



Teaching and learning African music and Jaques-Dalcroze's eurhythmics

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Abstract

This article looks at the indigenous music of Botswana as an African musical idiom, to illustrate common aspects between approaches to teaching and learning music in African societies and the Jaques-Dalcroze approach. The author argues that a strong foundation exists in African musical practices upon which the Dalcroze approach can build. That foundation is provided by the evidence of emphasis on certain musical concepts as displayed in the performance of a sample of song and dance genres discussed in this article. It is further contended that musical performance in African societies develops the same skills that the Dalcroze approach aims to develop.

Key words

Botswana, *hosana*, indigenous music, *phathisi*, *setapa*, *tsutsube*

When traditional methods of teaching and learning music in African societies are closely examined in juxtaposition with an approach to the teaching and learning of music as developed by Swiss music educator Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950), similarities are not striking at first glance. However, a common aspect between the two is that movement is central to both.

The two methods differ in two ways, though. The first difference is that the African teaching and learning methods are generally not documented, but are a living tradition, practised from time immemorial, learned by rote and acquired through the process of enculturation, whereas the Dalcroze approach has been elaborately written, with all the details of the conditions necessary for it to be executed effectively and the procedures to be followed. The second difference is that African methods are not necessarily restricted to formal settings of instruction, as enculturation is a pervasive process that takes place all the time, whereas the Dalcroze approach has been developed following an experience with a critical aspect of the western system of music education. It was therefore developed with the formal western educational setting in mind. The bottom line, though, is that both are approaches to some kind of musical training.

The Dalcroze approach centres on movement of the human body as a means of interpreting musical sound. The body is used as an instrument of expression (Bachmann,

1991). According to Caldwell (1993), Dalcroze postulated that all music concepts could and should be taught through movement after much experimentation. An effective application of this method has made it possible for music educators to teach various fundamental concepts of musical performance such as duration, dynamics, tempo, pitch, articulation, tone quality, phrasing and interpretation (Hoffer, 1993; Mead, 1996).

Having highlighted this curious scenario and the backdrop to the topic of this article, a number of questions arise and possible answers are put forward. The questions are: how much overlap do we see between Dalcroze eurhythmics and the traditional methods of teaching and learning music in African societies? On the basis of the extent of such overlap, could we say that Dalcroze's method is relevant to societies with such a culture? If any measure of relevance is to be found in Dalcroze's method, how should it be incorporated into the teaching and learning of music in formal settings in these societies?

The indigenous music of Botswana is used in this article to illustrate and highlight the questions posed in the preceding paragraph. That the music of Botswana is taken as an example of African music should be understood in the context of the diversity of this rich art form. The folk music of Botswana, diverse as it is, represents a variant idiom of the broader African music tradition. This variety corresponds to the diverse ethnicity, geography and culture of the respective African societies.

A number of researchers and scholars have observed that African music is not homogenous (Kubik, 1983, cited in Waterman, 1991; Merriam, 1964). Agawu (2003) notes that African music is irreducibly diverse. Chernoff (1979) makes an observation that justifies the choice of the music of Botswana as a point of reference in an attempt to seek answers to the question raised in this article: 'what so many people accept is that there is an essentially African style which can be perceived in the different music of African peoples' (p. 30). However, a glimpse of the traditional methods of teaching and learning music from elsewhere on the African continent may become inevitable where relevant sources are being cited to support some points of argument. A background to Dalcroze's work is presented in the next few paragraphs.

Background to Dalcroze's work

Dalcroze's work was inspired by a desire to solve some of the problems he encountered in his teaching of music. He realized that his students could not actually hear the harmonies they were writing and that their sense of rhythm was based on what they could perform by adding one note to the next (Mead, 1996). This means that Dalcroze's students did not have any idea of how the harmonies they wrote would sound when sung or played on a musical instrument.

A comprehensible summary of Dalcroze's work is provided in a video presentation by Robert Abramson (1992) where the following is revealed: as a music teacher, Dalcroze observed that his piano students could read notes and not the music; there was no connection between what they heard and what they felt in their bodies. Hoffer (1993), in support of Abramson's viewpoint, observes that the basis of eurhythmics is a physical response to music. As a result of what he observed with his students, Dalcroze could discern the following categories of performance:

1. Arrhythmic performance, characterized by the absence of rhythm and undefined movement. Such a performance does not display a sense of time and shape.
2. Errhythmic performance, with all the notes in the right place, but lacking in feeling and therefore dull. The performance is mechanical and does not seem to move through space, since it emphasizes beat and not rhythm. The presenter aptly labels it 'robot playing'.

3. Eurhythmic performance, with all the notes in the right place, provides a striking and appealing sense of balance of motion and rhythm.

It is the third type of performance upon which the Dalcroze approach rests. It consists of three components: rhythmic, solfège and improvisation. Rhythmic involves variations of flow through time and space. Solfège involves sight-reading, ear training, harmony and counterpoint. As far as improvisation is concerned, Dalcroze believed that well-trained musicians should be able to improvise. Improvisation is achieved through physical response to music.

Branches of movement in eurhythmics

In another description of the Dalcroze approach, an influential teacher and practitioner of eurhythmics, Heather Gell (cited in Pope, 1996), observes that eurhythmics consists of three elements or 'branches of movement, namely: rhythmic, plastic and form' (p. 37). Rhythmic deals with the technicalities of music and a realization of various rhythmic devices such as syncopation, unequal beats, cross rhythms and note values. Plastic is concerned with training of the body to execute the fluent and smooth movements. Form is a combination of the other two elements, that is, rhythmic and plastic, to experience shape and design in the structure of the music. The slightly different terminology employed by Heather Gell expresses the same concepts as described by Abramson.

Before discussing the similarities between Dalcroze's approach to teaching music and the way music is learned and taught in African societies, it is important to look at the main characteristics of selected music genres from Botswana as chosen for the purpose of this article.

The music of Botswana

The traditional music of Botswana may be broadly categorized into vocal and instrumental music (Phuthego, 1999). The nation of Botswana comprises different ethnic groups, some of whom share common cultural practices while others have distinct cultural traits. Music happens to be one cultural element that the various ethnic groups possess in common. Below is a sample, in summary, of the popular music genres found in the country, and the specific ethnic groups with which the music is normally associated. These are meant to illustrate that the music of Botswana is not a far-fetched example for the sole purpose of putting forward points to buttress the author's point of view.

Hosana (associated with the Bakalanga)

Distribution: North East region

Hosana is ritual music. It has a fast tempo, both vocally and in terms of movement, with a quick shuffle-like footwork. The singers clap in syncopated rhythms, surging their torsos forward in a rhythm that is consistent with the clapping. One percussive musical instrument that features prominently is a shaker known as *woso* or *hoso*. *Hosana* music would be incomplete without drumming. It is performed by the Bakalanga people in a ceremony in which people appeal to ancestors for assistance in difficult times, such as the provision of rain during a drought. Performers, both dancers and singers, who are normally female, wear symbolic red, black and white attire. The black skirts are a symbol of rain clouds. The white T-shirts symbolize rain, and the red ribbon tied diagonally around the torso symbolizes lightning.

Phathisi (associated with the Bakwena)

Distribution: Kweneng region

Phathisi is a hectic type of dance, with the most hectic part done by males. Females do the subtle, gentler movement, but most importantly they do the singing and clapping. There is the basic pattern of movement to *phathisi*, which must be kept throughout the performance even if the dancers improvise other movements as they wish. When they are not dancing, the men also sing. The dancers take turns at the dancing. The dancers jump high into the air, beating, with sticks or hands, the padded, untanned goatskins worn around the shins called *phathisi* (plural: *diphathisi*), from which the genre derives its name. The beating of the skins produces a loud percussive sound. *Phathisi* is mainly performed for entertainment on occasions such as weddings.



Figure 1 An indoor performance of *phathisi* dance. The dancer in the foreground is hitting a *phathisi* with his right hand.

Genre: Tsutsube (associated with the Basarwa)

Distribution: Kgalagadi region

Tsutsube dancers usually dramatize a story, for example a hunting expedition. The dancing by the males and females is showcased in equal measure during the performance. Everybody takes part in the singing, clapping in syncopated rhythms as they do so. It has a noticeable feel of two beats against three. The movement of the legs is fairly fast, with heavy accentuation that takes place close to the ground. *Tsutsube* is performed in celebration of moments of triumph, such as a successful hunting expedition.

Genre: Setapa (associated with the Bangwaketse)

Distribution: Southern region

Setapa has a moderately fast tempo. It is typically lively with a feel of triple time. The transformation of *setapa* through time has resulted in its spellbinding choreography. The clapping provides the basic rhythm and tempo of the music. The dancers take turns at the dancing. One of the dancers may decide to recite a poem on the theme of the song and improvise some movement to go with the poem. The poem may not have been rehearsed and is therefore impromptu. It is performed for entertainment on happy occasions, such as traditional beer-drinking sessions.

The genres described here serve to underscore the fact that music cannot be divorced from dance and movement in the African context, as music invariably features movement quite prominently. The two, as found in African societies, are inextricably linked musical arts (Addo, Miya, & Potgieter, 2003).



Figure 2 A boy and a girl perform *setapa* dance. Two boys are approaching from the background to take their turn. The singers in a horseshoe formation clap to provide the basic beat. Photo: Courtesy of Ditholwana Cultural Ensemble.

The Dalcroze ideas in the performance of African music

Having provided the preceding summary on popular music and dances in the country, I now go on to examine some ideas of the Dalcroze approach as found in the performance of these dances. It should be noted, though, that a comparison in this manner may not be acceptable to some, since the Dalcroze approach relies on movement of the body, while what has been discussed in the preceding paragraph is a brief overview of what are essentially dance styles from Botswana. Dancers use the medium of movement to express themselves. They may do so in reaction to musical sound or mime, and their combination of various patterns of movement makes up the dance. Movement, in any culture in the world and in any setting, is natural and therefore spontaneous. It is unrehearsed, and because of that we cannot be particular in the way people execute movement, as the exercise is highly individualized and creative. However, the use of the dances described above as illustrations is not out of context. What should matter most is the fact that the dances discussed in this article allow for freedom of self-expression, as they are characterized by a great deal of improvisation on the part of the performer. In the paragraphs that follow, I examine how the various elements of music or musical concepts are observed during performance in traditional African music teaching and learning methods. A close resemblance is present between these methods and the Dalcroze approach.

Musical concepts

The next section of this article discusses the musical concepts of solfège, duration of silent parts, rhythm and form, and also highlights the importance of musical games in exercising aural, visual and kinaesthetic capacities in musical training.

Solfège

In singing, singers often display a sensitivity to pitch. The leader starts the piece at a comfortable pitch and the answering voice or voices adjust accordingly in order to sing in tune. An example illustrating that singers are pitch-sensitive would be when those who are supposed to answer to the call of the leader point out that the leader is starting the song at a high or low pitch. They would say in Setswana (the language of the Batswana), 'e ko godimo', meaning it is (uncomfortably) high, or observe that 'e ko tlase', meaning it is (uncomfortably) low. This is particularly true in the present age where four-part harmony has displaced the traditional unison singing. Humming of the melody or vocal line is another aspect of performance that points directly to pitch sensitivity of the singers, since the humming must be in tune. With reference to solfège, the crux of the Dalcroze approach is to hear the music internally.

Observance of a rest

In *tsutsube*, *phathisi* and *setapa*, moments of deliberate silence are duly observed. The rest, which may be observed by complete stillness or silence, occurs as the leader in a performance sees fit. So its duration is entirely at the leader's discretion. The word *setu* literally means silence. It may be a silence in the clapping or singing. By the same token, the clapping alone may go on whilst there is momentary pause in the singing or movement of the body. Under no circumstances should the movement and clapping stop simultaneously, because the two are of equal importance in maintaining the beat and therefore keep the music going. The performers resume the clapping or singing or any form of movement without fumbling over the beat. It is done with minimal effort, as the performers are in control and display utter mastery of their art.

Maintaining rhythm and progression

The tempo of the clapping of the backing singers determines, to a large extent, the tempo of the dance. The dancer may complain of the clapping as tying up his legs ('e mpofa maoto') and thereby restraining his or her movements. This implies that the clapping is too slow or sluggish. Similarly, the clapping may be independent of the movement of the body, and vice versa. So the decision to sing at a tempo consistent with the clapping rests entirely upon the performer.

Expression of form

Tsutsube is characterized by a lot of drama. As described earlier, the performance may depict, in acted scenes, a story of a hunting expedition. The plot usually centres on a hunting party stalking an animal. A member of the party gets bitten by a venomous snake. This is usually followed by ecstatic and frantic movements as the victim struggles and pants for breath as the poison makes its way to the vital organs in the body. The healing is effected by sucking out the poison and applying an antidote on and around the snakebite. The ending is usually happy, as the victim recovers consciousness and rebounds back to life. All the different scenes are expressed and communicated in a particular movement that clearly conveys the form of the music.

Musical games

Dalcroze's ear-training games sharpen the students' perceptions and result in a more sensitive response to musical elements (Mead, 1996). Children's games are the basis for early childhood musical training. The noticeably similar features between eurhythmics and the traditional methods of teaching and learning music in African societies are in fact areas of potential collaboration between the two. Without shifting the focus away from the music of Botswana, an important piece of research reveals that young children in Zimbabwe are able to pick up a variety of skills through their traditional methods of learning music: 'musical skills possessed by most children when they enter Zimbabwe primary schools are in-tune singing in relation to a consistent tonal centre, keeping track of a steady beat or underlying pulse, performing polyrhythm by movement and on percussion instruments and harmonizing vocal lines in parallel with the melody' (Kreutzer, 1996, p 14).

Apart from being enjoyable, the games also teach important musical concepts as well as developing essential skills. Games that are played to musical accompaniment are popular in African societies. It is reported that games formed part of the main activities at the 2004 event of the annual Kuru Dance Festival held in Ghanzi in Botswana (*Midweek Sun* (Botswana), 2004). With regard to the rote method of learning music that is predominant in African societies, Campbell (1991, cited by Kreutzer, 1996) observes that aural, visual and kinaesthetic capacities are well exercised.

Skills for learning

In addition to the ideas presented above, the performance of all the music genres discussed in this article should develop the six skills that the Dalcroze approach teaches through physical movement. Caldwell (1993) lists the six skills as: (1) paying attention; (2) turning to concentration; (3) remembering; (4) reproducing the performance; (5) changing; and (6) automating. It should be possible to teach the six skills in African music, which is mainly taught by rote and where observation, imitation and memorization are keys in the teaching and learning processes. Observation requires attentiveness, which yields concentration. Imitation enables the learner to reproduce the performance, and the ability to improvise

what has been learned leads to what Caldwell (1993) refers to as changing. Automating is achieved when the learner observes very well and is able to imitate the teacher; this goes beyond simple memorization to an internalization of what has been learned. These corresponding features found in the Dalcroze approach and traditional methods of teaching and learning music in African societies serve to underscore the extensive overlap between the two.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, the following points can be made. Much as we can differentiate, by definition, between movement and dance, the two are inseparable. African music is characterized by movement. In fact, movement permeates all aspects of musical performance in African societies, be it accompanied or unaccompanied vocal music, instrumental music and so forth. When seriously considering employing the Dalcroze approach in the music classroom, particularly where the learner comes with an African musical background, it should be appreciated that a foundation exists for highlighting important concepts in music. This is the same foundation upon which skills will be built and further developed.

There is a way, in African music, of expressing oneself as identified and given prominence by Dalcroze. The primary object of adapting Dalcroze eurhythmics, therefore, should be to assist music teachers incorporating African music in their classes to search deep into the various genres in order to bring out what the approach emphasizes. The approach should therefore serve more as a guide than as the sole formula from which all ideas should be derived. Teachers should not over-depend on the approach. For this reason, the Dalcroze approach is of relevance in a classroom setup where traditional methods of teaching and learning are used. African musical culture abounds with resources to adapt to the Dalcroze approach. In fact, aspects of the main topics of solfège, eurhythmics and improvisation, which are adhered to as a unified programme (Mead 1996), are to be found occurring simultaneously in the performance of African music.

African music teachers should not be daunted by the fact that Dalcroze taught improvisation on the piano (Mead, 1996), an instrument they may not have. They do not have to look too far for the resources they could utilize. For instance, spontaneous poetry serves to develop a sense of improvisation through speech. As mentioned earlier, the poet in *setapa* may improvise some movement to go with the poem. Farber (1991) reveals that a Dalcroze teacher should be able to teach improvisation in movement, words, song and instruments.

Lastly, the educational goals of the Dalcroze approach as highlighted in the video presentation by Abramson (1992) are to be found in reasonable measure in the African methods of teaching and learning music. These are listed as social integration, perceiving and appreciating nuance, paying attention, and turning attention into concentration. These goals could be achieved through the successful development of Caldwell's (1993) six skills: (1) paying attention; (2) turning to concentration; (3) remembering; (4) reproducing the performance; (5) changing; and (6) automating. It should be added that social integration will be promoted through cooperative musical games between two or more persons. The presenter succinctly defines eurhythmics as 'the study of physical motion to understand all the elements of music' (Abramson, 1992).

Traditional African methods of teaching and learning music teach essential musical concepts. This has come out clearly in discussing the concepts of solfège, observance of rests, maintaining rhythm and rhythmic progression, expression of form, and awareness

of movement. The primary medium of movement, which is central to the Dalcroze approach, is equally central to African music. The extent of overlap between the Dalcroze approach and the traditional methods of teaching and learning music in Africa, as illustrated through the music of Botswana, is considerable.

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Abstracts

Jaques-Dalcrozes Rhythmik und das Lehren und Lernen von afrikanischer Musik

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der Musik aus Botswana als einem Beispiel für ein afrikanisches Idiom, um daran gemeinsame Aspekte des Musiklernens in afrikanischen Gesellschaften und des Ansatzes der Rhythmik von Jaques-Dalcroze aufzuzeigen. Der Autor legt dar, dass es in der afrikanischen Musikpraxis wichtige Grundlagen gibt, auf denen Jaques-Dalcrozes Ansatz aufbauen könnte. Diese Grundlage besteht in der Bedeutung der Betonung bestimmter musikalischer Vorstellungen, wie sie sich bei der Ausführung von Lied-

und Tanzbeispielen zeigen, die hier vorgestellt werden. Es wird schließlich behauptet, dass das Musizieren in Afrika dieselben Fähigkeiten entwickelt, die auch die Dalcroze-Methode anstrebt.

Enseñar y aprender música africana y la rítmica Jaques-Dalcroze

Este artículo examina la música vernácula de Botswana, como lenguaje musical africano, para ilustrar aspectos comunes entre las perspectivas sobre enseñar y aprender música en las sociedades africanas y en el enfoque Dalcroze. El autor sostiene que existe una fuerte base en las prácticas musicales africanas sobre la cual se puede desarrollar el enfoque Dalcroze. Esa base está provista por la evidencia de un énfasis en ciertos conceptos musicales, como se muestra en la interpretación de una muestra de géneros de canciones y danzas analizada en este artículo. Asimismo, se afirma que la ejecución musical en las sociedades africanas desarrolla las mismas destrezas que el enfoque Dalcroze pretende desarrollar.