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Scholarly Reflection #2: Problematizing Music Education

Have you ever thought about how the “conventions of choral pedagogy are designed to create docile, complacent, singers who are subjected to a discourse that is more interested in the production of music than in the laborers”? (O’Toole, 1993/1994, p. 65). Maybe you never viewed choir as “fraught with power relations that serve specific interests and intentionally create silences and gaps” (O’Toole, 1993/1994, p. 65). The power of discourse, and of language, is incredible. The hierarchy of power that exists between a conductor and the singers in a choir or instrumentalists in a band or orchestra can easily be abused. Power can either be a weapon or a tool and, historically through its discourse, it has been an invisible weapon for both the director and the ensemble. (O’Toole, 1993/1994).

There are many problematic words that come to mind when thinking about choral pedagogy and music education. What does it mean to be “successful” with your choir? What does making “good” music sound like? What is “good” music? Who gets to pick the repertoire and why? You can see how this becomes a bit of a rabbit hole. One final question comes to mind: What is the *purpose* of a choir? Or we can stretch this more broadly - what is the *purpose* of music ensembles?

According to O’Toole (1993/1994), choir’s current purpose is not to create a high quality experience for its singers but to create a high quality product. That is to say that choral pedagogy and the discourse surrounding it is primarily concerned with the choir sounding “good”. Yet, this

again becomes problematic. Who gets to determine what sounding “good” even is? And why are we so concerned with the product when choir is about collaboration and citizenship? I contend that singing in a choir provides its singers with moral agency, and that choral singing is just as much about the collective experience as it is about creating beautiful music. Think about this: how can we expect our singers to create music if they do not feel like they are part of the experience? The word “ensemble” comes from French and means “together”. How ironic is it that we create these music ensembles and leave it to one sole conductor to make all of the decisions and craft the final product? The idea of one sole person having all the knowledge ties directly into Fiere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We are literally oppressing our students and silencing them, and it is this irony that is the reason why language and discourse are so important in the music classroom, and it applies to all ensembles - not just choir.

Foucault (1979) states that discourse is a conversation with a specific vocabulary that intentionally creates ignorance as well as power. What we have done specifically in choral pedagogy is created a discourse that inherently gives all of the power over the singers to the conductor (O’Toole, 1993/1994). We are part of the common-sense pedagogy that O’Toole (1993/1994) is completely frustrated with.

Let’s think about what it means to have “a democratic purpose for music education” (Woodford, 2019, p. 22) for a second. As music educators, we see the value in music and the other arts; so one would hope. Perhaps we see the importance of music through “developing imagination and creativity” or “provoking students to think more carefully and deeply about the state of society” (Woodford, 2019, p. 24). Now let’s return to the idea of power being a tool or a weapon. The arts are critical tools that help communicate ideas to the public, according to

Dewey (1946). So if we want our students to have profound, deep, and critical thoughts about the world and as music educators we do this through the means of making music, then why are we not letting them be part of the music making experience? From giving them back some power in our choirs and bands to making it about the people and not the product, O'Toole (1993/1994) states that we will be moving towards a twenty-first century music education philosophy. If knowledge is power as Foucault (1978) claims, then let's give our students access to this knowledge through musical empowerment and be less concerned with losing control of our students and ensembles.

References

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