

The Influence of School and Community Choral Contests in the Introduction of Music Education in Botswana Schools

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Abstract

This article examines choral contests in Botswana's music education. Choral contests have been conducted for many years in Botswana and predate the introduction of formal music teaching in schools. These early contests were often annual choral competitions (tonic sol-fa notation) and were organized through the Botswana Teachers Union or community organizations such as churches. These early choral competitions in fact laid a foundation for formal music teaching in schools. Data for this study was collected through the researcher's participatory observation as a college choir conductor, a community choir conductor and a competition adjudicator. Rather than empirical research, this article is based on a critical argument about issues the author has experienced. At the time of writing this article, there has been very little to no documentation of Botswana choral music.

Keywords: Botswana, schools, communities, choral contests, music education.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Phibion, O. S. (2012). The Influence of School and Community Choral Contests in the Introduction of Music Education in Botswana Schools. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education*, 5(2), 94-99. Retrieved [DATE] from <http://www.ijre.com>.

INTRODUCTION

This paper was inspired by the author's conducting and adjudicating of choral music. This article focuses on the organization of choral competitions in Botswana. There are two different types of choral music competitions that regularly take place: school choral competitions and community choral competitions for adult choirs. The selection of songs, and adjudication and sponsorship of these choral competitions are also important issues discussed in this article as is the demarcating of Botswana into sixteen regions by the Botswana Teachers Union for the convenience of choral competitions.

For the individual, music can be an outlet for emotional expression, can influence moods and arousal levels and can be a therapeutic medium. It can entertain and inspire. Within society, music provides a means of communicating that goes beyond words and provides us with shared, unspoken understandings. It also enables particular groups, such as football supporters, members of political parties or members of particular ethnic or cultural groups, to reinforce their identities. Not surprisingly, no major state occasion is without music (Philpott & Plummeridge, 2001, p. 61)

The urge to compete is basic to human nature and musicians are no exception. Reports of music contests go back to ancient times, the modern form of which developed in the late 18th century in Great Britain. Brass band contests began early in the 19th century but even more widespread were the choral competitions and vocal competitions between individual instrumentalists. Beginning in 1904, these were organized by what is now the British Federation of Music Festivals, apart from the Welsh eisteddfodau (Kennedy, 1994, p. 186).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the 1960s, the Bechuanaland Protectorate African Teachers' Association (BPATA) has sought to establish itself as an organization and consequently to gain respect as such (Vanqa, 1999, p. 45). Efforts were far reaching and showed serious commitment on the part of teachers. They suggested, for instance, that arrangements be made with tribal administrations to establish social centres in the major centres of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (BP). They went on to argue that where tribal administrations owned trucks, school children attending sports and music competitions should be conveyed in these trucks without cost to the children and their families. In the event that the tribe did not possess a truck, tribes were urged to pay the transport costs incurred on such a trip (Vanqa, 1999, pp. 45-46).

In recognizing the importance of the voice, Bebey (1975, p. 115) asserts that even if we were to put all the recordings where the voice is of secondary importance into instrumental category, we would still arrive at a ratio of two vocal pieces to every instrumental piece. Vocal music truly is the essence of African musical art.

Cox (2003, p. 97) points out that before children can sing, they can speak and that once this is realized in all its bearings, it quickly becomes evident that parents and teachers have in their hands a priceless means for fostering in children a love of the beautiful – a love which unconscious at first, gradually strengthens as the intellect awakens, until, as in the case of other habits so formed, a perception and standard are formed that are unreasoned, instinctive and invincible.

According to Cox (2003, p. 98), often times not enough contemplation and care is given to choosing music for children's choral competitions. There are various reasons for a careful choice of music:

- The indelible effect of sense impressions should be borne in mind, so that nothing may be chosen that will not fulfill the object for which the true teaching of music exists. Will the peculiar song chosen be one the child will care to remember all his life, in other words, is it what we call classical? Will it provide him or her with a beautiful medium for expressing emotions and satisfying the creative instinct to the fullest extent? If the piece of music under consideration does all of the above or any one of these (as any one includes the others) we may safely choose it.
- It should always be possible for schools and teachers to work the chosen music into the curriculum. Further, the music should suggest a high standard, apart from context of the competition, to the teachers themselves. Cox has found that teachers often teach poor or even bad music in schools because they know so little of what is good and what is bad. They only find they have not been teaching the right piece after they and the children have been through the pain of learning it. Incidentally, choral competitions stand to exercise an enormous influence on school taste, and teachers' commitment to and capacity for music.
- Lastly, there is good to be done with respect to preserving the voices of children. Three-part singing is worse for children than any other type of singing. Three-part singing has ravaged a large number of voices which may have been good on the adult stage save for the effects of making boys and girls sing notes that do not naturally exist in their young voices. For Cox, the nearest approach to part singing should take the form of rounds and catches, unless music can be found that as been written for two or three equal voices. He thus deprecates the choice of three - part music as being against the best interests of the children themselves.

A peculiar situation exists in Botswana wherein the Botswana Teachers' Union (BTU), formerly the BPATA, organises choral contests outside the stipulations of the Ministry of Education through its district affiliates. BTU has an elaborate organisational structure that allows contests to be conducted across Botswana in BTU-devised branches and regions, culminating in national finals where regional finalists vie with each other for honours in the form of trophies, money or musical instruments, depending on the sponsorship. All levels of the school population are included in these competitions, a feat the Botswana Ministry of Education, with all its financial resources, has not been able to achieve.

Competition songs are in the tonic sol-fa notation system and are usually assigned a month in advance (December each year) so that contestants can start work at the beginning of the subsequent year. Processes of elimination at the branch, regional and national levels, build interest in the contestants and finals which are held at the end of July or

beginning of August. The prescribed songs are graded according to division of voice parts. Unfortunately, the level of difficulty is mostly considered in two part songs for primary school junior choirs and to some extent three part songs for intermediate, boys and soprano, soprano, contralto (SSC) choirs.

The University of Botswana does not take part in these local choral contests. It does, however, compete with the Universities of Lesotho and Swaziland under the name BOLESWA. Their contests occur annually alongside the rotational inter-varsity games during a week-long mid-semester break, normally the first week of March.

Choral contests have, to a large extent, helped to keep music literacy in Botswana schools alive. In so far as participants equate a sound to a symbol, even if the symbols are in the tonic sol-fa system with all its limitations, choral contests foster music literacy. This music literacy is achieved for a greater number of children than the Ministry of Education could ever hope to reach under present conditions. The Ministry should take heed of this tested literacy tool and prepare for its further development so as to enhance staff notation music learning.

The importance of teacher music knowledge lies in the fact that choral singing in Botswana schools does not concentrate on teaching pupils how to experience and read music. Instead they recite and memorise after the teacher, mistakes and all. To make matters worse, most of these songs are not even in any of Botswana's local languages, but in languages such as *IsiZulu*, *SePedi*, *TjiVenda*, *IsiXhosa*, *IsiSwati* and English. This has its advantages and disadvantages. One such advantage is the exposure of teachers and learners to a broader repertoire of songs and languages that can enhance their sense of musical appreciation.

Repertoire has been long regarded as a factor that can considerably improve or impair performance. The more appropriate the repertoire is to the technical capabilities of the voice, the better the singer can convey the contents of the music to the audience (Davidson, 2004, p. 207). Likewise, music in non-primary languages can create a despondent spirit among students since those choirs with an understanding of these various languages tend to dominate the annual competitions.

The shortage of local vernacular songs has stimulated much activity among those who are proficient in composing in the Western style. Indigenous style traits are consequently evident in these vernacular compositions because of the vernacular lyrics and because composers are often not products of a formal Western music education system.

One of the dictums of choral music must be that music is for everybody, by virtue of their being human. In other words, music is not just for talented or gifted youngsters or the "able performers," but plays a part in all our everyday lives and so enriches our thinking and feeling (Welch & Durrant, 1953, p. 3).

The choral contest movement has kept alive a choral tradition that otherwise may have been frustrated or lost given the lack of opportunities and amenities for group music in our automated and industrialised society. Not surprisingly, other organisations have since emulated this movement: different church organisations now have choral contests and there are adult choirs, crime prevention choirs, and health choirs, to mention but a few.

SCHOOL CHORAL COMPETITIONS

According to the Botswana Daily News (2003, p. 9), Botswana has 765 primary schools, 206 community junior secondary Schools, 27 senior secondary schools and 6 Colleges of Education (two for secondary and four for primary training). Choral music competitions are held annually in Botswana, both at the primary and secondary school level. In the past, only a few secondary schools took part in these competitions. Currently the situation has changed with most secondary schools participating. All primary schools in Botswana participate in the activity. Even if the choir conductor is not good at reading tonic sol-fa and/or staff notation, s/he has to find some means of making sure that the choir knows the music and takes part in the competition. The maximum number of choristers for each section and at each competition level is eighty.

According to Miller (1996, p. 6), no matter how problematic the voice, some areas of it will clearly be better than others. It is the job of the teacher to identify which sounds are most favourable and to improve those that are not. Frustration over slow results sometimes tempts us to treat students as though they were incapable of discerning between the sounds for which we are searching and the sounds they are now producing. We must be careful to guard against making the student feel inadequate if at first they fail to comprehend what we are asking. Many times, it is not the student who is at fault, but us as the teachers. Today's student is far less impressed with the performance credentials of teachers. The sharing of information rather than masterful dominance and encouragement as opposed to intimidation, produce the rapport between teacher and student that makes learning possible (Miller, 1996, p. 7).

There are four teacher organisations in Botswana: the Botswana Primary Teachers Association (BOPRITA), the Botswana Secondary School Teachers Union (BOSETU) formerly called Botswana Federation for Secondary School Teachers (BOFESETE), the Association of Botswana Tertiary Lecturers (ABOTEL) and the Botswana Teachers Union

(BTU). Of these, the Botswana Teachers Union is responsible for organizing annual choral competitions for primary schools, community junior secondary schools, senior secondary schools, colleges of education and adult choirs.

In 2003/2004, secondary schools tried to form a choral competition platform called Botswana Secondary Schools Choral and Traditional Dance (BOSECTRA). It was short lived because of financial constraints and the fact that its music chairperson contested and won the Botswana Teachers Union Music Chairmanship at the end of 2004.

The Botswana Life Insurance Company began financing the Botswana Teachers Union Choral Competitions in 2004 and awarded all participating choirs a P500.00 cheque. During the 2005 competition, the Botswana Life Insurance Company presented pianos and keyboards to the winning choirs as tokens of appreciation. These pianos are sure to prove useful since as of 2004, western pieces at senior secondary schools and colleges of education are sung with piano accompaniment.

Besides Botswana Life Insurance Company sponsorship, BTU also raises funds through the payment of membership fees from teachers who hold BTU membership cards. Teachers who hold Botswana Teachers Union Membership cards pay 0.06% of their salaries every month. Another source of competition funds is the P75.00 registration fee paid by every competing choir prior to the competition.

THE ANNUAL BTU COMPETITION

Currently, the Botswana Teachers Union annual National Music Competitions take place over three days in July or August. On the Friday, all sections (primary schools, junior secondary schools, senior secondary schools, and colleges of education) from the sixteen regions perform one song in their culture/language of choice. This is often the only opportunity pupils and students from the non-Setswana speaking communities have to express their cultural traditions publicly. It is important that Botswana's wealth of different languages and cultural traditions be recognized, supported and strengthened within the education system. According to the Presidential Task Group for the Long Term vision for Botswana (1997, p. 2), "No *Motswana* will be disadvantaged in the education system as a result of a mother tongue that differs from the country's two official languages". It should be noted that despite the diverse languages Botswana has, Setswana is constitutionally regarded a national language and English the official one.

On Saturday, primary schools and community junior secondary schools compete in choral music. Primary schools present two songs, one in soprano, soprano contralto (SSC) and one in soprano alto tenor bass (SATB). Primary school intermediate and male choir sections sing in three parts (soprano, soprano and alto for intermediate and tenor, tenor, bass, bass for males). Boys' choirs sometimes sing three-part songs depending on their ages and voice maturity.

There are other primary school sections that do not reach the national music competitions because of time-constraints and potential overcrowding. These include the infant and junior choirs that sing in two parts, soprano and alto (SA). These two sections only go as far as the branch level in their competitions.

Community junior secondary schools compete at the regional level to determine which choirs will represent the different regions at the national competition. At the national competition, these schools perform two songs in four parts (SATB). One song is in an African language while the other is in a Western language.

Senior secondary schools, colleges of education and adult choirs all compete with different songs in African and Western languages for their respective sections. Their songs are also in four parts (SATB). This competition takes place on Sunday, which is also the departure and travel date for this last category of competitors.

Sixteen regions have been formed to represent all Botswana schools in the National Music Choral Competition. These are:

NAME

BORAGAKOBO
BOTSWATUMA
BOWE
CHOBE
FRABOTO
GANTSI
LESOMOGALETAME
LOBANGWE
MAWETSAKOMA
MMASEBOTSWA

HEAD OFFICE

MIDDLEPITS
MAHALAPYE
LETLHAKANE
KASANE
FRANCISTOWN
GANTSI
MOLEPOLOLE
KANYE
TSABONG
SELIBE PHIKWE

MORAGAKGAMA
NGAMI
NORTH EAST
OKAVANGO
SETSWAMMAMORAPA
TSAHUKAMOLELO

GABORONE
MAUN
MASUNGA
GUMARE
PALAPYE
HUKUNTSI

Most of these names are acronyms of grouped towns/villages that are not very far from each other. The following exceptions are real names of places or districts: CHOBE, GANTSI, NGAMI, NORTH EAST and OKAVANGO.

THE ALLOCATION OF PRIMARY LEVEL CHOIR TEACHERS

The allocation of teachers to choir conducting at primary schools is an important issue as many primary school teachers in Botswana lack confidence in choir training. This is due to insufficient training at colleges of education or the status of music as a whole. In most cases, primary school administration allocates teachers to clubs in absentia. This kind of duty allocation is dictatorial (not negotiable) and often puts the assigned teacher in a difficult situation as he or she searches for the help needed to participate in the competition.

From the author's personal experience, choir conductors have no opportunity to object to this exercise because they are afraid of being penalized by school heads through annual appraisal forms and other confidential reports. Appraisal forms determine a teacher's recommendations for promotion, further studies and annual salary increases. Some head teachers have taken a different approach and will consult with interested teachers who may then conduct their school choirs. These schools undoubtedly end up with better competition results, not having forced teachers into conducting.

THE LACK OF CHORAL COMPOSERS IN BOTSWANA

There are very few choral composers in Botswana. As a result, most of the songs prescribed for the annual school competitions are South African. All choirs are compelled to compete in two songs, one in a vernacular and the other in a Western language such as English. As diverse as South Africa is in terms of language and culture, the committee generally just picks any song from any South African language. The Western songs are also from South Africa even if South Africans might not have composed them. In addition to battling with the tonic sol-fa notation, songs in foreign languages represent an additional burden on school choral conductors.

Normally, the Botswana Teachers Union National Music Committee (BTUNMC) makes an effort to invite some South African musicians for a day's "workshop" before the competition. This workshop usually takes place on a Saturday when choir conductors throughout Botswana are not on duty. Conductors or representatives of conductors are sent from each school or branch, depending on the availability of funds. This Saturday workshop normally takes place in the semi-urban Mahalapye, believed to be a central and fair destination for participants from all over the country. The Botswana Teachers Union National Music Committee pays for the resource people, their return traveling expenses, hotel accommodation, meals and workshop expertise expenses.

It is in such workshops that choir conductors are assisted with the pronunciation and meanings of foreign song lyrics. Imagine the struggle encountered with clicking languages such as *IsiXhosa*, especially if teachers have never previously been exposed to these languages. The author of this article endured such an experience in 1988 when conducting a Xhosa song entitled *Qingqa Lovedale*. Some *Ikalanga* speaking children in North Eastern Botswana do have the advantage of being able to pronounce *IsiZulu* lyrics correctly. This is due to easy mixing with the *IsiNdebele* speaking people from the neighbouring Zimbabwean border region.

Some choirs, especially in the Southern part of Botswana that neighbours South Africa, go so far as to employ South African "musicians" at exorbitant prices for choir training in order to win the competitions. This kind of arrangement disadvantages choirs from other parts of the country as it would be very expensive for choirs some distance from South African borders to become involved in this kind of exercise. These distant choirs normally have only a very slim chance of winning the national choral competition.

The author of this article finds such an arrangement detrimental to musical development in general and indicative of overdependence by *Batswana* on South African musicians. *Batswana* choral lovers, conductors and musicians seemingly do not feel any urgent need to learn to compose their own music. Songs are readily available in South Africa and so schools have never run short. However, as one role of songs is to portray a people's way of living and their cultural

heritage, Botswana schools are thus relying on and learning South African cultural heritage, as there is very little cultural symbiosis between these two countries.

Adjudicators for the Botswana Teachers Union National Music Competitions are not easily found within the country, as there are very few chorally trained musicians in Botswana. Almost all such musicians are lecturers in a college of education and choir conductors for these colleges. The Botswana Teachers Union National Music Committee is thus left with no choice but to employ South African adjudicators to perform this task. In fact, South African musicians adjudicate all annual Botswana Teachers Union National choral music competitions.

CONCLUSION

Choral contests practiced as extra curricular activities sustained Botswana's musical life for many years before the introduction of formal music education in schools. Tonic sol-fa, the notation used for this activity, has laid a good foundation for the teaching of other conventional notations such as staff notation. Most students who now take music as a taught subject in schools have some knowledge of Tonic sol-fa from choir participation which eases the process of music learning. Since all children are born with musical talent, students who are not taking music at primary and secondary schools need to be encouraged to join choirs in the hopes that in future they might develop an interest in further refining their musical talent through music as a taught subject.

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