

METHODOLOGIES FOR WORKING WITH CHOIRS OF SENIOR CITIZENS

The Aging Process

Old age is referred to as the period of the third age, with the first age meaning childhood and adolescence and the second age the period of adulthood. At present, we also encounter the designation of the fourth age, which results from the need to divide old age into two periods with regard to their different characteristics. The elderly, aged 60-74, usually do not yet suffer from serious diseases, are active, integrated into society and able to travel. This active part of old age is called the third age. The fourth age usually begins after the age of 75 in a period of deteriorating health.

Aging is a slow and smooth process, during which time changes occur in the body and the human psyche. Its course is uneven and very different individually. It is important for the senior to accept life as it is, without remorse for what did not happen or could have been different. This involves accepting one's own imperfections and coming to terms with one's shortcomings.

Some Physiological Changes in Old Age

- The ears have difficulty perceiving high tones and are more sensitive to noise.
- Eyesight weakens, taking longer to adapt to light and darkness.
- The respiratory system tires more quickly, especially during exertion, as well as during singing.
- In some cases as a result of deteriorating vocal cords, a vibrato is formed during singing which is practically impossible to control.

The Psychological Aspects of Old Age and Aging

These aspects are also closely related to biological aspects. Some of the main psychological changes that occur in many people's old age are:

- Slower reactions due to impaired sensory perception (sight and hearing).
- The memory deteriorates. This is especially true with memory for new events, while distant experiences remain.

Active Participation of Senior Citizens

The preparation of seniors for active living can be characterized by the following points:

- enthusiasm and a desire to engage in various activities;
- new interests and social ties;
- volunteering as one of the activities;
- a sense of usefulness;
- a sense of increasing self-esteem;
- gaining information about possible activities before retirement.

Even in old age, a person is able to acquire new knowledge. The pace of teaching elderly persons should be slower and individually adapted to age, health, abilities, and existing knowledge. Some very suitable places for teaching are universities and academies of the third age, academies of the third education, retirement clubs, the Union of Retirees in Slovakia and

senior centers, which in addition to bringing new knowledge, bring social contacts, fulfillment of free time, and improve quality of life.

The category of social activities in leisure time includes, among other things, sports activities, (especially walking), swimming, hiking, dancing, cycling, recreational football and others. Some seniors decide to assist others by helping the dependent and working as volunteers. They help those in need at home with shopping, cooking, and caring for them (especially for immobile people). Distraction alone is especially important for seniors, e. g. listening to the radio, watching television, solving crossword puzzles, handicrafts and the like.

The Senian period was defined by the ancient Greeks as a time of wisdom and a time in which the elder is revered and held in universal esteem. While these general rules are now giving way to various clichés and pseudo-values of a rapidly developing society, even this dynamic 21st century society is aware of the demographic disparity that is emerging. We are witnessing great advances in science and medicine, which are essential aspects of increasing the average age of the population. It is therefore the task of an advanced society to offer seniors the opportunity to actively develop their interests and spend their time productively.

If we look at the relationship between music and social inclusion, it is, in a broader sense, to create the conditions that will allow each individual, and particularly each senior, to have access to environments in which they can develop their musical education regardless of their economic means, social class, ethnicity, religion, linguistic and cultural heritage or sex. Furthermore, the concept of informal learning and the creation of musical communities are increasingly approached in terms of music programs that develop outside of the formal system of teaching and are considered to be an extracurricular activity, specifically aimed at populations considered at risk. The following is a brief synthesis that summarizes the relationship between music and social inclusion in a setting of non-formal education within the Portuguese society:

- Music as a social practice is seen as a vehicle for the promotion of citizenship and social inclusion, the sense of belonging and the development of group identity. The doors are kept open for some musical experimentation.
- Musical projects that work with socially disadvantaged populations can promote new life perspectives.
- One of the typical characteristics of musical programs that take place outside the educational system, is the breakdown of the barrier between the so-called classical/formal music and popular musical cultures.

Music as a form of social integration and the achievement of citizenship is one of the paths that we intend to achieve in our Musical project. An example of this would be the implementation of choirs. However, there is a broad range of social relationships belonging to this group, insofar as these social relationships acquire significance in accessing a wide range of resources that allow subjects to “participate successively and simultaneously in various groups or institutions”. Therefore, the more expanded the network of knowledge and social relationships, and the greater the amount of resources, the greater that seniors in this project will benefit. These resources act as mechanisms that encourage the search for skills and competencies, hitherto lost or asleep in an imaginary reality. The exercise of citizenship should not be illusory.

Social Inclusion through music, can be referred to here as a training tool for the seniors involved in the ASEB. This inclusion can also function as a source of social mediation, being useful, above all, to those in charge of non-formal education. Insofar as mutual assistance dynamics are established between seniors and their families, social inclusion through music may positively influence the quality of relationships between them and in interaction with other subjects and institutions in the surrounding community.

Finally, since in this music project the participants involved come from different ethnicities, it is essential to stress the importance of Intercultural education, through which commitments are made within the professional and public bodies involved, enhancing the emergence of plurality within communities where cultural diversity is a reality. The concept of social inclusion within music education, and especially its consequent practice, impact art, cultural democracy and citizenship.

Development of Musical Skills

Music can contribute to the prevention of cognitive decline, being an ally in the challenges posed by an aging population. Music takes on a variety of functions. On the one hand, music influences individual functions, such as the way we feel. On the other hand, music helps assume social functions that end up playing the role of facilitating cooperation within groups (Clayton, 2009). Other authors (Peretz, 2006 and Wallin et al., 2000) claim that when music is present in dances, ceremonies, and religious rituals, it can promote cooperation, cohesion and identification with a group. The same authors also claim that music can be a facilitator to strengthen interpersonal ties. According to Schubert (2009), music takes on two fundamental functions. The first function regards the fact that music has the potential to produce pleasure in listeners; the second function regards the fact that music takes on emotional functions since it is common to all people, times, and places. Sloboda (1985) affirms that the main reason that people participate in musical activities is that music has the capacity to arouse deep emotions.

According to other authors (Gomes and Amaral - 2012) the use of music in geriatrics and gerontology is more and more frequent, since it has effects at the psychological, emotional, physical and social level. Music ends up influencing the self-esteem and socialization levels of the elderly. In that same article, the authors divide the advantages of music into two major groups. The first refers to music therapy as improving the quality of physical life and the second refers to music therapy as improving the psychological quality of life. Noordhoek and Jokl (2008) also claim that music helps to prevent memory loss, thus becoming a “self-expressive and relevant therapy as a model for prevention, rehabilitation, and intervention with the elderly”.

Musical training has recently gained additional interest in education as the increasing neuroscientific research demonstrates the positive effects of musical activity on brain development. Musical activities performed by the elderly, especially those of an improvisatory character, may have effects on executive functioning through transfers between training, planning and inhibition functions, where different modalities of musical training have different effects.

Among different musical activities, choral singing is one of the most popular and widespread hobbies among seniors. In Europe, there are 37 million choral singers, and participation in senior choirs is growing rapidly. As an example, the experience of Portugal can be cited, where most enrolments for activities at Portuguese universities for the elderly are in the field of music, and most often in choirs. The coupling of singing-related brain processes (vocal-motor, auditory, linguistic, cognitive, and emotional) with social interaction (singing together in a group) and goal directed learning (learning to sing and perform polyphonic song arrangements), make choral singing a particularly promising activity for promoting cognitive resources and psychological and social well-being in aging. Previous research on group singing has shown that it can improve mental health and emotional and social well-being in adults who have mental health conditions. Physiologically, singing has a positive impact on cardiorespiratory functions, and the emotional gains of singing are linked to the secretion of endocannabinoids, immunoglobulins, and cortisol. In older adults, regular participation in community-level choirs can reduce anxiety, depression, and loneliness, improve self-evaluated quality of life (QOL), physical health, interest in life and can increase general activity.

The long-term goals of this project include systematic development of singing techniques while taking into account various physiological conditions of people in the age group 65+. Also among these goals are techniques such as a combination of chest and abdominal breathing and its benefits for general health, searching for an optimal vocal register, using head resonance as a tool for relaxation, an optimal setting of the singing apparatus, and developing a singing posture 'which does not hurt, as well as other techniques. Maintaining optimal physical condition is a lifelong topic. Continuous development or maintenance of a proper breathing method while singing, (vocal) training, and cultivating an active singing posture/sitting position, is directly related to one's physical condition. A well-trained singer makes sure his or her body receives quality oxygenation, often using all or most of the lung capacity, which, especially in the cold winter months, acts as a prevention of respiratory diseases.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES FOR WORKING WITH CHOIRS OF SENIOR CITIZENS

Preparatory Phase

In general, it can be stated that choral singers across age and social spectrums, are united by a desire to create together, and to be participants in the artistic process. Other important aspects include participation in a common project, the idea of togetherness and the knowledge that choral singers are part of a whole that transcends them. These are some of the reasons why senior citizens return to musical activities after many years, begin studying a new instrument or begin singing in "Academy". Participation in a choir is another opportunity they enjoy.

We must also not forget about quality choirmasters and conductors, who must not only be professionally prepared, but also have the social skills to work with senior age groups. Working with these groups requires a different approach, which is not only being more patient but also spending more time explaining the various musical problems. The instructors must be trained in music theory and in singing. They should play a musical instrument and have pedagogical and social competencies enabling them to teach music.

If a senior wants to learn a certain piece of music, the method that best suits the student should be chosen and not a universal method as taught in conservatories. The process often involves simplifying the structure of the music and explaining it with gestures, step by step, so that the seniors will imitate each of the gestures and memorize them. Then memory media such as videos or numerical guidelines (tablatures) can be put to use.

In preparing a course that meets the needs of each student, the conductor must take various factors into account. The first step in defining the content of an online or face-to-face singing class, is to get to know the students and understand what their needs are. This first contact is crucial, as it will determine what the teacher-student relationship will be like, as well as the successful functioning of future classes. The first meeting will also be decisive in the determination of a senior's desire to continue or not. Here are some suggestions that could be included in the first meeting:

- the level of knowledge of the interested party in music theory; If he/she is able to read a score, and able to reproduce some of those notes, among other things;
- the level of knowledge regarding singing and technique;
- the expectations that he/she has regarding the classes. The intention in these classes is always as a hobby;

- the level of knowledge about music is not an issue;
- the musical styles the choir members like best.

Technical Requirements

The singing room should not have desks except for the conductor. Singing seniors should be grouped as a choir, and participants who play musical instruments (they may also sing) should sit in front of them. The room should be large enough for everyone to fit comfortably and have their own personal space. A piano, conductor's desk, and having enough copies of the music to be practiced are musts. Depending on the financial possibilities, a laptop, CD player, speakers, flipchart and the like are welcome.

Basic Steps of Success

- Find a suitable spacious and airy space, where the seniors can stand and sing comfortably.
- Allow for the option of playing an instrument (cavaquinho/ukulele) in addition to singing, or instead of singing.
- Choose appropriate repertoire from each country's specific tradition.
- Distribute the musical material (lyrics and scores).
- Start the lessons with warm-ups and breathing exercises and then move on to learning the musical material.
- Once the vocal and instrumental parts are secure, combine all the participants.

Methodical Procedure of Singing Practice

Choir practice should be conducted following the next five steps:

- a) vocal warm-up,
- b) breathing exercises,
- c) practice of vocal techniques,
- d) musical interpretation
- e) specific study of a particular song or selection of music.

1. Vocal Warm-Up

Warm-ups are an essential and indispensable part of the rehearsal and are important to avoid damage to the vocal folds. This is one of the first lessons that the conductor should teach to the choir members. Some simple exercises help to relax the lips and tongue. They also help not only to warm up the voice, but also are an aid to listening.

Singing without warming up, will not result in as good a performance as with voices that have been warmed up. In addition, lack of adequate warm-ups can bring problems such as vocal nodes and hoarseness over time. The vocal warm-up is responsible for promoting better blood circulation in the parts of the body one uses to sing. These areas are not restricted to the vocal folds or the mouth. The muscles of the face, neck, ribs, abdomen and even the back are used in the process of singing. It is important to activate all of those regions, so, 10 minutes of the class should be reserved for exercises as listed below:

- Stand on the tiptoes and stretch the entire body for a few seconds. Then, return to the normal position and repeat that process two or three times.
- Massage the head and face muscles with the fingertips and the center of the hands.
- Rotate the tongue a few times to one side and then to the other.
- Make circular movements with the shoulders and neck, stretching them.

Repeat this same sequence at the end of practicing. This allows the voice to be cooled down (vocal cool-down) and helps in the health of the entire phonatory system. Remember that the singer's voice, unlike what happens with instrumentalists, is produced by one's own body. Now imagine a car with misaligned wheels and the effect that misalignment has on the car as a whole.

2. Breathing Exercises

Another indispensable tool, is for singers to work on their breathing. Breathing exercises should take place in all classes. As the choirs progress, these exercises will take up less class time, but in the beginning it is important that the conductor helps the singers to be aware of their own bodies, to relax their muscles, to feel more comfortable, and to use the diaphragm consciously. This muscle is responsible for the inhaling and exhaling of air. Every singer needs to learn how to control the flow of air that enters and exits the lungs while singing. Knowing how to breathe is a key step for progress and at the same time, it is also necessary to pay attention to one's posture, as correct posture helps singing. Good posture allows air to circulate more easily through the lungs.

The following describes correct posture:

- standing erect, with cervical spine alignment ;
- shoulders should be low and relaxed;
- the chin should be slightly lowered.

Over time these gestures will become automatic and will no longer need to be mentioned at each class.

Stand upright. Slightly spread the legs and place the hands on your ribs, just below your chest. Every time when air is inhaled, check to see if the ribs are opening.

When you exhale, pay attention! Your ribs should remain open for as long as possible, even if your lungs are empty.

Take a deep breath and fill your lungs with as much air as you can, forcing your ribs further out, that is, sideways.

At this stage, be very careful not to lift your chest or expand your abdomen. And check your navel, which must be fully contracted.

3. Practice of Vocal Techniques

Mastering the composition also requires good diction and good pronunciation of words, especially the vowels, since they are the ones that color the sound of the voice. The conductor may consider more or less in-depth work on these aspects according to the choirs needs. Directors can also work on vocal extension and the tessitura. The vocal extension represents the set of all the notes that a singer can articulate. The tessitura represents the set of notes that a singer can articulate effortlessly. It is necessary to know what the vocal extension is, in order to gradually expand the range of notes that the singers will be able to sing with ease. It is worth mentioning that all of this must be done gradually, so as not to damage the vocal folds.

4. Study of a Musical Composition

Now comes the time to study a particular composition. This task requires knowledge of music theory and solfeggio. If the student is a senior citizen without experience, it is necessary to be aware of this fact and include in the classes a moment dedicated to the study of music theory. To interpret a musical composition, it is first necessary to know how to break it down, in order to study each of its aspects.

At this point in the class, it is necessary to pay special attention to the rhythm and to listening. The latter is important to the choir member's evolutionary process, as listening will help to improve the quality of the singing and in general, the voice. Furthermore, listening will help when interpreting the particular composition.

5. Interpretation of a Musical Composition

A singing lesson has as its main objective the improvement of technique. The lessons also need to be dynamic and pleasant because music is first of all, a passion for those who make it. The part of the lesson dedicated to interpretation serves both to put into practice what has been studied, as well as to decrease stress and to create a fun time. This is also the time to express musical creativity, and to convey emotions and feelings through the voice. The seniors need to be able to express themselves, to know how to listen to their own voices and to understand whether they are singing in tune or not. The conductor's role is to point out the issues to be improved and to teach the choir to improve their techniques.

To supplement and diversify the methodological procedure, a specific example is pointed out, using the, "Andrej Church Choir" from Slovakia. Each rehearsal of the "Andrej Church Choir" begins with a prayer, after which the singers warm-up in the traditional way, that is, humming with major and minor seconds up and down, followed by warm-ups with successive intervals of thirds, fifths, and sixths to the octave. The warm-up should not last too long, as some older singers tire quickly, which makes it difficult for them to sing and rehearse music later in the rehearsal. The conductor of this Slovak choir was forced to abandon almost a half-hour of quality vocal warm-ups used with other choirs she led, and to settle for warm-ups lasting 10 to a maximum of 15 minutes. During the vocal warm-up, the singers are divided into voices: soprano, tenor and then alto, and bass. In some harmonic exercises, they all sing together. Another concession on the part of the conductor, was the abandonment of her desire for purity of intonation. In these situations, older voices can crack, many of the singers have developed poor technical habits, and despite the best efforts, it is practically impossible to break those habits. In addition, some singers show typical annoyance and impatience when the conductor repeatedly tries to correct intonation problems.

When rehearsing selected songs, the traditional method is followed. The new composition is learned by voice, then some voices are combined and finally all the voices together are rehearsed together. After learning the composition, the members of the singing school are invited to make constructive remarks and suggestions for the improvement of the interpretation. Technique can be aided by using tools such as a camera or a dictaphone and playing more than one recording of the same composition from the beginning, so that the difference between individual recordings becomes visible/audible.

The warm-up is followed by the rehearsal itself, which always begins with the most demanding music, due to the endurance required to sing it. Then the conductor will include in the rehearsal some familiar, more or less well known composition, which nonetheless, still needs to be rehearsed. Something new follows again, which is then followed by a more familiar composition, and in this way the rehearsal continues. At the end, the conductor will include a favorite composition, so that the singers finish the rehearsal with a good feeling and look forward to the next meeting.

Also there are several observations from Czech sources, specifically from the senior choir "Collegium Bonum". The methodology of rehearsal and vocal training is based on the "Czech Choral School" and its representatives. Although in modern pedagogical methods some procedures seem to have been replaced, the basics remain unchanged. The framework consists of quality singing preparations, which also accentuates the correct singing posture or sitting. Breathing exercises and activation of the diaphragm are an integral part of the preparations, which also brings many health benefits (oxygenation and movement of the

diaphragm has a secondary effect on the blood supply to the organs of the abdominal cavity, etc.). This is followed by articulation exercises and facial gymnastics. The vocal training itself includes the formation of the head tone, gradual warming up of the vocal cords, soft deployment of the tone, formation and balancing of vowels, exercises from fifth to unison, and full tone exercises with emphasis on diaphragmatic breathing. Individual exercises are chosen by the conductors to match the current condition of the choir members and their abilities which change over time.

The rehearsal itself starts with an initial analysis of the piece, followed by a demonstration (usually sung by the conductors). The rehearsal continues with practicing in small groups (divided by voices) and then rehearsing together. Just as with the youngest singers, it is always good to focus on one problem at the beginning of the rehearsal, so too with choirs of seniors, it is good to choose this approach. For example, first intonation, then rhythm, phrasing, and dynamics.

Although the “Collegium Bonum” choir is an amateur group, the conductors do not want to completely resign themselves to targeted vocal education. Nonetheless with proper practice, vocal education also serves in the prevention of respiratory diseases besides other diseases. Many choir members have been singing in choirs all of their lives, many members have returned after a singing hiatus, and here, more than anywhere else, the rule of muscle memory applies. The vocal cords are a muscle. Building a repertoire requires a certain amount of patience, which is eventually rewarded by the experience of creating together during a performance.

Methodology for Cavaquinho/Ukulele Training

The cavaquinho is a traditional four-string instrument associated with folk music in Portugal. It is already played by some of the participants in the Portuguese senior group, and it is one of the goals of this project to introduce it to the Czech and Slovak lecturers and senior students, along with the ukulele, another four-string instrument that can be traced back to Portugal.

Both the cavaquinho and the ukulele are perfect instruments for people with no prior musical experience and they provide an excellent starting point for the development of instrumental playing skills. Due to the instruments' reduced size and complexity, cavaquinho/ukulele players can achieve fast results and fast rewards with minimum effort. As an example, drawing from the Portuguese folk music traditions, some songs can be played using only two chords. It is not uncommon for beginning cavaquinho/ukulele players to be able to accompany such songs at the end of a single lesson. The result is the enthusiasm of the student and an increased will to keep learning.

By introducing the cavaquinho to the Czech and Slovak audiences, it will be possible to expand the use of the cavaquinho beyond Portuguese music and maybe find new contexts for it within these countries' musical traditions. At the very least, it will generate an interest and skill interchange that will help to shorten the distances between different musical cultures.

For students starting from zero from any nationality, we propose the following goal-oriented methodology:

- 1) Learning how to properly hold the instrument and be comfortable while playing it.
- 2) Learning the first basic simple chord shapes to be performed by the left hand. One of the first tasks should be to practice switching between these simple chord shapes that use only one or two fingers.

3) Introducing the role of the right hand (strumming) with basic rhythmic patterns, for example, quarter notes.

4) Connecting the two hands. Perform, at slow speeds the basic rhythmic patterns, while changing chord shapes every one or two bars.

5) Once that the previous task is mastered, a simple song should be introduced in which the student can apply the knowledge learned so far. This should be done at slow/moderate speeds.

6) When the student can already perform a song at a moderate speed, then the speed should be slowly increased to reach the original tempo of the song.

7) After the student can successfully accompany a simple folk song, slowly introduce new chords, new rhythmic patterns, as well as new songs where this information can all be applied.

Although the Czech and Slovak lecturers can begin the first contact with the cavaquinho for their senior members, the documents, materials and videos that will support cavaquinho/ukulele learning should be provided by the Portuguese lecturers and should be made available on the shared platform.

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