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The Role of Music in Blind Persons' Social Responsibility

Keywords: blindness, music, social responsibility

Abstract

Throughout human history blindness has always been associated with special abilities, such as: playing music with an exceptional talent. These mental images have become hidden, subconscious expectations that blind people are supposed to meet day by day, and thus, they play a significant part in both most mainstream societies and in blind people's thinking even though literature claims that not all blind people are born musicians. Still, music, in line with several other aspects of the sounding world, is of major importance in most blind persons' lives. That aspect of perception is one of the fields which has recently turned to be in the scope of musicologists, musicians, insider researchers, and as a result, we can see how a discipline is born and involves several disciplines, such as: musicology, disability studies, critical disability studies, education. That theoretical background strongly contributes to the practice of teaching music to blind students, which proves a basic element of blind persons' social inclusion, as well as demonstrates their social responsibility. This paper focuses on the history of learning, teaching and playing music blind, and aims to exemplify various ways how blind persons wish to and express their intentions to be regarded useful. The paper introduces several attempts how culture makes it possible for blind people to make any society aware of the fact that they are fully responsible, valuable citizens.

Introduction

There are at least two main reasons why culture in general, music in particular and disability are inseparable concepts. Firstly, culture has always provided one of the basic elements for charity to support disabled persons. And secondly, persons with various dis/abilities have always tried to communicate their values through culture (Flamich, & Hoffmann, 2011). Thus, music, being one of the pillars of human culture, has doubtlessly been playing a significant part in social inclusion ever since human beings first made sounds out of the objects at hands.

In order to illustrate the inclusive nature of music, this paper is a dialogue between past and present with relevant messages for the future. Concerning its structure, it is built upon the historical facts it reveals, the disciplinary basis it relies on, the practices it exemplifies and some possible directions to consider when shaping future tendencies in the field of education. Besides its theoretical approach, this paper undoubtedly aims to prove the motivating power and inclusive role of music in professional and amateur blind musicians' daily lives through lived-experience-based narratives.

Aims

The complex nature of the topic indicates complex aims, and complex approaches. Therefore, I find it inevitable to highlight a young discipline: cultural disability studies. I also aim to emphasize the necessity of re-thinking (music) teacher education. Thus, the focus on musicians' narratives describing their attempts to accomplish inclusion is also amongst the aims of the paper. With the help of the lived-experience-based

examples, I intend to encourage and motivate people with diverse abilities to play music together and at the same time to be open towards hidden values of people of all kind

Mental images of blindness

Music has always played a significant role in blind people's lives and their "social inclusion" in the course of centuries.

"In ancient times impaired vision was considered a fundamentally debilitating condition, confining its bearers to death or a life of beggary, but even then there were exceptions to prove the rule." (Bolt, 2006:80). Recognizing the special nature of hearing through which blind people, to a great extent, perceive the world, and musical hearing which is stereotypically supposed to be one "special gift of God" to compensate people for the loss of vision, have always distinguished the blind from persons with various other disabilities. Consequently, music is an integral part of our mental picture of blindness and blind people (Straus, 2011; Flamich, 2018). The fact can well be proven by the picture of the two blind harpists in the tomb of Ramses III., king of ancient Egypt, reigned from 1187 to 1156 bce (Britannica, n. d.)

In the course of time there have always been acknowledged blind musicians, such as Francesco Landini (1325-1397) Italian organist, composer and poet, John Stanley (1712-1786) English organist and composer, Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999) Spanish composer and pianist, Ray Charles (1930-2004) American singer, songwriter, musician and composer, Stevie Wonder (1950 -), American singer, songwriter, musician and record producer, Andrea Bocelli (1958 -), Italian singer, Imre Ungár (1909 – 1972), the Hungarian pianist of the 20th century, Tamás Érdi (1979 -), the pianist of our time, and Tomi Juhász (1988 -), the rock musician, just to mention a few of the role-model blind musicians. They, and the mental image of blindness may be the reasons why numerous blind children's parents hope music to be their children's future profession. Whether these hidden expectations remain dreams or become reality has not yet been in focus of any research so far, what is known though, that numerous blind people tend to enjoy the infinite variety of sounds and as such, making music. Therefore singing in a choir has always played a significant role in the School of the Blind in Budapest, Hungary, even if the choir has not aimed to guarantee a career for a living.

Mainstreaming undoubtedly affects singing in a choir. I meet fewer and fewer children at the School of the Blind, and this phenomenon impacts for example, children's blind identity as well as their attitudes to music education. Although mainstreaming is meant to be one way towards social inclusion, it seems to prevent children to learn to live blind, for blindness still seems to be regarded as a stigma and a tragedy, or the opposite, i.e. a super-quality of living with super-human characteristic features and talent, consequently, numerous mainstreamed blind children often face unrealistic, unreasonable expectations. Although blind identity can strongly be connected to music education, the concept and related issues are much too complex to discuss in this paper, that is the reason why I focus solely on its role in playing music.

The empowering role of music in the context of education in Hungary

Recognizing blind people's characteristic features and values started with their education. Teaching music was one of the basic elements the Planum, the special curriculum compiled as

early as in 1827, contained. The outcomes of music education resulted in social acknowledgement already in the early 1900s. Károly Herodek, the school director from 1905 to 1933, recognized music as a significant factor of social inclusion and social responsibility when he wrote:

“The blind’s voices and singing have already inspired many people to support educating blind children, and develop the institution they are taught in.” (Herodek, 1925:220)

The director’s encouraging attitude characterizes the curriculum, too. It proves that in 1930 blind students had twenty four music lessons a week. The curriculum and education policy clearly reflect that blind people’s social inclusion was aimed through music, and not only exceptionally talented blind students were involved. We may still meet generations who remember the well-known Homérosz Kórus, the choir named after Homer, either because they were members or because they heard them singing.

The choir was established in 1928 and there was a time when it had seventy or eighty members. It regularly gave concerts at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, toured around Hungary and the neighbouring countries, moreover, it was even invited to perform in Finland. The choir worked with sighted as well as blind conductors, made some recordings, an LP., when finally in the middle of the 1990s it ceased to work (Flamich & Hoffmann, 2011).

For tens of years another ensemble, a string orchestra also existed in the Hungarian cultural arena. It was less acknowledged than the choir, still each and every member of that chamber orchestra was respected by both the sighted and the blind communities. The chamber orchestra was established in 1953 as the successor of the string orchestra of the Blind School (Flamich, 2018).

Consulting the very few materials that describe the history of Hungarian blind people’s education, I may conclude that music did play a significant role in social inclusion in the past. The present, when the whole world tends to focus on mainstreaming still raises several questions, for example, how much does mainstream education influence blind people’s music education, now?

Research on the empowering role of music

Currently, in the international literature of music education there is a limited number of papers dedicated to blind music students’ and their professors’ experience and challenges. One of these works is a dissertation on inclusive teacher competencies through the eyes of blind and low vision musicians, music students and their teachers. In the following phase, the paper outlines the findings of the dissertation.

The reason I decided to elaborate on the topic was that in the school year of 2016/2017 at the School of the Blind, I was asked to teach Braille music reading and notation to talented blind students who wish to continue their studies in special music schools, and dream to be musicians. Being an active, though, non-professional musician and insider researcher myself, I am convinced that exploring the roots of difficulties and challenges may add new aspects to re-consider teaching music to blind students in secondary and higher education as well as preparing music teachers to teach students with various dis/abilities.

The dissertation understands music as a cultural discourse, and explores Hungarian blind and low vision professional classical musicians', music students' and their sighted teachers' beliefs on teaching music at secondary and higher education, and describes the history of blind people's music education in Hungary. In the paper I also shed light on stereotypes related to blind persons, blindness and music.

The participants of the research say blindness-related stereotypes and their consequences, for example: fear are still strongly present in music education. It can best be proven by the fact that blind students may continue their music studies in secondary and higher education solely in case one teacher of the chosen institution is willing to teach them. Blind students as well as their teachers emphasize that the teachers, professors concerned assume blind students are open, enthusiastic and creative, whereas each blind student feels that their music teachers are uncertain in teaching the blind. Teachers compensate their uncertainty with openness and creativity, for example relying on blind students' hearing in score reading classes. Teachers say they would be eager to participate in courses to prepare them to teach students with various dis/abilities. Currently, music teacher education fails to offer courses to prepare teachers for teaching blind or in any other way impaired students. Therefore, the dissertation aims to provide a detailed description of the methodology of music teaching, Braille music notation and the inclusive nature of singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra. The historical overview reveals the tendencies of blind people's music education which, owing to various education policies and economic reasons has gradually lost its significance. Imre Ungár, Hungarian blind internationally renowned pianist, pointed out as early as in 1960 that "the number of music lessons has been dramatically reduced in the School of the Blind" (Ungár, 1960:n.p.). Supposedly, the tendency resulted in ceasing of blind people's acknowledged ensembles, the choir (Homérosz Kórus) and the orchestra (Berindán László Zenekar) as well as in decreasing the number of students in the school choir, though the latter phenomenon may well be attributed to mainstreaming as well. Owing to the "pervasive" nature of music (Straus, 2011), to increase the number of music lessons would certainly have a positive impact on blind students' concentration and learning abilities, consequently, the current practices should be reconsidered and any attempt for intensifying students' contact with music should be supported.

The dissertation also aims to examine the truth behind the stereotype that blind people have extraordinary hearing and musical abilities. Therefore, as to answer the re-occurring question, a carefully-planned literary review is included in the work, in which Sacks (2010) states "one third of the human cortex is concerned with vision, and if visual input is suddenly lost, very extensive reorganizations and remappings may occur in the cerebral cortex...". These reorganizations highlight that there is a difference how sighted and blind people hear, and thus, the existing diversion may also explain in what ways their hearing can differ. Straus agrees with blind students' music teachers in the fact that not all blind persons are "born musicians". Interestingly enough though, in this research out of the 11 blind persons 9 report to have absolute pitch (AP). This ability plays a significant role in blind students' inclusion in music class activities and surprisingly, it results in a certain kind of respectful attitude towards them.

The interviews of the dissertation also aim to reveal the challenges blind music students and their sighted teachers face in learning and teaching music in secondary and higher education. These narratives may certainly prove a significant basis to work out programs to improve inclusive music teachers' competencies.

As far as the interviews are concerned, what all the respondents find challenging is relaxed and flexible posture. Hand, finger, body motions and motion patterns prove difficult, too. The most challenging task, however, is to understand, feel, learn and teach these motions. Although, in most cases, certain motions are realized, they fail to support technical improvement and musical expression until they are automatized. The participants state that motions can be learned, flexibility, relaxedness, impetus, and to feel how they help musical expressions, take a long time to acquire owing to the lack of visual input.

In case of blind music students learning and teaching body motions require touch, which is considered a natural characteristic feature of learning and teaching music, especially, when either the teacher or the student or both are blind. According to each respondent teaching music with the help of body contact is based upon fundamental confidence. Sighted as well as blind teacher participants claim that body contact appears in teaching music to sighted students, too, though, it is less frequent.

All the respondents emphasize that critical thinking, confidence and sincerity are the basic pillars of blind and sighted musicians' cooperation in learning and teaching music. Therefore, it is of major importance to look beyond stereotypes, and get acquainted with several basic characteristic features of how persons with various dis/abilities perceive the world, so disability-related courses would definitely contribute to the birth of confidence, and thus, would facilitate the cooperation between students and teachers. Cultural disability studies, i.e. cultural approach to the presence of disability and those concerned could well be regarded a significant resource for courses to improve inclusive teacher competencies.

Cultural disability studies

Human differences are present, moreover, well represented in each culture. Disability, one basic element of human differences is also richly reflected in human culture, as culture depicts daily life (Couser, 2009). Lennard J. Davis, one of the most acknowledged critical disability studies scholar highlights a characteristically common attitude to disability, which tends to determine thinking about and taking steps towards disabled persons and disability-related issues:

“When it comes to disability, ‘normal’ people are quite willing to volunteer solutions, present anecdotes, recall from a vast array of films instances they take for fact. No one could dare to make such a leap into Heideggerian philosophy for example or the art of Renaissance. But disability seems so obvious — a missing limb, blindness, deafness. What could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there.” (Davis, 2006:xvi.)

Disability studies and critical disability studies are now present in the academic arena. As to promote further understanding of disability, cultural representations of disability have also been in focus recently, and ambassadors of the young discipline offer a wide variety of literature to rely on, for example: Lennard J. Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001), Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006), Margrit Shildrick's *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality* (2009), Tobin Siebers' *Disability Theory* (2008), *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), and David Bolt: *The Journal of*

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies (2006) as Berressem, Ingwersen and Waldschmidt (2017) list to exemplify and demonstrate a well-established theoretical basis as to imply the significance of understanding diverse human dis/abilities through culture. Cultural disability studies emerge from cultural understandings and interpretations of disability.

Conclusion

The paper outlines the role, perspectives and practices of music in blind persons' social inclusion, social responsibility. I attempt to give several holistic answers to the questions the title implies: firstly, I highlight that music plays a significant role in blind persons' social inclusion, though mainstreaming may influence their skills and abilities. On the basis of blind people's lived experiences I may conclude that well-prepared teachers and the quality of education in general, and music education in particular are inevitable to support blind persons' social responsibility. As to assist transition from theory to practice, I introduce cultural disability studies. Music is a significant part of the mental image mankind has always formed of blindness. Lived experience-based narratives reveal that although sounds do enjoy priorities in the unseen world, not every blind person is a born musician. This paper points out that there is a kind of a gap between blind music students and their professors, even if both parties intend to bridge it. The paper strongly relies on lived experiences, and thus, impressively illustrates how people with diverse abilities move in the world. Cultural disability studies may well prove inevitable sources to support music teacher education as one way to promote blind persons' social responsibility.

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