

The involvement of young Portuguese people with Philharmonic Bands – a cultural and social perspective

Graça Mota

Music Education Department, College of Education, Polytechnic Institute
Porto, Portugal
gmota@ese.ipp.pt

ABSTRACT

1. Theoretical background

This paper gives an overview of a two and a half years study addressing the involvement of young Portuguese people with Philharmonic Bands. It looks into the ways musical identities are constructed within a specific cultural and social context, the Philharmonic Band, and is, therefore, affiliated to the area of cultural and social studies.

2. Aim of the study

The purpose of the study was to analyse and interpret, under a social and cultural perspective, the musical context of the Philharmonic Band, as a milieu of socialization and enculturation of young people where musical identity is forged and a personal narrative is constructed.

3. Methodology and Methods

This study used mainly a qualitative, and phenomenological methodology combined with the case study approach 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. At the beginning of the research a questionnaire was sent out to the 301 students and former students of the College of Education in Porto (May 2005), in order to identify those that have participated and/or still participate in the musical activity of Philharmonic Bands. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions concerning the subjects' family history and personal past or current involvement with Bands. Analysis and discussion of data includes the results from the questionnaire, and the findings of an in depth collective case study, built from seventeen individual interviews and one collective interview to former students with a long personal and family history in Philharmonic Bands.

4. Main research findings

From the 301 questionnaires that were sent out, 129 were returned, from which 36 subjects reported to be still involved with Philharmonic Bands. Content analysis of the interviews showed that two processes concurring to the production of a musical identity, biographical and relational, were strongly evidenced. Further, an impressive relevance in terms of social and cultural analysis came to light, revealing the many ways in which the Philharmonic

Band musicians see themselves within that particular culture.

5. Conclusions and implications for music education

Taking into account the great discursive complexity of the analysed data, the conceptual definitions of identity in general, and musical identity in particular, seem to be in need of further attention bearing in mind the social and cultural contexts where a musical life takes place and flourishes. Further, important implications for music education might arise from the understanding of the effect that a strong instrumental practice in the context of a Philharmonic Band may have, as a motivator for young children to pursue an involvement with music for life.

INTRODUCTION

This study stems from the experience of almost two decades in music teacher education programmes of the College of Education in Porto, Portugal. 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 (Mota, 2001).

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. These ensembles play mainly in popular religious fests, parade through the villages, and perform in open-air stages called *Coretos*.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the last decades, developmental theories have been under a certain systematic critique as their approach emphasizes what can be explained by biology and/or evolution, rather than valuing the fundamental role of situation and culture (Minick, 1989; Bruner, 1990, 1996; Walsh, 1991; Graue & Walsh, 1995; Walsh, 2002). In the same line of thought, the perspective of cultural psychology (Bruner, 1990, 1996) approaches development as a process of growth that happens within a certain culture where meanings are

shared, and common narratives are constructed. On the other hand, 'culture' has also been described as one of the most difficult concepts in the human and social sciences as it can build upon both traditional definitions, such as the classic works of literature, and more 'modern' ones, such as 'mass culture' or 'popular culture' in terms of people's everyday life. For the purpose of this study, we would rather focus on a more 'social science' context, which uses the word 'culture' "to refer to whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, national or social group" (Hall, 1997, 2003, p. 2). This is what is being termed as the 'anthropological definition'. Another alternative is to use the word to describe 'shared values' setting an emphasis on the sociological aspect. As a matter of fact, all these interpretations seem to set the focus on the importance of meaning to the definition of culture, understanding it as "what gives us a sense of our own identity" (ibid, p. 3). Moreover, it is the communicative process that enables these meanings to be shared with other people, using the same linguistic codes, i.e. 'speaking the same language'. In this sense, culture "is conceptualised as a primary 'constitutive' process.... and 'discursive' has become the general term used to refer to any approach in which meaning, representation and culture are considered to be constitutive" (ibid, p. 6). This role of discourse is particularly interesting to this study as it highlights the way knowledge is constructed within a shared practice, as well as a shared way of talking about it, and forms of associated behaviours in a particular social, and institutional activity.

In the pursuit of building a clear theoretical contour for the concept of identity in this study, Dubar's search for a sociological theory of identity (2005) was reviewed, and it was also based on his approach that we derived the categories of analysis, which will be presented later on in this paper. In the first place, Dubar refuses to distinguish the individual identity from the collective one, placing the emphasis on the social identity as an articulation between two types of transaction: 'internal', individual transaction, and 'external' between the individual and the institutions with whom s/he interacts. In his perspective, "identity is nothing else but the result at one time stable and provisional, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, of diverse socialization processes that altogether construct the individuals and define the institutions" (ibid, p. 136). For the purposes of this paper, the importance of this view lies on the acknowledgement that identities may be understood as the product of tensions, which are inherent to the social world, and not mere results of psychic functioning.

In the field of musical identity, since Hargreaves & North (1997) edited *The Social Psychology of Music*, the most diverse ways in which people interact with music, and how it influences their musical behaviour, have been more systematically presented as the result of their social context. On the other hand, the extensive body of research around the concept of musical identity consistently relates the individuals' musical experience to their personal

identity. In *Musical Identities*, MacDonald, Hargreaves, & Miell (2002) propose a conceptualisation of musical identities in terms of *Identities in Music (IIM)* and *Music in Identities (MII)*. IIM was defined as the ways in which people view themselves in relation to the social and cultural roles within music while MII refers to the ways in which music may form a part of other aspects of the individual's self-image, such as those related to gender, age or national identity (ibid, p. 12; Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003). The context of this study points out to an affiliation to the first categorisation – identities in music – and draws on a concept of musical identity as the result of multiple influences, biographical contexts, and cultural settings (Frith, 1996; Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000).

AIM OF THE STUDY

Taking a cultural and social perspective, this study seeks to understand the role that the involvement of young Portuguese people with Philharmonic Bands plays in the construction of their musical identities. It aims at the interpretation of their narratives as discourses of the past, present, and future while young musicians playing in the Band. Further, memories and present discourses are interpreted in light of current definitions of identity in general, and musical identity in particular.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This research used mainly a qualitative, and phenomenological methodology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993) combined with the case study approach (Stake, 1995) for the data collection about the memories of the young musicians on their participation in the Philharmonic Bands. Moreover, the building of a coherent narrative also constituted a purpose to be attained (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In the first phase of the study, a questionnaire was sent out to the 301 students and former students of our College of Education, in order to identify those that have participated and/or participate in the musical activity of a Philharmonic Band. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 7 Band conductors (5 former students and 2 current students) and 10 musicians (5 former students and 5 current students). Criteria for selection of the participants were drawn by the research team from the returned questionnaires, and took into account longer participation and early musical tuition in the Band. Further, it was considered that to be a conductor meant a considerable knowledge about the conflict between tradition and innovation in Portuguese Philharmonic Bands, and therefore all reported conductors were included in the study. Later, as we received the visit from the project consultant, a prominent Brazilian researcher in community music, a collective interview with Band specialists was organised in order to allow her to have a first hand experience with the study's context. In this interview, four of the research team members and the project's consultant were present, together with 5 band musicians (1 conductor and 4 band members). The main objective for this meeting

was to allow several people, with different personal experiences and musical pathways in the bands, to interchange and debate their personal knowledge, giving rise to a shared base of common experiences and shedding light on their personal and/or local involvement with the band. This interview embodied many of the characteristics of a focus group interview, which is defined by Bader & Rossi (2002:2) as “a special type of group interview that is structured to gather detailed opinions and knowledge about a particular topic from selected participants”. The dialogue between them was spontaneous, although it was sometimes moderated by the interventions of the research team members in order to propose further topics for reflection, and elicit the participants to engage in interaction as to produce significant meanings behind their accounts.

In the process of constructing a system of content analysis of the interviews, a categories' framework was built which, on the one hand, emerged from the data, and on the other was informed by our theoretical background. Taking as main reference Dubar's identity categories of analysis (2005), this framework is organized along two major axes and informed by two major processes (fig. 1). These axes are 'Identity for oneself' and 'Desired identity', which are intersected by the individual/institutional axes. The processes, which are transversal to all these dimensions, are the biographical process and the relational process, through which all identity is shaped and reshaped continuously.

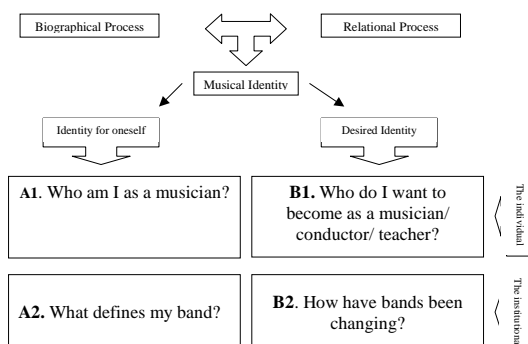


Figure 1. Categories' framework

MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the 301 questionnaires that were sent out, 129 were returned, from which 36 subjects reported to be still involved with Bands. Table 1 shows the distribution of their different types of involvement in the Band. Gender distribution of this group showed 64 percent male, and 36 percent female.

The first approach to the content analysis of the interviews revealed emergent themes, which indicate that:

- The on-going participation in Philharmonic Bands still performs a significant role in the participants' overall musical lives.

Table 1. Distribution of the subjects musical involvement in the Band

	Frequency	Percentage
Musician	21	58,3
Conductor	4	11,1
Musician and teacher	4	11,1
Musician and conductor	4	11,1
Musician and management	2	5,6
Musician and teacher	1	2,8
Total	36	100,0

- The fact that they have graduated, or are in the process of graduating as music educators, has significantly changed the way they approach their activity as musicians in the Band, both in the sense of the repertoire and in the pursuit of excellence of performance.
- The experience of community music, and emotional and affective relationships among participants, plays a major role in their musical and professional development.
- Participation of young women has been growing continuously since the time the interviewees first engaged with Philharmonic Bands.

As the in-depth analysis proceeded, according to the previously shown categories framework, the following ideas can be summarized:

Identity for oneself

A1 – Who am I as a musician?

A common trait to the interviewees' narratives is the idea that without the Bands they would have never been musicians. Even if they acknowledge some of the negative implications of the type of music education they received there, there is a strong sense of belonging to that particular culture – being a 'philharmonic person'.

I would not be a musician today if I didn't have those beginnings in the Band. It opened to me the music world. (A.)

I would consider myself to be a philharmonic person, and I was, for a long time, a philharmonic in its purest meaning. Right now, I certainly am not, because I have a career in music, and being a philharmonic band musician is no longer a part of my life. Now, I am a conductor. But for a long time I was a philharmonic person... (M.)

A2 – What defines my Band?

In the conflict between tradition and innovation, our participants seem to have developed a consciousness about the musical problems that arise from this dichotomy.

There is a person, in many contexts... particularly in the bands of the interior regions of the country, the 'mestre'. He is a charismatic figure, who 'knows it all' and cannot be questioned. Here, in my hometown, he was the one who first taught me (...) but on a musical level, he is very uninteresting. (F.)

Desired identity

B1 – Who do I want to become as a musician/conductor/teacher?

Our interviewees cannot envision a future without any connection to the bands:

...When I finish my degree in Music Education I would like to go back to develop further my instrumental skills, which is something I can't get in my Band. But even if I think the musical standards there may not be the highest I will not let down my colleagues, my conductor, my friends. I will keep going to the rehearsals and playing with them. (A.)

... I may develop my artistic career, I may become a soloist in a great Orchestra, I may become the conductor of a large symphonic band, I may develop an important research in higher education, etc. But in fact, I think all my life I will be connected to the Philharmonic Bands. (M.)

B2 – How have Bands been changing?

All participants acknowledged that Philharmonic Bands nowadays are going through a dramatic change:

Now there are people with a good music education who participate in bands, and they are willing to cooperate, and even for financial reasons teach in the bands. (C.)

And nowadays there are some bands with music schools where there are teachers for virtually every instrument. (...) Some of the band schools have evolved into conservatoires (...) Musical training has improved 200% over the past 20 years. (M.)

Collective interview

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 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 AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

The Philharmonic Bands appear, as an environment where young people are socialized both in biographical and relational terms, as two processes concurring for the construction of their identities (Dubar, 2005). This leads to a permanent negotiation between innovation and tradition where music is at the heart of the construction of a cultural identity. 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. Taking into account the great discursive complexity of the analysed data, the conceptual definitions of identity in general, and musical identity in particular, seem to be in need of further attention bearing in mind the social and cultural contexts where a musical life takes place and flourishes. In this sense, this study confirms the fundamental role of situation and culture where development is faced as a process of growth that happens within a certain context where meanings are shared, and common narratives are constructed. Finally, important direct implications for music education might arise from the understanding of the effect that a strong instrumental practice in the context of a Philharmonic Band may have, as a motivator for young children to pursue an involvement with music for life.

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