

“We sing, we compose!”: a children’s choir experience

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Abstract

This paper¹ is a brief report of an experience with the children's choir PCIU! (Projeto Coral Infantojuvenil da UFMS), in Campo Grande, Brazil, during the pandemic period - when the rehearsals were carried out online. Faced with the feelings of discouragement and uncertainty brought on by COVID-19, it was realized that the choral rehearsal could be a possibility of conversation between children, where they could talk about what they were feeling and living in this period of adaptation, and this could be expressed by music. In this article, we discuss the structure of choral rehearsal and the process of composition itself, with the support of authors that write about music education and children’s choir conducting.

Keywords children’s choir; choral conducting; virtual choir; children’s composition

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Introduction

PCIU! is an extension project of UFMS (Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul), accessible to the community. It started in 2013, as a part of action research developed in the Doctoral Degree Course at Universidade de São Paulo (USP). Since the first rehearsal, the work with the choir was recorded in video and carefully analyzed, for 18 months. It resulted in a thesis that brings studies about the conducting, the structure and planning of rehearsals, music education, and vocal technique. Even after the end of the thesis writing, the research about children's choir conducting continued, and the choir keeps singing until nowadays.

PCIU! started with 20 children and most of them never sang in a choir before. Our first presentation occurred three months after our first rehearsal, with some simple songs in unison, accompanied by the piano (or electronic keyboard) and sometimes, with percussion (played by the choristers). When we began the presentations in public spaces - like shopping malls and public squares - people got interested in the project and the group started to grow. Two years later, we had about 100 children interested in singing in the choir and it was divided into two groups: beginners (PCIU New) and experienced (PCIU Alfa) - who could easily sing in two or three voices and had their voices more technically developed. After that, we started the other three groups in the same project, but with different purposes: PCIUzinho (for beginners aged up to 06 years old), PCIU Mais (for adolescents), and PCIU Master (for parents). In the last ten years, the group was invited to sing at important places in the city and outside the city, being part of choral festivals and scientific/cultural events at the University.

It is important to consider that most children in Brazil don't sing in a choir nowadays, since the Brazilian Guidelines and Basis for Education (Law 5692), in 1971, substituted collective singing (named "Orpheonic Chant") by the general Artistic Education, with a free expression purpose (Fonterrada, 2008). Some years later, law was changed, but the focus on music education in general - not in the choir singing - was preponderant. This way, singing in a choir is not a common practice in schools or other social contexts like churches or communities in Brazil. Even in families, it is not a common habit that parents sing to/with their boys and girls (Filipak, Ilari, 2005).

So, how do children start to sing in Brazil? In general, they have some "singing teachers" such as TV, tablets, cell phones, and other technological resources that offer a variety of musical examples - but not always appropriate to the delicate child's voice. In some schools, folk songs and simple songs dedicated to the children have some space in the classroom routine, but sometimes teachers are not prepared to sing with perfect tune and intonation and are not able to be a vocal example to their pupils. Thereby, starting a choir in Brazil is a hard task for the children's choir conductor.

It is relevant to mention that planning and defining a work purpose or a work perspective for a while (for a short period and/or a long period) is crucial to motivate children towards singing in a choir. At PCIU!, we have some opportunities to sing with great artists of popular music and this increases the children's interest. Presentations in some places that children like to visit (or where their friends can go), trips to other cities, and the recording of a CD (like we did with "Crianças" ²) were very important to maintain children's positive energy and stimulate them to never give up.

1. The rehearsal

PCIU! has, as the main intent, teaching music through choir singing. But we realized in this period of work that we developed much more than music: we contributed to the cognitive, psychomotor, socio-affective and artistic-cultural development of children and adolescents. Welch (2011, s/p) affirms that

² Crianças was recorded in 2014 by the composer Marcio de Camillo and the videoclips are available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@Crianças>

singing activity affects on physical benefits such as respiratory, cardiac, and neurological development. It helps children for better understanding and skills of what they learn in educational perspective. Most importantly, it benefits in social perspectives such as group works, communication, or community setting understanding. Children with higher singing ability had a more positive self concept, and felt more socially including whereas children with lower singing ability showed less effective ways of dealing with the world.

On PCIU! rehearsals, we work with different kinds of activities: rhythmic games, solfeggio, listening, vocal preparation, study of repertoire, and others. These activities can contribute to the global development of children and adolescents.

First of all, we play - or, children feel that they are playing. Children need to play, indeed - it is a natural behavior of childhood. We involve rhythm, improvisation and body coordination, combined with socialization and musical expression. This is fundamental to develop choir singing: everyone must sing together, in the same flow and with the same energy; every syllable has to be sung exactly at the same time and in the same way, for all the choristers, to achieve a choral sound synchronic and in tune. And besides, playing with different paces and agogics - *accelerando*, *rallentando*, etc. - can develop more precision in music, according to the conducting. These activities are based on the Dalcroze Method, which emphasizes a "music education in which the body itself plays the role of an intermediary between sound and thought and in which aural sensations are reinforced by muscular sensations" (Jaques-Dalcroze, 1921, apud Juntunen, 2002, p.76). So, activities and exercises that link ear and body could be effective for expressive and precise singing, such as: "follow the leader" with different paces, "walk according to the music", exploring the room's space, "listen and react" - with different kinds of movement (jump, sliding, heavy steps).

After that, we develop musical reading through solfeggio and hand signs, based on the Kodály Method. Reading tools - rhythmic and melodic - are important not only to develop sight singing, but also to develop musical conscience; build group tune; get fluent learning; understand the construction of musical ideas, and, consequently, achieve better musical interpretation. According to Kodály's ideas, "a knowledge of the basic components of a music repertoire will enable students to develop their performance, listening, composition, and improvisation skills" (Houlahan, Tacka, 2008, p.25). But it's important to emphasize that solfeggio can be fun too; for Kodály (apud Houlahan; Tacka, 2008, p.20), teaching music can't be torture, but a joy to the students. On PCIU!, we think about a better way to involve children and we realized that the audiovisual method and the technological resources could take their attention. Thus, Power point presentation can be more attractive than a book - even when it presents some images - and children can be easily involved when the lessons bring a game (such as a memory game). Therefore, with solfeggio lessons, we can work with musical memory and also develop polyphony and polyrhythm in collective singing.

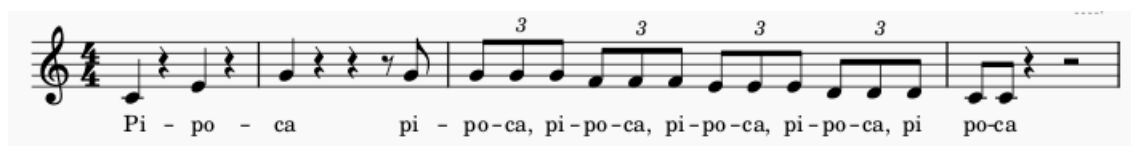
To develop vocal technique, we start working with vocal preparation: at first, the body alignment (posture), showing the difference between a relaxed position and a "singing position". According to Rao (1987, p.9), "a musical approach to developing vocal technique begins with a sequence of exercises that healthfully prepare the body and mind for singing". This premise also includes the development of good vocal habits - like drinking water frequently, having a healthy eating and never shouting. The vocal technique can be worked with games that involve body movement (like a "mirror" game, in which choristers are the mirror, imitating every movement from the conductor); games where movement must suddenly stop, and choristers must be just like as a statue ("shake and stop"); "marionettes" (imitating positions with support and without support), and others. After playing, the body must be "prepared to sing".

The next step in vocal preparation is breath management. According to Goetze, Broeker, and Boshkoff (2011, p.72), "once the singer's posture is established, turn your attention to respiration. (...) Breathing exercises provide singers a way of exercising these muscles without tiring vocal chords". Thus, we practice some exercises of conscious inhalation (imagining a good smell) and after that, exercises with sustained (long) and short exhalations, using imagination (thinking in a blowing candle, or a pressure cooker), or taking some objects, like balloons or coloured strips of paper to motivate children.

In this sequence of activities for voice development, we work with vocalizes: "the first task of the teacher is to teach the students to think of the singing voice as an 'instrument'. This approach will encourage a more 'objective' response to singing" (Rao, 1997, p.9). So, we choose some

Children like challenges very much. So, vocalizes (warm-ups) become very interesting to them when we combine some difficulties with something that they know (and can do). For example, this kind of vocalize:

Figure 1. Vocalize “Pipoca”. Author’s transcription.



Finally, after developing vocal technique and body-mind-singing comprehension, we can start with the repertoire study. Some elements of rhythm, melody and harmony can be worked in the first part, as a preparation for the music itself, and be remembered in this part of the rehearsal. It is essential consider that children are performers, and they can be conducted to a great interpretation of music if the conductor believes that and works for: "giving children the opportunity to create great art is surely one of life's noblest tasks" (Bartle, 2003, p.45).

We can consider the delicate children's voice and their vocal range, before choosing the appropriate repertoire. As a reference, we will use the graphic proposed by Wurgler (1990) and adapted to Brazilian children (Gaborim-Moreira, 2015):

Figure 2. Children's vocal range. Author's transcription.



In the field of music education, the composition is a process that depends on creativity and musical knowledge; the quantity and quality of this knowledge are determinant to the results - the composition itself, as an artistic product. Beinecke and Zanetta (2014, p. 198), who studied

After collecting the ideas, we organized the text, looking for a regular meter, and began to recite the first phrase, “*É tempo de cantar*” (“it’s time to sing”), observing its rhythmic and melodic design, and then registering it in the score; this was the basis for the composition in the following sentences. In this process, we observed that children used familiar materials to compose, but in an intuitive way. For example, they used excerpts from vocalizes that they were used to sing or a sequence of notes that they used in the solfeggio lessons.

Figure 3. Excerpt from score. Author's transcription.

É tempo de cantar...

Ana Lúcia Gaborim (org.) &
Coralistas do PCIU New

The musical score is written on two staves in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time. The melody is simple and hymn-like. The first staff contains the first two measures of the melody, with lyrics 'É tem-po de can-tar' and 'é tem-po de se_a-mar'. The second staff contains the next two measures, with lyrics 'é tem-po de se cui-dar' and 'e não de-sa-ni-mar'. Chord symbols are placed above the notes: D, A, D, D, A in the first staff, and D6, Em, A7, Em, Asus4 in the second staff. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables across measures.

É tem-po de can-tar é tem-po de se_a-mar

é tem-po de se cui-dar e não de-sa-ni-mar

Building the melody together, it was observed that children learned the music faster. This is also justified by the motivation because they were very excited by the idea that they were composers. They all participated sharing their ideas and opinions, one by one, and the conductor interfered a few times, just to organize and register. At this point, Welch and Adams affirm that “all each group needs is time to discuss, create, practice and polish their collective

musical composition. The teacher intervention can be minimal apart from structuring the time and indicating that such activity is valued and has a shared outlet” (2003, p.8).

Children did not know how to write the ideas in the score - they just knew some elements of musical notation - but they accompanied the proceedings: the conductor shared the screen when she was writing, and explained about the place of the notes (pitch) and the figures employed to transcribe the rhythm. They can also observe the relationship between text and music. This process during the rehearsal was recorded in video and the final result was recorded in audio. When showing it to one of the parents (musician), he was delighted with the composition and suggested the recording of the song in a music studio. Subsequently, the song was edited into a video and published on the YouTube platform³; after this positive experience, children felt motivated to compose other songs and to continue singing and learning music.

Conclusion

The rehearsal was a moment of making music together, as well as a moment of joy and hope, of playing and thinking. Despite everything we were facing during the pandemic period, it was still possible to sing, dream and feel good, and we could always do that. Children-choristers were excited to be able to put their ideas and feelings into music and sing something they had made by themselves. Thus, we can conclude that the choral rehearsal was a possibility to sensitize children – something that music itself brings to students – and also to transform this into art: imagination, expression, creativity and creation.

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³ Available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yBt_0oQCp0

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Perspectives from Children, Composers, Performers and Educators

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