have always been acknowledged blind musicians, such as Francesco Landini (1325-1397) Italian organist, composer and poet, John Stanley (1712-1786) English organist and composer, Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999) Spanish composer and pianist, Ray Charles (1930-2004) American singer, songwriter, musician and composer, Stevie Wonder (1950 -), American singer, songwriter, musician and record producer, Andrea Bocelli (1958 -), Italian singer, Imre Ungár (1909 – 1972), the Hungarian pianist of the 20th century, Tamás Érdi (1979 -), the pianist of our time, and Tomi Juhász (1988 -), the rock musician, just to mention a few of the role-model blind musicians. They, and the mental image of blindness may be the reasons why numerous blind children's parents hope music to be their children's future profession. Whether these hidden expectations remain dreams or become reality has not yet been in focus of any research so far, what is known though, that numerous blind people tend to enjoy the infinite variety of sounds and as such, making music. Therefore singing in a choir has always played a significant role in the school of the blind, even if the choir has not aimed to guarantee a professional musician's career.

Mainstreaming, the favored tendency of the recent decades, undoubtedly affects the school choir, too. Thus, we meet fewer and fewer children at the school of blind, and its impacts can undoubtedly be discovered on, for example, children's blind identity as well as on their music education. Although mainstreaming is meant to be one way towards social inclusion, it seems to prevent children to learn to live blind, for blindness still seems to be regarded as a stigma and a tragedy, or the opposite, a super-quality of living with super-human characteristic features and talent, consequently, numerous mainstreamed blind children often face unrealistic, unreasonable expectations. Although blind identity can strongly be connected to music education, the concept and related issues are much too complex to discuss in this paper, that is the reason why we focus solely on its role in playing music.

The empowering role of music in the context of education in Hungary

Recognizing blind people's characteristic features and values started with their education. Teaching music was one of the basic elements the Planum, the special curriculum compiled as early as in 1827, contained. The outcomes of music education resulted in social acknowledgement already in the second half of the nineteenth century. Károly Herodek, the school director from 1905 to 1933, recognized music as a significant factor of social inclusion and social responsibility when he wrote:

“The blind's voices and singing have already inspired many people to support educating blind children, and develop the institution they are taught in.” (Herodek, 1925:220)

The director's encouraging attitude characterizes the curriculum, too. It proves that in 1930 blind students had twenty four music lessons a week. The curriculum and education policy clearly reflect that blind people's social inclusion was aimed through music, and not only exceptionally talented blind students were involved. We may still meet generations who remember the well-known Homérosz Kórus, the choir named after Homer, either because they were members or because they heard us singing.

The choir was established in 1928 and there was a time when it had seventy or eighty members. It regularly gave concerts at the Academy of Music, toured around Hungary and the neighbouring countries, moreover, it was invited to perform in Finland. The choir worked with sighted as well as blind conductors, made some recordings, an LP., when finally in the middle of the 1990s it ceased to work (Flamich & Hoffmann, 2011).

For tens of years another ensemble, a string orchestra also existed in the Hungarian cultural arena. It was less acknowledged than the choir, still each and every member of that chamber orchestra was respected by both the sighted and the blind communities. The chamber orchestra was established in 1953 as the successor of the string orchestra of the blind school (Flamich, 2018).

Consulting the very few materials that describe the history of Hungarian blind people's education, we may conclude that music did play a significant role in social inclusion in the past. The present, when the whole world tends to focus on mainstreaming still raises several questions, for example, how much does mainstream education influence blind people's music education, now?

Research on the empowering role of music

Currently, in the international literature of music education there is a limited number of papers dedicated to blind music students' and their professors' experience and challenges. One of these works is a dissertation on inclusive teacher competencies through the eyes of blind and low vision musicians, music students and their teachers. In the following phase, our paper introduces the findings of the dissertation in the context of its aims.

As the author of the dissertation, Maria Flamich — co-author of the present paper — aimed to investigate the impacts of mainstream music education involving all the parties concerned.

The reason for the topic was that in the school year of 2016/2017 at the School of the Blind, I was asked to teach Braille music reading and notation to talented blind students who wish to continue their studies in special music schools, and dream to be musicians. Being an active, though, non-professional musician and insider researcher myself, I am convinced that exploring the roots of difficulties and challenges may add new aspects to re-consider teaching music to blind students in secondary and higher education as well as preparing music teachers to teach students with various dis/abilities.

The dissertation in general understands music as a cultural discourse, and explores Hungarian blind and low vision professional classical musicians', music students' and their sighted teachers' beliefs on teaching music at secondary and higher education, and describes the history of blind people's music education in Hungary paying special attention to its methodology. In the paper I also shed light on stereotypes related to blind persons focusing on the relation between blindness and music.

The participants of the research say blindness-related stereotypes and their consequences, for example: fear are still strongly present in music education. It can best be proven by the fact that blind students may continue their music studies in secondary and higher education solely in case one teacher of the chosen institution is willing to teach them. Blind students as well as their teachers emphasize that the teachers, professors who assume blind students are open, enthusiastic and creative, though each blind student feels that their music teachers are uncertain in teaching the blind. Teachers compensate their uncertainty with openness and creativity, for example relying on blind students' hearing in score reading classes. Teachers say they would be eager to participate in courses to prepare them to teach students with various dis/abilities. Currently, music teacher education fails to offer courses to prepare teachers for teaching blind or in any other way impaired students. Therefore, the dissertation aims to provide a detailed description of the methodology of music teaching, Braille music notation and the inclusive nature of singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra. The historical overview reveals the tendencies of blind people's music education which, owing to various education policies and economic reasons has gradually lost its significance. Imre Ungár, Hungarian blind internationally renowned pianist, pointed out as early as in 1960 that "the number of music lessons has been dramatically reduced in the School of the Blind" (Ungár, 1960:n.p.). Supposedly, the tendency resulted in the ceasing of blind people's acknowledged ensembles, the choir (Homérosz Kórus) and the orchestra (Berindán László Zenekar) as well as the decreasing number of students in the school choir.

Supposedly, owing to the "pervasive" nature of music (Straus, 2011), to increase the number of music lessons would certainly have a positive impact on blind students' concentration and learning abilities, consequently, the current practices should be reconsidered and any attempt for intensifying students' contact with music should be supported.

The dissertation also aims to examine the truth behind the stereotype that blind people have extraordinary hearing and musical abilities. Therefore, as to answer the re-occurring question, a carefully-planned literary review is included in the work, in which Sacks (2010) states “one third of the human cortex is concerned with vision, and if visual input is suddenly lost, very extensive reorganizations and remappings may occur in the cerebral cortex...”. These reorganizations highlight that there is a difference how sighted and blind people hear, and thus, the existing diversion may also explain in what ways their hearing can differ. Straus agrees with blind students’ music teachers in the fact that not all blind persons are “born musicians”. Interestingly enough though, in this research out of the 11 blind persons 9 report to have absolute pitch (AP). This ability plays a significant role in blind students’ inclusion in music class activities and surprisingly, also promotes a certain kind of respectful attitude towards them.

The interviews of the dissertation also aim to reveal the challenges blind music students and their sighted teachers face in learning and teaching music in secondary and higher education. They may certainly prove a significant basis to work out programs to improve inclusive music teachers’ competencies.

As far as the interviews are concerned, what all the respondents find challenging is relaxed and flexible posture. Hand, finger, body motions and motion patterns prove difficult, too. The most challenging task, however, is to understand, feel, learn and teach these motions. Although, in most cases, certain motions are realized, they fail to support technical improvement and musical expression until they are automatized. The participants state that motions can be learned, flexibility, relaxedness, impetus, and to feel how they help musical expressions, take a long time to acquire owing to the lack of visual input.

Admittedly, in case of blind music students learning and teaching body motions require touch, which is considered a natural characteristic feature of learning and teaching music, especially, when either the teacher or the student or both are blind. According to each respondent teaching music with the help of body contact is based upon fundamental confidence and trust. Sighted as well as blind teacher participants claim that body contact appears in teaching music to sighted students, too, though, it is less frequent.

All the respondents emphasize that critical thinking, confidence and sincerity are the basic pillars of blind and sighted musicians’ cooperation in learning and teaching music. Therefore, it is of major importance to look beyond stereotypes, and get acquainted with several basic characteristic features of how persons with various dis/abilities perceive the world, so disability-related courses would definitely contribute to the birth of confidence, and thus, would facilitate the cooperation between students and teachers. Cultural disability studies, i.e. cultural approach to the presence of disability and those concerned could well be regarded a significant resource for courses to improve inclusive teacher competencies.

Cultural disability studies

Human differences are present, and moreover, well represented in each culture. Disability, one basic element of human differences is also richly reflected in human culture, as culture depicts daily life (Couser, 2009). Lenmard J. Davis, one of the most acknowledged critical disability studies scholar highlights a characteristically common attitude to disability, which tends to determine thinking about and taking steps towards disabled persons and disability-related issues:

“When it comes to disability, ‘normal’ people are quite willing to volunteer solutions, present anecdotes, recall from a vast array of films instances they take for fact. No one would dare to make such a leap into Heideggerian philosophy for example or the art of Renaissance. But disability seems so obvious — a missing limb, blindness, deafness. What could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there.” (Davis, 2006:xvi.)

Since disability studies and critical disability studies appeared in the academic arena, cultural representations of disability have also been in focus, and ambassadors of the young discipline offer a wide variety of literature, for example: Lennard J. Davis’ *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001), Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory* (2006), Margrit Shildrick’s *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality* (2009), Tobin Siebers’ *Disability Theory* (2008), *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), and David Bolt: *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* (2006), as Berressem, Ingwersen and Waldschmidt (2017) list. The list exemplifies and demonstrates an existing and well-established theoretical basis and implies the significance of understanding diverse human dis/abilities through culture. The discipline to emerge from cultural understandings and interpretations is cultural disability studies, the nature of which is to involve an extremely wide spectrum, as culture itself covers thousands of features.

In theory, cultural disability studies prove its significance in preparing for understanding the diverse nature of experiencing of the world, one inevitable step to achieve social inclusion, consequently, it is highly relevant to consider the role and implications of the discipline in practice. On the basis of the findings of the dissertation we may conclude that music teachers express their needs to be prepared for receiving students with various dis/abilities, which also imply plenty of perspectives for cultural disability studies to rethink disability-related stereotypes and prepare music teachers to teach students with various (dis)abilities.

Conclusion

Our paper examines the role, perspectives and practices of music in blind youths’ social inclusion. We attempt to give several holistic answers to the following three questions the title implies: 1. What is the role of music in blind youths’ social inclusion? Reading the paper it turns out that music plays a significant role in blind youths’ social inclusion, though mainstreaming may influence skills and abilities. Answering the second question, i.e. What perspectives do blind youths have for social inclusion? we may conclude that social inclusion and perspectives are inseparable for well-prepared teachers and the quality of education in general, and music education in particular. Concerning the third question: What theories and practices can support blind youths’ social inclusion? we introduce two recently-born disciplines and provide academic pillars to promote awareness-based resources for improving inclusive (music) teacher competencies.

Reviewing human history, we face the fact that music is a significant part of the mental image mankind has always formed of blindness, consequently, the relation of the two implies examinations so that we could understand how most blind people may perceive the world, what their attitude is to voices, sounds and noises. The outcomes of such investigations reveal that although sounds do enjoy priorities in the unseen world, not every blind person is a born musician. It is also pointed out that there is a kind of a gap between blind music students and

their professors, even if both parties intend to bridge it. Therefore, to build that bridge both in theory and in practice is inevitable. The disciplinary basis of this paper is a doctoral dissertation on blind students' music education. Both works consider music as a cultural discourse, and view its perspectives in teacher education in mainly two young disciplinary contexts: cultural disability studies and music in disability studies. The disciplines strongly rely on lived experiences, and thus, impressively illustrate how people with diverse abilities move in the world around them, consequently, cultural disability studies as well as music in disability studies may well prove inevitable sources to support music teacher education.

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