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Growing up in a Philharmonic Band – a study on the construction of musical identity

Background

This study stems from the experience of almost two decades in music teacher education programmes of the Escola Superior de Educação (ESE) in Porto, Portugal (College of Education). The acknowledgement that many of the young musicians that apply to the music education course have had their previous musical training in Philharmonic Bands, and the fact that they go on participating in the Band activities, not only as students but also later on as young professionals, allowed us to identify a phenomenon with possible multiple implications on the construction of their musical identities. Therefore, one of the main purposes of this research study¹ is to identify the role that certain cultural contexts play on the development of a musical identity. This paper reports on the construction of musical identity based on a case study and on a focus group interview.

Philharmonic Bands are ensembles of brass, woodwind and percussion instruments of about 50 musicians, mainly amateurs. In Portugal, playing in a Philharmonic Band is often a family tradition. It is normal to find in the same Band several generations from one family, playing together. In the past, the musician with the best musical skills was usually the conductor, and the training of all instrumentalists was made from the older to the younger ones, based on imitative solfege routines (Vasconcelos, 2004). These ensembles play mainly in popular religious fests, parade through the villages, and perform in open-air stages called *Coretos*.

Key Findings

- Biographical and relational processes
- Dimensions of musical identity
- Determinant social interactions
- Tradition and innovation

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Aims of the research

The most relevant aim of the research, in the context of this paper, is to interpret the memories of young musicians about participating in a Philharmonic Band in light of current definitions of identity in general, and musical identity in particular.

Context and rationale

This study is theoretically affiliated to the area of cultural and social studies. It seeks to question the concept of identity from the point of view of a theory of discursive practice rather than of the knowing subject (Hall, 1996), and musical identity as the result of multiple influences, biographical contexts, and cultural settings (Frith, 1996; Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000). While Giddens (2001) states that ‘identity is the key concept for modernity’ there is an extensive body of research around this concept, specifically within the musical context, relating the individuals’ musical experience to their personal identity (MacDonald et al., 2002). The specific cultural context of the Philharmonic Bands in Portugal points out to an environment where young people are socialized both in biographical and relational terms as two processes concurring for the construction of their identities (Dubar, 1991, 2000). Here, tradition and innovation meet and are subject to negotiation “in order to reconstruct culture through agency”(O’Hagin & Harnish, 2006).

Methodology and Methods

This study uses a qualitative, and phenomenological methodology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993), combined with the case study approach (Case, 1995) both for the data collection about the memories of the young musicians on their participation in the Philharmonic Bands, and the characterisation of these ensembles as an overall social and cultural phenomenon. The purpose of obtaining significant biographical information was reached through individual and collective interviewing.

Two methods of data collection were used: in-depth interview of a former student of the college of education in Porto and current Philharmonic Band conductor (F.), and a collective interview with a group of Band specialists which occurred within the perspective of a focus group interview (Bader & Rossi, 2002) where participants were elicited to engage in interaction as to produce significant meanings behind their accounts.

The data was analysed according to four dimensions as found in the literature on sociological analysis, namely, identity for oneself, desired identity, virtual identity, and attributed identity, and two processes concurring for the production of identities – biographical and relational (Dubar, 1991, 2000). From these dimensions several categories emerged, which could be interpreted as to shed light on the construction of these young musicians’ musical identity.

Main research findings

The content analysis of the interview with F. showed that the two processes, concurring for the production of his musical identity, biographical and relational, are strongly evidenced. In biographical terms – identity for oneself and desired identity - his self-perception is deeply embedded in the culture of the Philharmonic Bands, as he cannot imagine his life away from the Band. He stresses the meaning that the musical beginnings in

the Band represented for all the choices he made subsequently such as to negotiate, as a Band conductor, between continuity/reproduction and rupture/production (alternative between tradition and innovation). In relational terms – virtual identity, and attributed identity – the musical path of F. appears to be strongly influenced by a dichotomy between the way an identity has been imposed on him, and the objective transaction between the attributed/proposed identity, and the one incorporated by himself. His narrative is situated either on the need to cooperate, and find secure recognition, or on the act of changing practices, and defying installed mentalities.

The collective interview showed an impressive relevance in terms of social analysis, revealing the many ways in which the Philharmonic Band musicians see themselves within that particular culture. The gap between a desired identity, and the perceived social value of their practices seems to be mediated by the strong emotional and affective relationships among musicians. On the other hand, a collective identification with the Band, as a completely legitimated social institution, also revealed a social identity, which appears to be marked by duality. While some of the musicians referred the common association of Band musicians with a less valued, peripheric social belonging, the one conductor participating in the collective interview pointed out the stronger motivation, ensemble skills, and sense of community which he finds in Philharmonic Band musicians.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that the young musicians that grew up in Philharmonic Bands in Portugal go on being imbedded in their cultural roots while coming to terms with the different pathways that are determinant for the construction of their musical identities. For the pursuit of this research, the conceptual definition of identity in general, and musical identity in particular, needs further attention taking into account the great discursive complexity of the data analysed so far.