Jabulani Africa: Celebrating music making and finding meaning in Australia

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Abstract
This paper begins to explore the notion of a South African identity in Australia through community music making. Solbu (cited in Herbst, Nzewi and Agawu, 2003) highlights the strong link between music and society, arguing that, music creates and confirms identity, and challenges cultural and communal borderlines. This paper situates itself in an Australian society that is becoming increasingly globalised and cosmopolitan. The South African Jabulani choir in Melbourne is just one example that illustrates a context of diversity as one that promotes respect for a multicultural society and one that promotes respect for diversity across the community. This paper focuses on the cultural and musical identity of South Africans as a minority group in Australia and offers some perspectives on South Africans in Australia, music and cultural diffusion, identity, and the notion of making music together by people in a community music setting.

Introduction
Community music according to Veblen (2004) is a form of music education that takes place outside the boundaries of the school music programme. ‘Community Music may be thought of as...music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that occur ‘outside’ traditional music institutions (e.g., university music departments, public schools, conservatories) and/or music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that operate in relation to traditional institutions’ (Elliott & Veblen, 2004). In this paper I refer to community music making in the context of a community choir in Melbourne, Australia who consist of South Africans. Community music making has never been a new concept in Africa. Part of the philosophy of music making in Africa is sharing and participating whether in a formal or informal setting. It is through the sharing of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next that music is passed on and communicated. Music cannot be understood as separate from the society and culture that creates it. Our increasingly globalised world is never static but constantly in a process of change and interchange. Such changes are made up ways of understanding and doing things that have different histories and different futures. For the purpose of this paper, I use the terms ‘cultural identity’ and ‘social identity’ interchangeably based on Jenkins’s (2003, p.4) claim that all personal identities are in essence social identities. They are understood to belong to people and are maintained by people in different ways. It may be said that many people maintain their identity through music and dance, particularly when they move from one cultural context to another.

South Africa is unofficially made up of close to 50 million people, however, Fraser (2001) claims that the population is approximately 44.6 million, spread across nine provinces where 11 official languages are spoken. Such a richness of diversity, both ethnic and cultural within a small country, is bound to travel with its people to new and foreign lands. By engaging and embracing a new country like Australia that is multilingual and culturally complex, South Africans, as a minority group, continue to pursue their cultural identity in their own languages, symbolic gestures and understandings. Khosa (2006, p.106), writing mainly of his corporate experience during three decades of turmoil and change in South Africa, comments that while “Africans prize their own cultural heritage, they have always accommodated and absorbed those of others in order to grow stronger through diversity”.

Despite the diversity of musics in South Africa, group music-making and shared experience is integral to music meaning in this context. Hence, issues related to performance practice are best understood through why that music is performed, what is its function, where and how is it performed or transmitted. African understanding of community is based on the concept of Ubuntu (a Zulu South African word which comes from the word Umuntu meaning ‘I am because of another’); the idea of sharing and the concept from the word Ubuntu is fundamental to indigenous South African life and culture. For indigenous Africans music exists in the community rather than the concert hall and communal learning through participation is authentic to established cultural practice. In Melbourne, Australia, in an attempt to maintain cultural identity, a choral group has been formed – the South Africa Jabulani choir. Members of the choir come together from different backgrounds, musical abilities and inter-generational experiences for the benefit of community music sharing and also for their own self growth, this Elliot (1995) refers to as a process of both individualization and integration within a musical community. I have been an ad-hoc member of the choir since 2003.

Background: South Africans in Australia
According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Migrants changing our population mix: ABS, 2006), the resident population of Australia is projected to be approximately 21 million. The Year Book Australia (2002) confirms that there are 80,000 immigrant South Africans in Australia, making them one of the fastest-growing groups immigrating to Australia, 8% a year on average (Migrants changing our population mix: ABS, 2006). South Africans (racially classified under the apartheid government as White, Coloured, Indian and African) of various backgrounds have immigrated to Australia for many reasons in both pre-and post apartheid days. South Africans in Australia often attempt to retain links to past notions of their homeland by maintaining cultural practices. Groups, such as the Jabulani choir, have been formed to formalise this process. It is to be hoped that such groups will come to see themselves as both South African and members of a culturally diverse contemporary Australia.

Music making is an arena where South Africans of all race, creed, ethnicity, religion and language can share their respective identities and transmit their cultures. Music is a powerful tool that promotes personal growth and social skills. Music in African societies is not different to other societies. It has an aesthetic significance with long traditions and values that are associated with the people and represents part of their identity. A large part of that identity is the concept of music making,
making meaning and sharing which Nketa (1966) aptly describes as part of the traditional way of life, and not as embellishments of it. In Africa music as a concept is commonly referred to as a verb rather than a noun, supporting the notion of ‘music as making and doing’. Small (1998) uses the term ‘musicking’, describing the idea of any activity that relates to music. This concept then of musicking is clearly realised when the choir meet for rehearsals and also when they perform. They talk about the music, the words, the actions of the song, and add to it body percussion or drums.

Musical engagement like the Jabulani choir, develops an understanding of one’s own cultural identity and experience. By realising this, one can possess a hybrid identity as Australian South Africans (see Van Heerden 2006, pp. 6-7). Music in Australia can explore and cement identities and may give rise to what could be called a polyphony of voices in which South Africans make music through song and dance both at choral or sport festivals. In such settings, South African music is performed by non-indigenous South Africans out of its original context. Although many participants may see this as traditional it is, as Levine (2005) identifies, problematic. Cultural practice is never static but is fluid and ever-changing.

**Music and cultural diffusion**

Given that cultural practice is fluid, it is interesting to explore its maintenance and transmission in community groups such as the Jabulani choir. Campbell (2001) confirms that the study of the teaching and learning of music as a cross-cultural phenomenon is of interest and significance to educators and directors of community groups who should strive for ‘a broadly conceived template of pedagogical considerations that transcend cultural boundaries’ (p. 215). Campbell (2001) continues to state that we should consider the formal and informal learning and teaching of music and ‘note the similarities as well as the distinctions across learners in many contexts’ (p. 217). By making and sharing the music of South Africa within a community setting in Melbourne, we cross boundaries and explore new possibilities in relation to changing musical identities.

The choir consist of a mixed group of South Africans, here it becomes possible to build bridges, and to make, renew and share a sense of ‘South Africanism’ interfaced with a new Australian culture and music. Music educationalists with an interest in ethnomusicology conclude that, despite cultural differences, there are common aspects that shape music whether transmitted locally or globally (Goodkin, 1994; Hopton-Jones, 1995; McCarthy & Goble, 2002; Reimer, 2003). As part of creating a sense of being and belonging in the wider community, music then acts in what Reimer (1993, p.24) refers to as a ‘panhuman constant’, where music is trans-cultural and trans-personal and can be seen as through a process of enculturation and socialisation (Jorgensen, 2006). All societies have their own music and culture. Nettl (1994) refers to music as ‘a cultural universal of humans’ (p. 139). People respond to music and find meanings from it for both aesthetic, personal associative and societal reasons.

**The notion of identity**

Identity, particularly musical identity, is complex. It may be argued that even though the processes of enculturation individuals construct a social and cultural identity (national, ethnic, religious, and so forth), we also create a personal identity. Even if, as Epstein, Hewitt, Leonard, Mauthner and Watkins (2003) argue, circumstances not of their own choosing make people who they are, we still construct ourselves creating narrative and developing understanding. Frith (2002, p.109) asserts ‘music, like identity, is both performance and story, [it] describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind’. Such notions of identity have various layers and are considered a complicated construct (Jorgensen, 2006). It can be said that in community music groups participants can expand and explore their cultural identity. Jenkins (2004) reminds us that music is a powerful mechanism within communities. Also, in community music groups a sense of collective national identities can be developed. Jenkins (2004) adds ‘community membership means sharing with other community members a similar sense of things, [participating] in a common symbolic domain’ (p.112) where singing, dancing and making music together takes place. In this situation, individuals get to know themselves as a collective group through cultural activities (Frith, 2002).

Delport (2005), writing about Afrikaner identity in South Africa (the Afrikaner is a person who is Afrikaans by birth or heritage see Schoonees, Swanepoel, Du Toit & Booyzen, 1976. Afrikaners are a homogeneous group of White/Caucasian people speaking one language and in the main belonging to one of three Protestant churches in South Africa, they also formed the ruling elite Nationalist political party in the apartheid era—pre 1994) claims that in the post 1994 socially integrated South Africa, boundaries of place and locality no longer exits. Afrikaners, in particular, are increasingly aware of the fact that they constitute a small minority group compared to the vastness of other cultural groups in the country. By integrating with other people from South Africa, music as a medium is one way forward for people to share their culture and sense of belonging. In the Jabulani choir most members self identify as Afrikaner but perform indigenous music that serves as a means of retaining cultural links to their ‘homeland’ South African and as way to learn, value and understand indigenous music and culture.

**The Jabulani Choir**

The South African Jabulani choir was formed in 2003. The membership consists of South Africans now living and working in Melbourne, and two Australian spouses. The purpose of forming the choir was to provide an environment where South Africans now residing in Melbourne could find a context in which to express their heritage through song and promote the diversity of South African music to the wider community at various events and venues.

The choir started originally as part of a community initiative to support the many South African immigrants under the auspices of the Manningham Council. This mixed choir (male and female) includes both children and adults whose ages range from 13years. There are approximately 20 members from various professional backgrounds some of whom have knowledge of, and can read, western staff notation. Stereotypically, indigenous Africans are well-known for their singing, vibrant rhythms and dance. In choosing a name for the new choir, the members selected the word Jabula means ‘be happy’, ‘rejoice’ hence the name of the choir Jabulani is taken from the imperative plural Jabula meaning ‘to be happy’ (see Zulu-
English/English-Zulu online dictionary). This name was meant to communicate what music should bring to the performers and their audiences.

The songs performed by the choir include religious, folk, carols, secular and popular. Some of the songs sung are in unison as well as in four part harmony either with or without accompaniment. Currently the choir is accompanied by the piano or organ as well as non-percussion and percussion instruments. Although there are 11 official languages in South Africa, the choir thus far has performed mainly in English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Sotho. In 2006, the choir was conducted by an Australian, who had the task with its members to learn the pronunciation of words and its meaning as the choir mistress and members of the choir are not indigenous black South Africans. This experience of crossing borders is an effort to celebrate diversity, such a diffusion of intercultural dialogue through music can promote cultural tolerance and diversity in our changing world.

Members of the choir through singing in either Zulu or Sotho learn more of the African culture and language and also the context of the songs, something they may not have been familiar with when living in urban South Africa. They also learn movements to co-incide with the African action songs which not only adds rhythm to the song but also communicates a message.

Although the choir sings mainly from staff notation, the basis of music education for the African is an oral and aural tradition, here music can be used as an education tool to learn about and or get to know other musics serving as an engaging hands-on activity and/or experience, as well as a form of knowledge system. Such a knowledge system, Nzewi (2003) points out, can be reduced or transformed by educators for formal education through which the musical arts of Africa can be promoted. During rehearsals, the cultural context of songs are discussed, through this sharing, members who may not be culturally or ethnically aligned to the song start to make connections and meaning to what they sing and why they move. For example when singing some Afrikaans folk songs they learn of the early Afrikaner people, some of the Zulu and Sotho songs when translated are gospel songs having a Christian meaning and when singing lullabies in the African languages they learn of how African women have to work the land and raise their children in rural settings whilst their husbands are far from their families working in urban cities. The choir has a selection of songs to sing from and always incorporate African, English and Afrikaans songs into the rehearsals and performance.

Nettl (1998) reminds us that African music must be examined not only in the structure of its music but also with reference to its cultural context. Hence, African music has a significant socializing role. This aspect of the music is an important strand that binds the choir as they maintain their South African identity and heritage through music making. This view is supported by Nzewi’s (2003, p.15) notion that African music is ‘formulated to perform differentiated tasks in the social, religious, political, economic and health systems’. The choir was successful in receiving a Community Development Grant in 2006. In the application they stressed the importance and need to promote the music, culture and ‘people of the South’ (a term commonly used for South Africans) and to build through music making an identity for the South African Jabulani choir with local communities. Such integration within the local community has taken place and will continue to do so at local festivals (Warrandyte Festival), carol services and at South African social events. Such understanding of how African music should function in a community is in line with Nzewi’s (2003) notion of making music in the community.

Another aspect of celebrating and sharing South African music and culture is the choir offering to sing at Citizenship ceremonies and other events like Australia Day and sporting events when South Africa participates in the cricket and rugby. Such activities help promote Australia’s vast array of cultural diversity. As part of the choirs vision, they would like to not only reach out to the young (where they can learn and sing traditional South African songs) but also to the elderly in care centres, retirement villages especially those where South Africans are resident. This has not yet eventuated but will do so in time. Bringing joy ‘Jabula’ through singing is one of the prime aspects of music making and sharing that the choir hopes to achieve at senior citizens homes in the community. The choir was invited by AnglicORD’s (AnglicORD is an overseas relief and development agency of the Anglican Church in Australia see AnglicORD for more information) projects office in 2003 to perform when the Archbishop of Cape Town visited Melbourne, here they sang songs that were typically South African and also strengthened a ‘South African’ identity at the forum.

Conclusion
This paper highlights the strong link between musical identities, through community music making, exploring diverse cultures and musics like that of South Africa. The notion of community and that of the ‘other’ are concerned with contradictory and ambivalent relations that delineate the way people belong within communities. The South African Jabulani choir in Melbourne is just one example of a community music group that promotes respect for different ethnic groups in multicultural Australia and encourages respect for diversity across the community. By focusing on the cultural and musical identity of South Africans as a minority group in Australia celebrating music and cultural diffusion, this paper has reported on making music together as a choir by people in a community music setting. Such a diffusion of intercultural dialogue through music can effectively promote cultural tolerance and diversity in our changing schools, society and world. According to Hawkes (n.d), the executive officer of Community Music Victoria ‘community music making is a fundamental ingredient of wellbeing and sustainability… all people have the right and capacity to make their own music…if we want to survive and be happy we must make music together’.

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References


