



Ensemble Music Performance as a Fulcrum in an Effective Curriculum: Learning Through Band Playing

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ABSTRACT

An ensemble is a group of players or musical parts playing together. The main purpose of such a collaboration is to bring together different players, of varied musical backgrounds, to make up one harmonized performance. The lessons learnt from the challenges that ensemble playing poses, we argue, extend beyond the music making and can generate numerous life lessons that can be of help to advice concerns that are proving problematic to many Kenyan youths as they purpose to join the job market. We aim, through this paper, to showcase some of the lessons that students at Kabarak and throughout Kenya are learning from participating in such a group, consequently informing an effective school curriculum. We intend to use demonstrations from the Kabarak SMPA band groups to showcase these particular lessons. We feel inadequate research has been undertaken in student ensemble groups in Kenya, therefore, failing to realize, to whatever extent, how to manage some of the issues that the Kenyan youth of today face after finishing a University program. This paper is informed by the latest guidelines for developing an effective University curriculum: We feel therefore that through music ensemble playing, we can provide informative and creative solutions that will assist in nurturing responsible and proactive youths, as well as providing solutions that we feel the youth can relate to, after undergoing a program guided by a well-informed curriculum. In addition, we feel through the mentioned approach, we can inform the University music curriculum on how to use ensemble class to achieve the objectives of achieving International and National Development goals. This may in turn aid the policy makers in the country to create such forums and extend the debate beyond this paper.

Keywords: Ensemble/Band Performance, Effective Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The direction a country chooses in relation to the curriculum it adopts in their education system, plays a very critical role in how students are transitioned into citizenship. This affects not only the workforce of a country, but also the infrastructure, development, technology and policies it follows in achieving a desirable economic level. Most countries in Africa are 3rd world economies. Curriculum, as Kabita and Ji (2017) put it, “is the vehicle through which a country empowers its citizens with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable them to be empowered for personal and national development” The Commission for Higher Education (2014) stipulates that any academic program in a Kenyan university should be made in line with the philosophy of the school: This includes the mission and vision of the school. The Kabarak University in its catalogue (2018) states its mission and vision as;

VISION

“To become a centre of Academic Excellence founded on Christian values”



MISSION

“To provide a holistic quality education based on research, practical skills and Christian values”

In addition to these guidelines, the KICD (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development) in collaboration with the CHE (Commission for Higher Education) and CUE (Commission for University Education) has attempted to enforce a competency based curriculum, after revising the National curriculum in 2002, that incorporated the MDG (Millennium Development Goals) as well as the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) and Vision 2030 goals, which puts more emphasis on what learners can do with the knowledge learnt in school, rather than knowledge memorisation – what learners are expected to do in contrast to what they are expected to know (Kabita, 2017) with emphasis “on the importance of producing learners who can take initiative and creatively innovate products and processes that spur talents and development of values” (NCP, 2015). This diminishes the notion that a bona fide assessment of a student should be done in one session/exam, instead over a longer period of time, albeit practically and more effectively.

We have summarised and sampled some of the goals that a good curriculum purposes to achieve, and intend to use *Christina Shusho's – Ninang'ara*, performed by a band from Kabarak SMPA (School of Music and Performing Arts), to showcase how some of these goals have been implemented in the mentality of our students at SMPA as they prepare to start their careers, through ensemble (band) playing.

Learning based on Christian values

Kabarak University is one of the few universities in Kenya that offers Academic programs intentionally founded on Christian values. The mission and vision of the school target that by the end of a program undertaken at Kabarak, a student should be able to interact with the wider community in some modus that demonstrates a biblical perspective of life. This is the direction taken by the university in order to shape the students adopt idealism based on good values and mannerisms, consequently informing behaviour and values based on biblical teachings. The school of music emphasizes this particular approach in the mentality of the students from the onset of the band course. The first genre we choose for our repertoire, is blanketed under the gospel umbrella of music. The song chosen for this paper is an example. The song talks about how the singer has been ‘nourished’ by the blood of Jesus making her life shine (*n'gara*) and now she enjoys the favours of God's grace in her life as a result. This is a rallying call to her audience urging them to let Jesus be the ‘driver’ of their lives, and their lives will in turn shine.

Lyrics

Refrain:(sang twice)

Umenifanya ning'are, umenifanya ning'are
Umenifanya ning'are, Yesu

You make me shine
Jesus, you make me shine

Verse 1:

Wewe waitwa nuru, eti nuru ya watu
Ukiingia kwangu, mi nang'ara
Ndani ya hiyo nuru, eti kuna uzima
Ukiingia kwangu, nina uzima
Uso wake Yesu, sura yake Mungu
Umeingia kwangu, mi nang'ara



Nuru ya injili, utukufu wake Kristo
Umeingia kwangu, mi nang'ara
You are called the light of men
I shine when you are in me
There is life in that light
I am fulfilled when you are in me
The face of Jesus, the face of God
I shine when You are in me
The light of the Gospel, the Glory of Jesus
You are in me, and so I shine

Refrain:(sang twice)

Umenifanya ning'are, umenifanya ning'are
Umenifanya ning'are, Yesu
You make me shine
Jesus,you make me shine

Verse 2:(sang twice)

Inuka uangaze we, nuru yako umekuja
Utukufu wa Bwana, umekuzukia wewe
Mataifa watakuja, wafalme watakuja
Utukufu wa Bwana, umekuzukia wewe
Rise and shine, your light is here
The glory of the Lord is upon you
Kings and nations will come
The glory of the Lord is upon you

Refrain:(sang thrice)

Umenifanya ning'are, umenifanya ning'are
Umenifanya ning'are, Yesu
You make me shine
Jesus,you make me shine

While the purpose of the course is predominantly informed by the musical details encompassed in the songs such as: Instrumentation, melody, harmony, rhythm, groove, et cetera, the words of the songs cannot be treated in seclusion from the other musical elements. By choosing a gospel song, we argue that the band members get to interact with the message of the song, in turn reflecting the principles embodied in the words of the song with how they reason and behave. Blacking (2000) acknowledges a relationship between the organisation of music and its components, and the behaviours of the performers and listeners of that music.

In so doing, the band members are well grounded on good morals and values which they can transfer to their daily lives and careers.

Fostering nationalism, patriotism and promote national unity

The pedagogy in the ensemble playing involves learning and performing songs from varied genres, with an aim of exposing the learners to the different musical details and idioms of the different types of music. This is done in order to shape them into musicians who are capable of handling wide varieties of musical genres. The band unit undertaken at SMPA, while not restricting the music to Kenya, emphasizes that part of the repertoire has to include songs from Kenyan artists. Through learning,



listening, researching on the composer information, students interact with the Kenyan reality of music and the dynamics of the Kenyan music industry. This is done with the aim of exposing the students to Kenyan content in the hope that they can relate and own the music, as well as feel a responsibility to want to improve Kenyan music. By so doing, the students feel a sense of pride in performing ‘their own’ music. It also promotes patriotism whilst acknowledging and appreciating music from other parts of the world. This ‘inward, outward’ approach, is particularly important as this demonstration paper aims to showcase that there is adequate talent in Kenya to generate enough content and of high standard. This has always been an ongoing debate between the stakeholders in the music industry as to whether Kenyan music artists are good enough. SMPA is keen on advocating for Kenyan talent growth, for Kenyan audience to appreciate and take pride in, through this approach.

In addition, the students learn music of the Kenyan artists regardless of the tribe of the singer/s or the regional background of the production house behind the song. This moves to show that while we take pride in the diverse cultures of Kenya, the same need not be used as a medium for tribal alienation and idealism inclined towards segregation of whatever manner. Monte(2017) acknowledges that music has been used in past years as a medium for tribal sycophancy and political servility, which can result to fuelling national instability. However, he also points out that the same music can be used as a symbol of national unity to foster peaceful coexistence.

The instrumentation in the song includes; vocals, brass, wind, percussions, strings and a keyboard part. For these parts to coexist within the song, each musical line plays a role that complements the other. The percussions provide the rhythmic accompaniment while driving the tempo of the song and provide rolls for entries and transitions, the vocals carry the text, melodic and harmonic parts, the brass and wind parts cue entries and provide embellishment while the keyboard and string parts provide harmonic accompaniment to the song. Using this criterion of how each musical line provides a detail that in general contributes to the harmony of the song, we feel by studying how the musical parts unify to bring forth one song, this lesson can be transferred to life skills where humans coexist interdependently.

If the players realise that each one of them has a role to play that is equally important as the other, they can transfer this to how they can work with others to generate and initiate ideas and solutions for other challenges that might be of benefit to them in their careers and in their lives, as well as the country. This is the classic illustration of ‘two heads being better than one.’ This, we feel in this paper, is a big reason as to why the students at SMPA interact well with each other, help each other and work together and are relatively unified and have a ‘family-esque’ relationship.

Gender equality and women empowerment

There is the anecdote that there were times when music was not permitted for the female counterparts. The notion was that there were some particular activities that ladies were perceived to be incapable of doing as well as their male counterparts. This is a harsh reality that drags on and is still evident, even in the education landscape of now. In our bands, no preference is given to ladies or men when giving roles, arguing that all genders can play the same roles. ‘What a man can do...’. As well, the same input is expected from all members, regardless of their sexual orientation, in terms of discipline, time keeping, practicing or behaviour during rehearsals – providing equal grounds for all. We envisage a Kenya where all men and women are treated equal, in the hope that we can motivate both the young girls and boys coming through that everything is possible if you put your effort into it, regardless of your sexual orientation. All band members’ setup and set down during the rehearsals and performances, and this we feel generates a feeling of equal treatment in the school of music.



The repertoire suggested in every semester is also closely scrutinized, to avoid songs that have text which have sexually related slogans or connotations, whose aim is to diminish the female students or even male alike.

Promoting social, economic, technological and industrial needs for national development

The band members come from different tribal and social backgrounds. This plainly means that each band member is exposed to different social and economic perceptions. Playing together enables social interaction as the bands comprises of students chosen randomly, with no particular preference in relation to the region that they come from or economic status of their family. This encourages tolerance and understanding between the players, as the ultimate goal is to come up with a team generated performance. This lesson is particularly important in the Kenyan society as it rules out alienation of people according to how rich or how poor their parents are, and in turn provides equal opportunity for all citizens regardless of how ‘small’ or ‘big’ your family name is.

In addition, as technological advances are generated every other year, the school tries to adapt to the new ways of sharing knowledge and information within the band members. The songs in the assigned repertoire are shared on social media platforms like WhatsApp, ensuring that students get their music as quickly as possible. The use of ICT technological ways of learning and sharing musical ideas is also highly encouraged, to minimise piracy as well as benchmark the musical potential to the global field. Also, the band sessions are recorded for reference and for archival collection, in order to monitor the progress of the level of playing and performance. The SMPA recording studio allows the members to record their music for commercial and promotional needs, but guided by classwork. All these approaches, we feel, draw the students closest to the reality of how the entertainment industry is run in the country and globally, ensuring that they are market ready when they finish their academic programs. This way of learning can only be possible with a well-informed curriculum approach.

Promote individual development and self- fulfilment

Mastery of any musical instrument is a skill that has proved problematic to many. In particular, band instruments like the brass, keyboard and drums, et cetera, are highly demanding in terms of skill of playing, especially in a case where the band intends to play professionally. The repertoire chosen for the bands at SMPA is handpicked to challenge members to tackle challenging musical material which they will eventually come together to make up one harmonised and highly desirable presentation. We argue that every student has a right to be allowed to improve and grow their skills to progress their skills, whilst considering their ability. This boosts their morale. This, we feel, makes learning more effective, enjoyable and fulfilling. The band members are from varied skill level of playing, however, for them to generate one harmonised performance, some of the members realise that they need to raise their skill of playing. In turn, they go through rigorous extra practice in order for them to raise their standard.

This approach not only necessitates that no player has room to be lazy, but also keeps the members who are at a higher level of playing ‘on toes’, to ensure they maintain their level or improve to a higher one. This is a lesson that is delicate among young people, of whom have a fragile emotional mentality and are prone to peer influences. Educators have attempted to provide solutions to this challenge, but with a relatively low success rate. Some teachers fail to motivate students who feel they are not as good as some of their counterparts, resulting to many youths resigning to loss of hope, or self-inflicting pain or in a worst-case scenario, committing suicide. By having a platform where every student feels that they are relevant to a bigger course, students feel emotionally safe to express themselves and do not see the negative side of being different from others. The band members feel a sense of value in learning, as



they know regardless of their varied abilities, they can contribute on equal platforms with others and this generates a lot of self-fulfilment, self-belief and consequently challenges them to improve. A good curriculum has to necessitate such an approach to education.

Conclusion

Kenya is proving to be a fast rising economic power as predicted by analysts. Education plays a pivotal role in how much of a reality this will actually be achieved. As the future generation is shaped to drive a country forward, in terms of their mentality, proactivity and industriousness, a lot can be realised by a proper learning framework that encourages utilising and maximising the potential of every child in the country with no prejudice and 'educational ransom'. This raises the odds at which the society and the economy will grow. To enable such a growth, schools and their curriculum policies have to prioritise how they approach education and how students learn. To equip, rather than whip, them with relevant practical skills, values, information and knowledge. The Kabarak SMPA realises this has to start happening sooner rather than later, suggesting a change of approach in teaching and learning of the units taught in the school. The lessons learnt during band playing go a long way to prove that Kabarak students and their counterparts in other universities, can play an important role in the country as they purpose to be career leaders, innovators and leading drivers of the Kenyan economy and society, while enjoying learning and their academic programs, with a biblical perspective. We hope this paper initiates the conversation to the Kabarak community and to the larger audience of how students in school learn.

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