

*Third 21st CAF Conference at Harvard, in
Boston, USA. September 2015, Vol. 6, Nr. 1
ISSN: 2330-1236*



Intercultural Musical Learning in the Era of Technology

Gabriel Antão and Darlinda Moreira

Universidade Aberta
Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract

Foreign students abroad need to feel integrated in the new community, which includes complex learning processes in multicultural environments. The fact that we have experienced these processes ourselves was certainly a motivation for this research, especially knowing that we could contribute to help our fellow Portuguese brass players undergoing the same experience. From the singularity of music performance in the style of playing and communication emerge many cultural aspects, which have been developed through centuries of orchestral practice. As the new students are confronted with the aesthetic musical concepts and both professional and social practices of the country they arrive in, they strive to understand these concepts and adapt themselves to the values promoted by the new music practice. The aim of this on-going research is the study of the integration of brass music students in German universities and in the German society. Notably, through the understanding of intercultural processes experienced by the students, professors can become more aware of the challenges that concern music education. In this research all ten Portuguese brass students enrolled in any German music university in the last five years were interviewed in order to deeply understand this process. With a growing importance of the technological facilities, students are able to gather more information, to prepare themselves for the new concepts they try to embrace and to better deal with a different culture.

Keywords: Musical Education, Interculturality, Classical Music, Technology.

Introduction

The undergoing investigation is sparkled with multiple personal experiences, from which we could perceive many culture-based differences on brass playing as we will explain in the next pages. Being aware of the difficulties of getting a professional job as an orchestral musician in Portugal, students wish to move abroad and use their mobility in order to complete further studies, especially inside the European Union. We would like with this study to optimize the learning process for students who are striving for more success, and for that purpose we need to know what the students are undergoing so that we can understand what it takes to study abroad and become a professional musician.

In order to explore the evidences stated about cultural influence, we looked for the existence of Portuguese brass players studying in Germany: these individuals could make us understand their experience of adapting to another culture. We aim to understand and learn from the learning process and getting along with the culture: the difficulties, problems and successes of the students. This will allow us to find logical patterns of success in the way Portuguese students approach their studies.

The current research addresses the Portuguese and German cultures, studying the musical culture and history of each country, as well as their orchestral landscape. Firstly, brass players usually find in the symphony orchestras the best option as a professional career. We must have into account that the ratio of symphony orchestras in Europe is said to be of one per million inhabitants. In Portugal, for reasons we will discuss later, this ratio is lower than the average. On the other hand, we find in Germany approximately one quarter of the total symphony orchestras worldwide, (almost) all being state funded and several of them counting some hundreds of years of existence (DOV, 2013). After researching on the Portuguese orchestra and Classical music culture, we could verify that its peak took place in the sixteenth century (Brito, 1989) and throughout history several unfortunate events did not prevented it from establishing itself in the leading European culture. Furthermore, both the lack of literate musicians during that period – which explains why there are so few manuscripts dated from the 16th century – and the earthquake from 1755, which destroyed not only most of the city of Lisbon but also many documents, are responsible for the thin amount of information available today regarding musical practices at the time (Bettencourt da Câmara, 2009). The orchestral landscape in the twentieth century did not enjoy the desired stability (Cassuto, 1999), however in the last two decades of the twentieth century we did assist to remarkable transformations in the musical education system (Delgado, 2002). We must say that the number of symphony orchestras in Portugal has not changed significantly, making it necessary to the Portuguese brass players to look for more opportunities abroad. The German orchestral landscape in its tradition, impressive magnitude and politically stable funding, seems to be ideal for the high qualified musicians to look for an opportunity, which usually means to move abroad to complete further studies and attend the orchestral auditions.

Symphony orchestras are institutions of tradition and aesthetic cohesion, which means they tend to reflect the surrounding culture. Having this idea in mind, the demand for a way of playing that fits the orchestra/culture is logical. This means we will be dealing in this research with different cultural levels: the students facing a whole new culture (society), the contact with a multicultural student community and the professional learning situation as soon as the students get their probation time in one symphony orchestra.

Theoretical Frame

The cultural influences on brass playing can be perceived in several ways. Firstly, on the dominant master-apprentice model, working on the basis of imitation, the student tries to get the musical product given by the teacher, realizing the differences in the approach during the process. For this topic we must refer to Paul Budde, who in his PhD Thesis (2011) defends the influence of the mother tongue on playing, by the replication of particular consonants and vowels on brass playing. These are perceived differently according to a given language and students may hear and reproduce those models differently due to the influence of their mother tongue. It follows that several authors (Heath & Street, 2008; Hargreaves, Miell & MacDonald, 2002; Miller & Shahriari, 2009) reveal the impact of our early development stages, when our culture is shaped, since the moment we were born.

Another interesting point is the culturally perceived concepts, something we can find in the metaphorical description of music, since adjectives in music are “borrowed” from other sensory perceptions and, therefore, culturally different. Furthermore, metaphor does not represent but it transforms the meaning, opening new insights (Kramer, 2011). Additionally the musical notation (and its symbols) can have different interpretations according to a specific culture. In this topic, we cite Nicholas Cook (1998): “[...] the pattern of what is determined by notation and what isn’t, what is to be taken as given and what is a matter of performance interpretation, is one of the things that defines a musical culture [...]” (p.63) and this implies that it can determine how people imagine music in one given culture, binding members of a musical community together (Cook, 1998). This is of special importance in this research, as we take into account the different approaches to music from different cultures. In this sense, music notation is not meaningful by itself. Meaning should indeed be produced by interpretation (Kramer, 2011). This insight to music brings an implication, exposed by Parncutt and Dorfer (2010), who stated: “[...] a migrant musician may have difficulty demonstrating their musical ability to local musicians, and in rehearsal may misunderstand local unwritten rules of musical interaction. Both in this specific case and more generally, if music can promote self-esteem, it can promote integration” (p.384).

Contrasts in music performance can be well perceived in the intercultural environments of music universities, where different students tend to approach music in different ways, a phenomenon that helps the brass players to realize how different a cultural approach to music can be. We consider that adaption to a new approach takes time, as well as it takes time to know a new culture. Students are also able to recognize the boundaries of their own culture by experiencing other cultures, considering that musicians also have their ‘accents’ (Swanwick, 2002). As musicians, we should try to adapt ourselves to the musical product around us, henceforth on a defined musical culture we adapt to that way of playing, learning from it. As Swanwick (2002) highlights the ‘accents’ found on musicians playing are equally valid, retaining the question of what is better or more valid in a specific social context. As we will explain later, the value of music cannot be universal, but relies on the social and cultural context. We realize that until now different authors described different ways of reaching the same idea, that music can be cultural sensitive and that in order to engage a certain culture we must get to know it better.

Playing music is somehow a reaction to a stimulus: it is the use of unconscious reflexes, both natural and conditioned (Nelson, 2006). What makes reflexes become conditioned is the process of repetition, and with this we mean practice itself. However, this should be done as a response to a specific stimulus, a mental representation of the sound we pretend to achieve

(Frederiksen, 1996), being our body responsible to find the suitable way of reaching the objective. Wilfried Gruhn (2005) states that representations need activities (playing and therefore practice) to stimulate the neuronal loop and become learning, based on the cross modal activity crucial for the learning process. The importance and strength of mental representations – and with this we mean the mental representation of an ‘ideal’ way of playing according to a culture – is enhanced by the fact that mental training can be almost as productive as effective practice (Blakemore & Frith, 2005; Sacks, 2008).

We cannot oversee the aspect of ensemble playing that goes far beyond playing correctly the notes from the score: one must be flexible and work as a part of a group, otherwise we are unemployable (Slatford in AEC, 2001:63). The famous maestro and pedagogue Hans Swarowsky (1979) refers to the replacing of musicians and occasional substitutes in one particular orchestra with the idea that these should come from the same playing tradition and that could fit immediately in the orchestra’s way of playing, so that stability and homogeneity could be achieved¹. We could state that in order to fit in a pre-existing orchestra (thus environment), a new musician should try to shape both himself and his (own) way of playing in order to fit in, due to an already existing practice. On his contribution for the study made by the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC, 2001), Vapaavuori insists that conservatoires must train young students for the professional field but it is the orchestra’s responsibility to maintain tradition and quality, showing students both tradition and experience. This idea makes clear that despite the musical education of students, they will face a set of traditions and expectations while applying and fitting to an orchestra. Taking into account that new musicians are chosen by audition where their playing is the key to get a job, the closer they get to the expectations of the orchestra, the more likely they are to be employed. It means we should approach the orchestra as a community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced this concept saying that learning involves the whole person, implying a relation to social communities, being an active participant, thus a member. In addition, the music experience is a product of social interactions in a place and time (Barret & Webster, 2014) meaning that, “The musical and extra-musical aspects of musical styles constitute the elements of a ‘community of practice’ ”(Hewitt, 2009:330). Hewitt (2009) associates the concept of community of practice to the orchestra, where newcomers must accept and adopt the ruling practices if they are to be accepted as a member within that community. Giving value to the work of art may be what this is about. One of the prominent brass pedagogues was Arnold Jacobs who said that the phenomenon of imitation and the sense of sight could reinforce each other in order to accomplish the best learning (in Frederiksen, 1996), which can be applied to the learning of a specific cultural playing. This could be associated with the enculturation process in music (Kelly, 2009; Cutietta et Stauffer, 2005). Enculturation occurs mainly by music knowledge acquired through the process of listening, giving us the understanding of how music acts in peoples’ meanings. The enculturation process and especially learning through music listening, differs from normal language learning in the sense that learning a language is much more effective in young people, a process whose strength vanishes with time, while in music that process is almost equally as effective (Sacks, 2008). Then, for the foreign students enrolled in new cycles of studies at a university, learning within a music culture can indeed work. However, multiple ways of learning can be pointed: living in the culture, from the

¹ “Der Ersatz freiwerdender Stellen im Orchester darf ausschließlich aus einem Kreis von Musikern kommen, die dort von Mitgliedern des Orchesters genau in dessen Spielweise eingeführt sind und sich sofort klaglos einfügen können. So kann eine Spieltradition begründet werden, ohne die das Orchester immer wieder den schwersten Niveauschwankungen ausgesetzt sein wird, (Swarowsky, 1979:84)

teacher-student interaction, reading books or by observation and imitation (Miller & Shahriari, 2009:47). We believe that the most effective can be achieved by the sum of all possibilities together.

Conservatories prepare students for a musical vocation and employment (AEC, 2001), what includes international students (OECD, 2014) as the Portuguese students in this case. For that we should consider that learning music and culture of others is far more than reading a book or listening to a teacher talking (Valerie Peters, 2014), meaning that involvement in the culture might be determinant.

Nowadays the possibilities in Classical music are very different from those existing centuries, if not decades ago. Technology is constantly enabling new possibilities, especially with what concerns music learning. Even if most of the possibilities are related to general music learning, they also apply to the specialized music learning. Riley (2013) describes how new tools, such as the iPad, enable teachers and students to discuss and apply strategies of improvement, making references to the audio and video recording functions, as well as getting feedback for tuning and tempo or simply taking notes. The students' need for role models of excellence steers them to concert streaming and recordings, bringing a more intense experience through the use of tools like the Internet, a point that Riley (2013) made clear. Tools of online communication are equally as important, as they allow the exchange of experiences with other students engaged in a similar situation. The recording of practice sessions is one of the most effective ways to reach the musical objective, enabling the comparison of the actual product with the role models. The recording of lessons can also optimize the focus of the student due to the possibility of a second analysis from the student himself. Also, when confronted with a whole new culture and habits, students may use technology as an efficient tool to learn more about it and thus feel integrated. On the intercultural subject, technology is indeed important because it allows us to get a wider scope of the differences among cultures and to value them equally. Knowing other cultures can help us to be conscious of the characteristics of our own culture, giving us aside from giving us a better understanding of the cultural environment we are dealing with in the new country.

Methods of research

The purpose of qualitative research is not only to generate general social significance but also to reach an understanding of a particular situation (Stake, 2010) and to look for new insights and meanings (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006). As mentioned by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), for a case study the most important should be the extensive examining of the case itself. In addition, the case study has its strength in its own complexity and details (Bassey, 1992), as well as an exhaustive gathering of information about the case, so that it could be possible to understand its singularities (Berg, 2001). Furthermore, as mentioned by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), "For a qualitative community, case study concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts" (p.444). Also Lisa Given (2008) states that: "Case studies focus on one or a few instances, phenomena, or units of analysis, but they are not restricted to one observation. Nevertheless, the boundaries are not fully clear" (p.68). This applies to the observed case in which a deep research on the subject has been undertaken and was strengthened by other tools. So in order to pursue our objective of understanding the complex learning process of the Portuguese brass students, we find on the open-guided interview the most suitable tool to perceive how they face the cultural differences and engage in the process of learning. The open interview gives the opportunity to explore related topics and overcome some misunderstandings and enables the interviewed student to

approach the subject according to his/her will, allowing simultaneously a deeper understanding of the phenomena. Henceforth interviews can report people's opinions and understand their behaviors in real time (Hicks and Taylor in Cox, Geisen & Green, 2008).

The participants are the only ten Portuguese brass players who are either currently enrolled in a German University or have been in the last five years (so that the experience of encountering a new culture is still present). In addition, they must have done most of their musical studies in Portugal, therefore having a strong influence of the Portuguese musical culture. We did interview students from both genders, with ages varying between twenty and thirty years.

We consider it important to mention that due to the ethics protocol we follow, we were not allowed to identify the students neither strengthen the opinion of more successful ones, which could compromise the anonymity of the interviewees. However, by not revealing their identities, the students made very personal statements and felt free to give very valuable information for the research. We must recognize our privileged position (being a musician as well as a student) gave a better access to the participants, as they trusted a fellow musician and student with their personal statements, allowing us a better understanding of the phenomena.

Findings

Students find the cultural influence determinant and that the more they know about the culture and embrace it, the better they accomplish their objective of playing according to that particular Classical musical approach. Taking into account the progress and the development of musical education in Portugal, the Portuguese students perceive the multiplicity of cultures in the Portuguese music as being heterogeneous.

A big disparity between the two countries emerged from the curricula of university courses in music performance. While in Portugal the program focused on solo playing and was complemented with some occasionally chamber and orchestral music, in Germany the focus was on the orchestral playing and auditioning.

The answers we obtained reflected the perception we had from the revised literature and confirmed our idea that musical playing can be strongly influenced by the surrounding culture. We also believe that adapting ourselves to a new culture can make us excel at the professional level.

Amidst the conclusions we could draw from the data we obtained, we consider of greatest importance the obvious consensus of the answers. Furthermore, we believe that "the universality of the musical language is culture-sensitive". Different cultures may recognize a musical work but describe and interpret that work very differently, due to culturally based values and perceptions. Also, the results from the analysis suggest a relation between culture and History, which reflects the musical playing and the need for better cultural knowledge. The emerging role of technology as an important tool to foster cultural experiences and optimize the learning process was enhanced, and we can perceive how it facilitates musical learning and the integration of musicians in a new cultural model.

Discussion

With this investigation we aimed to help future students build a successful strategy for their studies, relying on literature and the experience of other students in a similar situation. Although we cannot make generalizations related to the situation of students of other nationalities undergoing a similar process, we purpose a new insight of the phenomena and a

better understanding that can hopefully lead to broader researches, which could help to make more general conclusions. We suggest here to look within the western culture for diversity, namely in Classical music.

Brass playing reflects not only the mother tongue (intrinsically the culture of the musician) but also the culture related perceptions of values inherent to music. In this point, Heyne and Derrick (2014) bring us some new information to complete the previous idea from Budde (2011), stating that the mother tongue is indeed perceived on brass playing. They concluded that differences could be noticed not only on the cultural way or style of playing, but also rooted in phonetics and phonology of different languages (Heyne & Derrick, 2014). The authors also state a decreasing language influence on articulation for professional players. However, we must take to discussion the fact that advanced students (as those asked in our interviews) realized strong differences on playing evidencing the mother tongue, which makes us conclude that its influence might not completely disappear. It might happen that there is a desire of matching some other language pattern on playing (as for the Portuguese students in Germany).

One arising question, similar to the one Valerie Peters (2014) makes in her chapter in the book of Barret and Webster (2014), is if students can be proficient in several musical cultures. In our opinion - meaning with this the possibility of students wanting to learn and reproduce a new culture, a way of playing and interacting - it could be at least very difficult to achieve that for some cultures, due to the high level asked for in auditions and the need for fulfilling expectations. Learning a new culture takes time, and so does creating habits of playing, thus leading to the conclusion that it should be fairly difficult to think otherwise than focusing on one single culture to learn in depth. Miller and Shahriari (2009) also bring up the individual listener's interpretation as result of conditioning and life experience, making sense of the similar common values of people who share the same background on performing music. It is not meant that this applies as a rule, but the likelihood of consistence between interpreter and listener might be seriously higher when sharing the same background, what could otherwise generate misunderstanding. We do not intend to impose this as a fatality, there are indeed exceptions to this idea with students having success as outsiders or simply branded as natural talents.

About the integration of the Portuguese students, we believe that it might help anyone (student) studying abroad but that in the specific case of brass players it could be determinant in order to achieve professional success. It would be interesting for further discussions to understand the relationship between German fluency and the better integration and success of the students.

Technology appears at this point as key since it enables students, professional musicians and researchers a definitely greater experience approaching and getting to know the new culture, shortening the process in various ways. Technology also changed the way we listen to Classical music and its market. Freitas Branco (2005) stated that decades ago we would need to attend a concert if we wanted to listen to music, and hire musicians if someone desired to have music in any context, but nowadays since we get to listen to music everywhere, the need for a concert is no longer that obvious. Pinho Vargas (2010) also points that due to the strong blending of recorded music in our lives, a recording that would since years succeed the concert, today the need for a recording is crucial in order to have a concert. Carlos Rodriguez (2014) refers to the Internet as the "ultimate listening space", being rich in possibilities and allowing users to access unlimited music, adding that "The music listening conditions acquired with handheld digital music players and headphones thus provide privacy in public places, making them private heterotopias" (p.98). It follows that technology makes possible for students to listen constantly to music, and more important, music that they are looking for and wishing to listen to, a key point

that can boast the students' experience on musical learning. Despite all the many new possibilities opened by technology, we believe we have yet to see its full potential in the future. Henceforth, the impact of technology in upcoming years will be one of the most interesting topics. If the current students are now exploring all the new social networks and online availability of knowledge (and music), the future students – labeled as born and educated in the digital age - could provide us with insights about the influence of the online learning tools on the preparation for further studies abroad and professional success.

We do not expect this evidences to prevail for many years to come, as does not most of the knowledge in science. However we would be glad to realize in later upcoming investigations that the Portuguese brass players do not need anymore to move abroad in order to look for professional success anymore. It would also be of most interest to interview the same students in a few years' time to analyze their success and to face the actual conclusions. We (also) further believe that this research topic could be explored in other educational environments, fostering the preparation of the students for the new cycle of studies and broadening the teachers' understanding of the situation and of what could be done to improve learning.

Final Considerations

In this era of universal values it might be difficult to understand those of music culture rooted in historical traditions and practices. Indeed, we find indeed growing evidences of high quality music making in Portugal and the non-ceasing efforts from musicians and composers to establish it in the European context. However, the influence of former politics and events in the History lead the current Portuguese brass players to look for solutions across borders and for that purpose we must consider the German hegemony in the Classical music context in order to understand the process these students are undergoing. We do not want nor should show this evidence as fatalist. There are not only exceptions to this process, but also new possibilities coming in the form of technology which could facilitate the process of knowing and adapting to a culture more easily. Also, the multicultural environment of music universities in Germany makes international students feel more comfortable and accepted, which generates more confidence to embrace this process.

The differences in educational programs in Portuguese and German music universities lead us to the conclusion that each country is preparing the student for the surrounding professional field, which means that in the Portuguese case a general approach to the performance is taken into account and less importance is given to the orchestral part, due to the almost non-existent auditions in the country. In Germany (on the other hand), probably due to the well-defined system of orchestras, the studies are directed to the orchestral part, focusing on the audition process and simulating auditions.

We would like to express our concern for the reader of this paper, as we do not pretend to take the Portuguese and German Histories as static. As two countries that over centuries participated in the development of Europe, they underwent wars, politics and mass migrations, among other factors. However, it is on the basis of these transformations occurred in every society - politically, socially and culturally connected – that this study comes to a meaning. Our perspective over cultural relationships may be supported in the words of Kramer (2011), who says: “Interpretations, whether of music or anything else, can be invalidated, but it is impossible to validate them.” (p.27). This new insight on the culturally sensitive side of Classical music can be contested, due not only to the interpretive value of music but also to the daily changes our societies undergo. However we tried exhaustively to give fundament to our idea, which turned

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out to be in accordance with the experiences and opinions of the Portuguese students, enabling future students with a better understanding of the process and of what it takes to become a professional musician under the described conditions.

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