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Singing Canons: A didactic suggestion, using BAPNE Method

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Abstract

Singing canons represent an extremely rich and interesting starting point for the development of music didactics, due to their historically known features of circularity and repetitiveness, their potential to be a socializing and cohesive element in group dynamics, their being relatively easy to memorize and their melodic and harmonic development and structure. Many collections and books present canons and rounds in which the singing of a canon comes with body percussion. What is actually missing today is a consolidated use of canons together with body percussion, in which the latter is not only intended as an accompaniment to the voice, but also fully appreciated in its biomechanical aspects and overall potential as far as cognitive and socio-emotional developments are concerned. This paper, using BAPNE method, aims at gradually improving and enhancing the involvement and the attention levels and strengthening short- and long-term memory, as well as concentration.

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1. Introduction

From time immemorial and from what has been considered as the first round “Sumer is icumen in” in history, to the subsequent developments within vocal and instrumental music, nowadays a great number of rounds, as they are also called for their circularity and perpetual repetition, are part of a traditional folk repertoire from all over the world. The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of the round since it represents a great source of folk traditions in different cultures and it can be employed in didactics as a means to develop, in a simple and immediate way, both polyphony and the rhythmic-melodic aspect. This is the starting point which is revised and systematized by the author,

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in accordance with the BAPNE method, in order to broaden the potential of the involvement concerning singing in round and to develop cognitive faculties such as attention, concentration and the executive function.

The aspects which connect the round with the BAPNE method are many. The voice is a form of expression constantly employed in this method; both from a linguistic and a music point of view (Conti & Romero, 2015). The intrinsic musical value of the round, prosodic accents present in the text, music and structure represent a perfect starting point to develop those faculties belonging to the different kinds of intelligences as stated in H. Gardner's theory (Gardner, 1983). Through the use of the body, with the body percussion, as regards biomechanical planes and axis (Romero, 2011a), this method employs music to stimulate cognitive and socio-emotional aspects. The use of rounds with two, three, four voices, together with the body percussion and the systematic approach of the BAPNE method, generate a virtuous system which can help to improve attention, according to Sohlberg and Mateer (1989), the executive function and the psychomotor aspects connected with the biomechanical planes. The goal of the BAPNE method is not the perfect execution of the exercise, what matters is that the student understands what she/he has to do and performs it in a stimulating environment. The focus is on her/his gratification and awareness about the different abilities which may emerge during the performance through the realization of a common plan, whose aims are not competition, but sharing and growing.

1.1. Round, current situation

The kind of round this article deals with is the round in unison or in circle, simply referred to also as round, as it is defined by the prestigious "The New Oxford History of Music" ("Musica medioevale fino al Trecento," 1978). This round often originates from folk melodies (Cerlati & Strobino & Vineis, 1987). In these simple compositions the melody is performed in exactly the same way by several voices, which start singing one after the other, at specific intervals, using an exact phrase or number of beats. The round, as a form of music, dates back to the western tradition (Falck, 1972; Lopatin, 2014) and has been widely employed by many renowned composers. In its simplest and most popular form we can find an extensive repertoire all over Europe and also in other cultures. The singing in round has become circular and perpetual and during its execution it creates an harmonic structure which is only based on a single melodic line. As it is a source which is particularly rich in simple and stimulating material, its repertoire has been widely employed in teaching music and in particular in school choir practice (see the bibliography relating to the collection of rounds) where this form of music, achieved through the use of the voice, allows one to immediately test both the harmonious and the rhythmic and melodic aspects.

As mentioned in the bibliography (Ubaldi, 1986; Bolkavec, 1996; Feierabend, 2014; Turner, 2015), a repertoire exists which contains a large collection of songs which can be executed in rounds and, for this reason, the present work might seem somewhat redundant. The teaching proposals include the employment of the body as a musical instrument, the body percussions or, often, real orchestrations. Nevertheless, using the body as a musical instrument is limited to a beat produced by the hands or by the feet, all meant as accompaniment to the song. The singing still remains the core, around which the added elements of body percussion gravitate. What is still lacking is the systematization of the use of the body percussion according to a neurological and kinaesthetic point of view of the biomechanical planes and axis. In this article the employment of the body percussion and of the voice follows a holistic concept, in order to stimulate the cerebral lobes and to develop the multiple intelligences, in accordance with H. Gardner's theory. This proposal can be considered as a starting point to enrich teaching methods. This enrichment originates from the systematization of the round through the BAPNE method, whose aim is the cognitive and socio-emotional stimulation.

The socio-emotional aspect is as important, since, traditionally, the round is a part singing; the relationships within the group and the will to listen to other singers' voice and adapt one's own voice to the others' become essential in order to obtain a common and satisfying result. Many musicians and teachers of the twentieth century, like Dalcroze, Kodaly, Orff (Piazza, 1979a, 1979b), Goitre, etc, have dedicated their energies to the collection of repertoires for choirs which can be executed in rounds. Therefore the focus on this repertoire as well as the use of the body and of the movement in music teaching has been on-going for years, and this article wishes to carry on the interest shown in this subject and contribute further to it. However, the aim is to go beyond and to integrate the potential of the round with the BAPNE method and to consider the music aspect, not as an exclusive or central matter of the teaching proposal, but only as the starting point.

The round in circle, either in its modality of execution (perpetual repetition), or in the possible form created by the executors, in circle single or concentric, recalls an African outlook which is definitely one of the pillars of the BAPNE method. The learning method in circle based on cooperation and not on hierarchy and competition, is the most natural way to execute the round and therefore, it is the one proposed in this article.

1.2. Body percussion

It is a technique which employs the body to produce different kinds of sounds using it as a musical instrument. It has been employed in different cultures (Romero, 2008a) and dates back to the dim and distant past. Its employment within music teaching has involved and still involve the work of many researchers (Romero, 2013).

1.3. The BAPNE method

It is a method based on cognitive and emotional stimulation which, as it is related to the principles the theory of the multiple intelligences, combines aspects present in various fields: biomechanics, anatomy, psychology, neurology and ethnomusicology. The activities proposed by this method aim to involve, stimulate and develop the multiple intelligences from a neurological and biomechanical point of view (Romero, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

2. Method, development

Since the voice is an inner expression of our personality, singing and choral activity stimulate the personal intelligences (intrapersonal and interpersonal), according to the Multiple Intelligences' theory (Gardner, 1983). Besides the linguistic intelligence involved in the text, which is sometimes different from one's own native language, and the musical intelligence, clearly involved in the whole activity, singing in group requires a constant attention towards the other singers. The aim is to achieve a common sound which is the result of continual adjustments that each voice, each person, has to make in order to join harmoniously the group.

The employment of the rounds certainly develops those aspects linked to music such as vocalism, intonation and rhythm and improve the melodic and harmonic perception. Moreover the structure of the round leads to spatial and logical-mathematical representations, useful to stimulate those intelligences which are different from those ones more clearly involved in the activity.

2.1. A practical working example

In order to exemplify the aims of this work, a scheme made on an English traditional song is reported sideways: "Row the boat" (Ubaldi, 1986, p.73). It's in 6/8 with a vocal extension of one octave and a very simple and brief text. During the first and the second teaching phase, as schematized in the BAPNE method about the movement in space, the "passive category" is used; this means that no movement is required.

2.2. First phase:

The group stands in circle. Then, through imitation, the singers learn the rhythmic text and the body percussion, phrase by phrases. The phrase will be split and adapted by the teacher according to the level of the group.

The BAPNE method uses four ways of learning: Imitation, Inverse reaction, Variable circular coordination, Real-time signaling. In this case we will employ the imitation-repetition procedure by creating a demand-response system led by the teacher to fluently teach the round by introducing it in a process which will lead the student to acquire the rhythm, the text, the prosodic accents and the body percussion. The plurality of the visual, audio and kinaesthetic stimuli, VAK model, will keep a high level of attention.

2.2.1. *Second phase:*

Introduction of the melody: the whole song is taught by repeating the previous phase and by employing again the learning model through imitation-repetition, based on the demand-answer system.

2.2.2. *Activity development*

To develop the activity, we introduce the movement in some stages of the round and from the “passive category”, according with classification in the BAPNE method, used in the previous phases in which no movement is required.

The kinaesthetic aspect, once the song is acquired in its initial form, can be developed in the following way:

- Students walk freely in the space, while he’s singing and performing body percussion sequence, and has to stop in front of another student at the end of the fourth bar (see Fig.2, first line).
- Continuing to perform the song by replacing the clap of the fifth and sixth bar, with beating one’s hands with the student opposite (see Fig.2, second line).

Variation: double circle

Students stand in two concentric circles, the inner one has its back turned to the center in order to have a student of the outer circle opposite. In this case few aspects get more important such as the relational aspect, the somesthetic stimulation for the contact with the other students, percussive laterality together with the use of the sagittal plane and spatial laterality. We can achieve these goals with the following changes:

- Each student is moving to the right, with two steps to perform the first bar, and she/he’ll continue singing and Body percussion with a new partner.
- At the fifth and sixth bar we’ll replace the four beat with beating one’s hands with the student opposite in front, on the right, in front, on the left.

2.2.3. *Variation: singing in round.*

In circle, we create homogeneous sections in number and gender by splitting the group in subgroups. We start with two groups which will gradually become four, in order to achieve the optimal execution required by the song proposed. The students start singing at specific intervals so that each group overlap the preceding, before on bar one and five, after also on bar three and seven. Actually, the best way to make each group start singing easily, is to single out a reference point from the group that is already singing; step by step the teacher will lead the students to execute their own part while listening to the others at the same time. In order to further develop the already mentioned cognitive abilities and the short and long-term memory, a nice and useful variation will be to ask the group to stop singing and keep just the body percussion sequence. The teacher, wisely playing with the different voices, will create interesting effects, able to involve emotionally the group and to keep a high level of attention.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this paper is to propose a working model usable in different fields: primary and secondary school, choirs, bands and several other areas. Take advantage of the spontaneity of the canon, round as a way of sharing and cohesion of the group, this is a connection point with the BAPNE method, whom adds an great potential by using of body percussion from a biomechanical and neurological aspect. The suggestion of a concrete job using round "Row the boat", it has been the most direct way to develop a model of activities, starting with a traditional round to show how the aim changes. It’s no longer just to sing together, which still holds its importance, but to achieve a cognitive stimulation through a systematized path according to BAPNE methodology. The effectiveness of the singing in school and of the polyphonic singing, in particular through the round, is an element supported by the expertise developed in didactics, in general. The relation with the other individuals unfolds through singing canons, which enable an intense and easy to reach experience of polyphony without any particular vocal difficulty.

Last but not least is socio-emotional stimulation, which benefits from the opportunity of working in a context of individual and collective growth where cooperation is an integral part of the practical activity. The teacher pays a

particular attention to the atmosphere in the group. Indeed, the whole learning activity takes place in a circle. This nonhierarchical structure – instead of the typical frontal structure of schools or choirs – enables the creation of a cooperative and non-competitive atmosphere.

The potential which results from the connection of the elements represented by the rounds with the BAPNE method deeply influences the employment and the goal of the song proposed.

To summarise the potential of the teaching proposal of this paper, below these are the most important aspects:

3.1. *Development of the executive function*

During the learning phase, which is just one part of the didactics, the student has to react to the demand-response process in order to learn the elements proposed by the teacher and repeat them (response) in a time span beaten by the rhythm of the demand. The execution then, must be subordinated to a constant adjustment of the single student to the group by keeping the same beats and intonation and by paying her/his attention to the different tasks on psychomotor and kinaesthetic levels.

3.2. *Development of the cognitive aspects related to attention*

According to the model proposed by Sohlberg & Mateer (1989): selective, focused, divided, sustained, alternating attention. The multisensorial stimulation according to the VAK model and the growing mnemonic request throughout the learning process stimulate short and long-term memory on a verbal, visual/spatial and kinaesthetic level.

3.3. *Kinaesthetic development, biomechanical aspect*

The use of the body, that is the body percussion, connects the singing with the kinaesthetic aspect right in the learning phase. It develops psychomotor skills and increases the perception that the student has of the rhythm. Laterality is developed according to the different types classified in the method: somesthetic, percussive, gyratory, spatial. By developing the laterality and the dissociation of the planes: horizontal, longitudinal, sagittal (Romero, 2012).

3.4. *Neurological aspect*

Different lobes of the cerebral cortex and the subcortical areas of the brain are each time involved through the tasks required by the exercise.

3.5. *Emotional stimulation*

Singing and group execution generate a relaxed environment and a sense of wellbeing thanks to the production of oxytocin which also enhances self-esteem and, in general, leads to a more active and stimulating atmosphere which favours learning.

3.6. *Stimulation of multiple intelligences*

In accordance with Gardner's theory about multiple intelligences, the activity proposed aims to develop the different intelligences: linguistic, musical, logical/mathematical, kinaesthetic, visual/spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic (Romero, 2008b).

The wish of this paper is to propose a development in this direction by drawing a road that has to still move forward in its extensive possibilities.

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