ORIGINAL CHORAL COMPOSITIONS AND
COMMUNITY MUSIC MAKING

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I. INTRODUCTION. WHEN MUSIC COMES INTO OUR LIVES

The presence of music in a child’s life is something that I used to take for granted. I always believed that it was common for children to grow up listening to their mothers or grandmothers singing them lullabies or traditional children’s music. It is clear to me now that my childhood musical experience was not universal; it was something to treasure. I value the presence of children’s music in life, and that appreciation is what inspires this work.

First, I will discuss the importance of music education as the path that guided me to compose original music for children’s choirs. In this pursuit I will examine various points of view in music education and its significance in society. Later on, I will survey experiences in working with children’s choirs as a common educational practice, as an artistic extracurricular activity, and also as a channel to provide access to music education—especially for young pupils living in underprivileged communities. I will share personal experiences with different types of children’s choirs, in particular the one organized by the Connecticut organization Music Haven, for whom I volunteered during a short period of time. It was for this organization that I composed the pieces included in this work.

The question I would like to begin with is: when does music education enter our lives? Education, as defined by Oxford Music Online, is any action that may “change people by leading them towards some knowledge or skill, or by extending their understanding” (Swanwick and Spencer). This implies that education starts at home, at
the hands of whoever is responsible for a child’s life: mother, father, grandparents, guardians, etc.

Therefore, any kind of information given to a baby could be considered educative, regardless of the intention. Babies are exposed to a variety of new things depending on their surrounding society. Moreover, music in and of itself—as a form of human expression, a philosophical way of teaching, and a form of experiencing life—is intrinsically tied to education. In the case of children for example, music is acknowledged to play a role in their emotions, actions, and thoughts (Department of Education, UK). Furthermore, in a social context, music “helps pupils understand themselves, relate to others and develop their cultural understanding, forging important links between home, school and the wider world” (Department of Education, UK). Few would argue that music also affects youths’ and adults’ thoughts and actions, albeit to a different degree. As adults, we can turn our attention to any of the multitude of sounds and musical forms to which we are exposed. As infants, however, we have no choice but to absorb whatever comes to us.

There are three settings just mentioned in the 2014 National Curriculum by the Department of Education, UK—home, school, surroundings—that I believe are of much importance in the life of any child. Home is where children establish their basic knowledge and develop their tastes and desires. Needless to say, there are countless cultural differences at play, but I believe that it is generally true that the first significant musical experience offered to babies tends to come through the voice of the mother. “[T]he newborn’s brain responds strongly to the mother's voice and shows, scientifically speaking, that the mother's voice is special to babies,” declares researcher Dr. Maryse
Lassonde of the University of Montreal, in the article titled “Mom's Voice Plays Special Role in Activating Newborn's Brain” published online by ScienceDaily. This innovative neural research was done with sixteen infants with electrodes positioned on their heads. The results also showed that the voice of the infant’s mother has more impact in their brain than any other voice, including female voices. Dr. Lassonde adds in the same article that the research also “confirms that the mother is the primary initiator of language and suggests that there is a neurobiological link between prenatal language acquisition and motor skills involved in speech” (ScienceDaily).

Maternity practices can vary from one society to another. In many cultures, including the one I was surrounded with growing up in Venezuela, the act of breastfeeding provides one of the earliest opportunities to expose babies to music. Here in the US I have discovered that breastfeeding is a controversial issue, while in my country it is virtually universally understood to be as normal as taking a shower. Perhaps at this point in time that understanding might be changing due to factors like globalization, industrial development, and feminism. But my point here is not to discuss maternity choices but rather to support the idea that breastfeeding is an opportunity for a mother to connect musically with a baby, and in doing so to at least indirectly educate him or her.

In Venezuela for example, it is part of national history to learn about the life of Simón Bolívar El Libertador, a Spanish descendant who stood up against the Spanish regime to help win the independence of Venezuela, among other Latin American countries, in 1810. It is taught that Bolivar’s mother was not able to take care of him due to her poor health, and that Negra Hipólita, an African descendant maid, breastfed and raised him during his childhood (Protzel). It is said in oral history that she would sing
lullabies, some of them of Spanish origin. Later on, according to twentieth-century Venezuelan ethnomusicologist Luis Felipe Ramón y Rivera, one of these lullabies became an inspiration for the National Anthem—the first two verses and its repetition of the “Glória al Bravo Pueblo” are the musical copy of the Venezuelan lullaby called “Duérmete mi Niño” (Sleep my Baby)—and a symbol of strength and liberty (Ramón y Rivera 6).

This relation between breastfeeding and lullabies is just one example of the way children experience music at an early age. There is of course little consensus on the exact nature of the effects of lullabies on breastfeeding children, but I believe very strongly that children’s musical awareness and perhaps even affinities are affected in intimate ways by such early experiences. Music educators of even the youngest pupils in turn should be aware of the degree to which the children they teach have been “educated” in one way or another.
II. MUSIC AS PART OF EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT.

In 1993, when my brother was born, I became aware for the first time of what my infancy must have been like. I have beautiful memories of my mother sitting on her bed, embracing my newborn brother while singing lullabies to comfort him in his restless moments. During the nights, I could hear her melodic voice through the wall while I was in bed. The alarming cries of my baby brother would wake me up, but the chanting of my mother would then calm us both. Even as I write this, thinking of this sound creates a certain feeling of comfort that I cannot easily obtain from other childhood memories. Feelings like this reinforce my belief that contact with music at a young age can somehow influence our minds and therefore our behavior in the future.

However, referring to “preverbal infants” engaged in sound stimulation—musically and rhythmically—Marcel Zentner from University of York, UK, and Tuomas Eerola, from the Finnish Centre of Excellence in Interdisciplinary Music Research, assert that “very little is known about its earliest manifestations” (1). Their main conclusion after working with 120 infants from 5 to 24 months of age was that infants engaged more in rhythmic movement through metrical sounds and music rather than only through speech. They observed that “predisposition for rhythmic movement in response to music and other metrically regular sounds” (Zentner and Eerola 1) was an attitude among infants who were exposed to the music of Saint-Saëns and Mozart, as well as strictly rhythmic excerpts from the same composers.

Furthermore, a “first study of its kind” about the way in which music stimulates an infant’s brain conducted by a group of Canadian researchers from the McMaster
University and published last year, reached the following conclusions: “Babies from the interactive classes—music lessons where parents, along with their preverbal and pre-walker babies, were encouraged to play selections of percussion instruments, and sing nursery rhymes, and lullabies—showed better early communication skills, like pointing at objects that are out of reach, or waving goodbye” (McMaster University). Furthermore, the interaction with music during the six-month study seemed to bring about a change in infants’ social behavior: “[T]hese babies also smiled more, were easier to soothe, and showed less distress when things were unfamiliar or didn’t go their way” (McMaster University). In short, the study suggested that babies’ brains might benefit from music lessons.

Jean Ashworth Bartle, a twentieth-century and contemporary educator, was the founder of the Toronto Children’s Choir and the winner of the 2004 Distinguished Service Award in Music Education of the University, among other recognitions. In 2003 she wrote *Sound Advice: Becoming a Better Children’s Choir Conductor*, winning the Outstanding Choral Publication Award by the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors. With the premise that any child can sing and should learn how to do it, Bartle suggests reasons why children may encounter difficulties in learning how to sing (3). One of them is due to the absence of a parent’s chanting voice during the preschool phase (Bartle 8). I will return to Bartle’s work later in this thesis.

Although there is strong support from researchers, philosophers, and educators about the benefits of music stimulation on preschoolers, I think that the population that gets to enjoy these benefits is certainly not universal and may even be a minority. Therefore, I will move to where I believe a higher number of children can be involved:
primary education. This is likely the place where most children receive their most significant early musical stimulation. According to the National Association for Music Education (NAFME), there exist in the US nine national targets to be accomplished by the music educators. Provided by the nafme.org, these are:

− Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
− Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
− Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
− Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
− Reading and notating music.
− Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
− Evaluating music and music performances.
− Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
− Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

Music education could lead children down a variety of paths. Here are some general examples. 1) Music could be seen as mere entertainment, leading a child to a superficial way of experiencing sounds. 2) Music could be considered an activity that enhances our lives, permitting the creation of extracurricular activities that would predispose our brains to keep absorbing knowledge outside of the typical routine of school. 3) Music could also be studied by itself, in the case of those that are considered gifted musicians at a very young age. And, in a more mature stage, 4) music could be considered a way of thinking and a lifestyle, which comes with a heavy philosophical background that would not normally be available by a child. Yet, none of these specifications are relevant for a young child, who in general would perceive music simply as an external stimulant.

At this point in history, I think music tends to be taken for granted and is mostly valued for entertainment purposes. The massive amount of new forms of music is now
overwhelming and almost inescapable. How many teachers have been asked by their students to perform “Gangnam Style?” And an even more extraordinary thought, how many teachers have agreed to do it? It is not my aim to find the answers for these questions right now. Instead, I want to take them as an example of daily experiences that teachers from different schools in New Haven have conveyed to me during informal interviews.

I do not necessarily condemn such performances in principle, but I do believe that we are missing an essential value in music, a value that is being replaced by the convenience and omnipresence of new media. In mentioning this I must also discuss the presence of politics and the influence it has on music education. As published in The New York Times’ article “School Districts Brace for Cuts as Fiscal Crisis Looms,” right now the US is facing a dilemma where “federal education programs for elementary and high schools would lose a little over $2 billion — or close to 8 percent of the current budget,” and music is among the first educational areas to be affected (Rich). Perhaps as budgets for music programs shrink, educators are more often taking the convenient shortcut of catering to children’s demands to imitate the pop music they hear on the radio and TV.

We also cannot obviate the role that philosophy has played in the development of music education. It has set the foundations and structures that support different ways to approach the study of music in pedagogy. As suggested by the professor Kevin Tutt from Grand Valley State University, and Marc Townley, band director at Byron Center High School, MI, there are basic subjects to be considered in the practice of music education and its success. In their article “Philosophy + Advocacy = Success,” they advise educators to reflect on their own philosophy: “[T]hink about what you believe and what
you want to accomplish. Talk to colleagues and read widely. There are writings on music education philosophy as old as Plato and Aristotle and a new as today’s blog” (Kevin, and Townley).

I was in high school when my mother, at that time an Art History student, shared Plato’s writings on music—one of the first documented works on music education. The work I had in my hands was a collection of fragments of Plato’s *The Republic*. Since then I have always kept in mind his thoughts about how “beautiful” music would shape an “educated” man for the society. Here I share his words:

Said I, is not education in music of the greatest importance, because that the measure and harmony enter, in the strongest manner, into the inward part of the soul; and most powerfully affect it, introducing decency along with it into the mind, and making every one decent if he is properly educated; and the reverse if he is not. And, moreover, because the man who hath here been educated as he ought, perceives in the quickest manner whatever workmanship is defective, and whatever execution is unhandsome, or whatever productions are of the kind, and, being disgusted in a proper manner, he will praise what is beautiful, rejoicing in it; and receiving it into his soul, be nourished by it, and become a worthy and good man: but whatever is ugly, he will in a proper manner despise, and hate, whilst yet he is young, and before he is able to understand reason; and, when reason comes, such an one as hath been thus educated, will embrace it, recognizing it perfectly well, from its intimate familiarity with him. It appears to me, reply’d he, that education in music is for the sake of such things as these” (Plato 110, 111).

His thoughts about music education—though they are likely based on those of Socrates—ring true to me even now. Others, however, might not perceive them the same way of course, especially when most of us can agree that there is no single definition of beautiful music in current society, and hopefully there never will be. Yet, during Plato’s life for example, beautiful music was selected, well described, and taught. As noted by Michael W. Riley, professor at Saint Mary's College of California, “In Republic 3, 389a ff., Plato has Socrates accept of the musical modes or harmonies only the Doric and the Phrygian, the one to inspire courage in forced activity… the other moderation in the full
exercise of freedom” (81). Despite the fact that Socrates or Plato’s views might have ultimately been for good, Plato’s social system has been endlessly scrutinized since its existence.

In his book *Plato: Political Philosophy*, Malcolm Schofield, professor at St John's College, discusses two points of view in Plato’s social inclination. He describes Plato’s ideology against Athens’ democracy, around 404 BC, and more crucial, Plato’s totalitarian principles (Schofield 102, 195). I refer to these experts on Plato’s thoughts regarding the power of music not to support some kind of political belief but only to reaffirm the idea that music has the power to shape the souls of men and women. If we are to fully believe in this philosophy, then we must choose carefully the appropriate music that should be taught. Also, if familiarity with music in our adult life comes from the time when we were young, then, of course, we should pay attention to what our children are exposed to.

Shinichi Suzuki’s pedagogy widely recognized during the twentieth century and even now, explores how the process of educational learning affects a child’s life. His method claims that environmental stimulation since birth would prepare a human being to live in accordance with his or her period of time (The Suzuki School). So, why not believe and accept that music should always be part of our children’s education? And moreover, what easier way to approach music than by singing?

I think it is safe to say that singing is the most affordable way for a person to be substantially stimulated by music. Singing has the added benefit of embracing language, and therefore text, permitting the involvement of people with disadvantages—hearing
loss, blindness, and special needs. But even if educators can agree that singing is the most accessible form of musical interaction, music faculty face the daily concern of distinguishing the best music to teach. There is of course a wide variety of music to which children can be exposed, as well as many ways of expressing ourselves through our voices.

Recently, in order to brush up on my choral conducting knowledge in the English language, I have been reading books like *Conducting a Choir* by the late British composer and conductor Imogen Holst; *Choral Concepts: A Text for Conductors* by the professor of Choral Studies at University Of California, Los Angeles, Donald Neuen; and, *Choral Conducting: The Forging of The Conductor* by the composer and professor of Choral Conducting at Universidad Simón Bolívar, Venezuela, Alberto Grau. Two general suggestions that these works have in common about what sort of music to teach are: folk and traditional songs, and a variety of works from the medieval period until the contemporary one. This allows students to become familiar with a variety of genres, from renaissance motets to eurhythmic operettas.

Here I would like to make a distinction regarding what to teach and where. So far I have mentioned the aims that the National Association for Music Education propose for music educators to accomplish. Then, in the above paragraph, I mention some suggestions about repertoire shared by specialists in the area of singing. Now I would like to share my personal suggestions of what I consider infants and pre-school children should be exposed to.
During my research I have concluded that there could be two main categories that parents or guardians should target at home. The first category includes folk and traditional songs characterized by a moderate tempo between *andante* and *allegro*. These songs should be in a centered register between E5 and C6 or an octave lower for male voices, ensuring that the child’s singing is produced in his or her natural register, and not forced. They should contain easy text, a clear meaning, and if possible be about life experiences including descriptions of beautiful landscapes, animals, etc. Children’s songs such as rounds, play songs, and lullabies are also in this category, since some of them are written for educational purposes and would also help in the process of learning letters, new words, numbers, symbols, and colors for example. Further, they would help in the process of relating things, for example: ‘green as the grass,’ ‘brown as the trunk of trees,’ ‘white as the clouds,’ etc. Or, ‘five like the fingers in a hand,’ ‘two like the eyes in the face,’ etc. Actions like ‘fly as the birds in the sky,’ ‘swim like the submarine,’ ‘smile like the monkey wild’, can also be conveyed. Even sizes or distances like, ‘little like a cricket,’ ‘long as the elephant’s trunk,’ ‘big like the pink pig,’ ‘tall like the waterfall,’ are some examples of rhymes that one could improvise and sing in order to contribute to the stimulation of an infant’s brain.

The second category consists of listening skills. It includes how to identify animals, objects, and surrounding activities by the way they sound. Examples include identifying the voices of relatives by phone, the sound of the tea kettle, and the ringing bell, among others that one can find in a house-like environment. If possible, I would add identifying types of instruments, especially those that belong to one’s culture and heritage, perhaps also those more mainstream in western culture like the piano, guitar,
violin, and flute. Here I would also add the identification of noise-like sounds such as that of the rain outside, the bark of a dog, or a garbage truck. I believe it would be a task for parents or guardians to enact such musical activities but it would definitely help to develop sound criteria and future personal taste in a child’s life.

Consequently, in order for infants and children to be able to develop their aural skills, parents have to be trained. It is an unstoppable chain, because if those parents had been raised with that attention then they would not have to learn themselves; they would simply pass on the knowledge orally, and so on. Modern times are difficult, I think. The fact that mothers spend less time with their infants than before does not help them monitor what the children are learning and how. Still at least day care facilities are better than if the child is just sitting at home, watching TV with the radio on and nobody around to even play with.

Parents must be educated to decide how to get the greatest benefit from music for the future adults in their care. If such training does not occur at home before entering primary school, then the teacher must work especially hard, and probably the result would not be as effective as shown in the studies mentioned earlier. But educating is not an easy task, and that is why there are many alternatives. Therefore, the next chapter will involve the matter of singing in groups or choirs as one of them.
III. CHILDREN’S CHOIRS

The work and art involved with children’s choirs often tend to go un- or underappreciated. Alberto Grau, an extraordinary Venezuelan composer and a former conductor of mine, writes:

Sadly, in some cultures or social settings little importance is given to the study of singing. This is especially the case with children, who are led to believe that whereas reading, writing, arithmetic and sports are compulsory, learning music and choral singing are fun, but inessential experiences (95).

This is not to say that there is anything inherently inessential about singing; this apparent inessentiality is a learned thing. Singing can be encouraged or dismissed; attended to or avoided. In any case, I do not conceive of a person in the world who has never intonated a melody, with the obvious exception of those who are truly physically incapable. Its role as a fundamental form of human expression transcends debates over its essentiality.

In the pursuit of broadening my understanding of the particularities of children’s choirs, I came across the book Clergy and Choir. Originally published in 1891, it is one of the first contributions to church literature on the subject of vested choirs, according to its author, Rev. Charles R. Hodge, a choirmaster from the Diocese of Chicago (Preface). This has proven to be a valuable source thanks to its historical significance and its wealth of still-applicable knowledge. Hodge states firmly throughout this book that it is not enough to simply encourage singing in general, but rather “children should early be taught how to sing properly” (62). This sort of rigor may strike us now as an old-fashioned notion, but it does not seem that far from the way I was taught music.

But what does it mean to sing properly? I would say this at least entails singing the correct pitches while preventing yelling or raspy voice and improving articulation and
breathing. Yet, each choir educator has his or her personal tastes, and it is for this reason that I would like to reemphasize that the following words on this subject are based on my own training, which is steeped in Western cultural tradition.

Children’s choirs can perform a variety of functions. For example, they could serve in the performance of music in religious services, music that is meant to accomplish some kind of health benefit, or for fulfilling an “institutional need” as Grau notes (95). Their makeup could also vary in gender and age; some are pure boys’ or girls’ choirs, some are mixed, some are for very young children around five to eight years old, and still others are for those a little bit older or mixed. And, to some extent, there are also choirs that combine children with adolescents and/or adults. Yet, there are no fixed rules about the age range that characterizes a children’s choir. I have seen festivals and competitions where singers in a children’s choir can range from five to sixteen years old, and sometimes older than that.

I believe a children’s choir should consist of singers between the age of six up until puberty, at around thirteen and fourteen. I would like to support this with two main considerations. The first is that a child younger than that might not be able to make it through a one-hour rehearsal. For example, being seated and maintaining undivided focus for more than an hour could be very frustrating for a child that has not yet developed a good attention span. It is roughly as easy to find eight-year-old students mature enough to handle the responsibilities of being a choral singer as it is to find an eight-year-old child whose actions resemble those of a five-year-old. The second reason is that I believe that the ingenuousness found in children can be disrupted if mixed with teenagers, whose emotions and behavior could negatively impact the attitudes of the youngest ones.
Nonetheless, it is not unusual to find children’s choirs that have eighteen-year-old singers, as does the Boston Children’s Chorus.

The life of a singer in a children’s choir is very short compared with that of a singer in adult choirs. In some organizations or choir groups levels and divisions are present in order to separate the children based on their ages or gender. Here lies a crucial difference between a boys’ choir and a girls’ or mixed children’s choir. Hodge explains, “in any other choir, if a singer drops out, all that is necessary is to secure another one” (66). But then he continues, “when a boy ceases to sing, not only must another boy be found to fill his place, but all the work which was done in training the old chorister must be repeated with the new boy” (Hodge 66).

This sort of cycling and repetition are routines that conductors and educators must endure for their entire careers, but it is certainly a more acute problem when it comes to boy choristers. Further, boys are often more difficult to attract to choirs than are girls. Often they are more strongly encouraged to take up sports than music. Even in the music field, I have seen countless examples of boys driven to take up orchestral instruments instead of singing. Furthermore, boys’ behavior is usually more frenetic than girls, which, aside from disrupting rehearsals, may result in a raspy vocal tone.

Among the particularities that Hodge mentions when referring to the attention that must be paid to boys’ voices, I found this one the most descriptive: “The most of the time and care must be expended on the boys; and their voices are not permanent; at the age of puberty the boy’s voice changes more or less gradually to the man’s” (66). Consequently, the life of a boy in a children’s choir whose aim is the performance of treble music could
run its course in more or less four years. More and more often, I have come across cases of boys whose puberty starts at the edge of eleven. Although I am amazed when I see those cases, a publication by Alan C. MacClung, professor at the University of North Texas, describes that the process of puberty ranges from age ten through seventeen, having thirteen to fourteen years of age as “the peak of a bell curve” (“Identifying the Singing Range of the Early Adolescent Male”).

This particular age in boys represents a special challenge for conductors. For example, Hodge believes that “during this period [a boy’s] voice is absolutely useless, and his place in the choir must be filled” (66). Although Hodge’s reaction to puberty’s process in boys might sound strict, many children’s choirs still apply this policy. My own conductor from twenty years ago, Argenis Rivera, professor at Universidad de Los Andes, VE, used to dismiss boys in puberty with the advice that they should stop singing during that period so the muscles in the larynx would develop without distress. Then he would add that, once the muscles are mostly grown and balanced, they should return to singing so that the voice's muscles would develop with the necessary amount of strength and flexibility.

There is a term that refers to approaching this vocal stage—cambiata concept or changing voice. According to professor Don L. Collins, founder of the Cambiata Institute of America for Early Adolescent Vocal Music, “cambiata concept is recognized as a method of dealing with boys’ changing voices... it has been fashioned into a comprehensive philosophy and methodology of teaching choral music to adolescents.” The pedagogy was developed by Irvin Cooper, a Professor of Music Education at Florida State University during the second half of the twentieth century. During his years as a
high school music teacher, he “became aware that most of the boys were not singing but instead were having a study period during music class” (Collins). This situation inspired him to find a way for adolescents to continue their participation in choral activities. His methods gained popularity and support from different countries, leading to establish the term “cambiata voice” to classify boy singers in their puberty.

At present, cambiata as a method has spread out internationally, facilitating educational material and music compositions to educators and conductors in order to encourage singing in boys going through puberty (Collins). This issue of training the voice merits further discussion and I will return to it in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to appreciate it simply as an important issue that leaders of children’s choirs must take into account.

Another important point to discuss is the voice color among children’s choirs, which is to say the timbre of their sound. In Western culture, aspects consistent with the ideal timbre of a children’s choir tend to include clear vowels that promote homogenization, resonance, voice projection, and a sense of tuning. In some cases, characteristics like an accurate musical interpretation of the score or emotion might also interact with the sound production. Hodge suggests the use of the words “loud” and “soft” to describe two basic qualities of a child’s voice (83). For him, a crucial part of training is to address the importance of developing the “soft” voice as the predominant one. Another way to understand these two types of vocal qualities is to compare them with the voice a child uses for ordinary speaking, or “loud,” and the voice needed to reach a high E on the treble staff. Like Bartle and some others conductors I have heard, soft and speaking voice could be also referred to as a head voice and speaking or chest
voice, respectively (Bartle 8). From here on I will be using the terms head voice and speaking voice when referring to these qualities.
IV. TRAINING CHILDREN’S CHOIRS

“There are no bad choirs, only bad conductors.” I do not know who said this first, but my conductor, to show that he was not part of the latter, said it a lot. As noted above, there are different methods for training a children’s choir. They can vary according to the conductor’s desire or institutional demands. But there is much common ground in what the majority of conductors want to work on. I find that the basic aspects that conductors tend to have in mind when working with choirs are: finding a good sound, expanding the register of the voice, proper breathing, and posture.

The conductor must play an important educational role. Whatever is in his or her mind is must somehow be transmitted to the members of a choir, either by words or physical expression. There is a subtle art to achieving good physical communication with a choir, and this often tends to be the most persuasive route. As Holst wrote in her book *Conducting a Choir*, “an inexperienced conductor may imagine that he is achieving the right choral effects by wildly waving his arms about, but if the members of his choir manage to sing well it will be in spite of his frantic gestures, not because of them” (1). Little can be accomplished if a conductor does not have a good sense of awareness.

I find that there are four important aspects to take care of when training children’s choirs: vocal range, facial engagement, breathing, and posture. There are many differing views on voice range. I have seen choirs where children are continually switched to different parts so distinctions between voices are not strict. This case can be seen in most primary school music classes, where teachers tend to approach choral music not with the intention of forming a choir but for the purpose of teaching music in general.
a conductor determines a child’s vocal range in order to find the most accurate section for each singer in the choir. To generalize from the many perspectives I have heard on this subject, I will say that for sopranos, for example, a comfortable voice range should be from around $E_4$ up to $F_5$. As for altos, the ideal range would be from $C_5$ down to $A_3$. Mezzos or soprano II should sing somewhere in between, perhaps from $B_3$ to $D_5$. The ideal exercise for supporting and expanding vocal range is a simple progression of sounds or ascending and descending scales. Exercises could start with sequences of two intervals next to each other and then expand by adding a third sound, then a fourth sounds, etc.

Hodge offers a series of vocal training techniques entitled “Ten Exercises” to expand vocal range during warm-ups (86). The recommendation is to start in a slow tempo, in order to understand each sound “keeping the notes well separated, and sounding each one clearly”, and increase the tempo as the voice and ears get adjusted to the singing of different sounds in a fast tempo (Hodges 86). Although these exercises are a century old, they are virtually the same as those I still use today.

Another important aspect, and one that is often overlooked, is the engagement of the face. As I was told during my choral childhood, part of a singer’s work is to develop muscle memory. Considering the face as the external visual aspect of singing, attention must be paid to facial muscles. For example, during vowel exercises, Hodge says that the mouth should be opened “wide enough to place the forefinger edgewise between the teeth” (84). In other cases, more rudimentary tools are used. In my case, the conductor of Coro de Niños ULA, would ask us to bring clean wine corks and place them between our
teeth while warming up with vowels. Looking back, I think this was a little more extreme than necessary, not to mention a little bit painful, but he certainly made his point.

Exercises like these would help us to resonate all vowel sounds from the same place. Controlling our jaw opening, where our tongue goes, and how much space is needed in our oral cavity is part of the training that would lead to homogeneity. Vowel exercises also contribute to a more consistent transitional head-speaking voice. Over time, the sounds covered by the speaking voice and the head voice would be balanced, and hopefully they would be performed with the same tension.

Breathing is another essential consideration. There are several approaches to developing good breathing. They do not differ from each other much, since they all have the same target: to develop a consciousness about the use of the diaphragm as the main muscle for breathing. For a better understanding, it could be compared with how we used to breathe when we were babies. The proper manner would be to inhale and exhale, mostly through the nose, while keeping the shoulders relaxed, expanding the middle of the back and letting the diaphragm to control the amount of air involved (Bartle 17, Holst 53). Exercises like holding long sounds while preserving a good quality in the tone of voice are the most widely used by any type of choir.

The last major issue regarding physical engagement is posture. As Bartle says, posture is the aspect that unifies all other aspects of engagement (19). Educators and conductors should create a consciousness about the importance of maintaining a good posture where energy is constantly flowing. Hodge writes, “If standing, let the weight rest evenly on both feet… each singer will make himself as tall and erect as he can without
raising his heels from the floor” (87). And for the sitting position he continues, “An upright posture is the only one, and, while singing, it is best that the back should not rest against the back of the seat, but that the singer should sit a little forward” (Hodges 87). I would complement this by adding that in either position, feet should be shoulder-width apart and parallel to each other, in order to be balanced. This position could be slightly modified by placing one foot further ahead than the other one so the body’s energy creates the illusory feeling of moving forward. Arms should rest in their natural and relaxed position. I do not enjoy when singers have their arms folded over the chest or when their hands hold one another in front of their abdomen. Visually, it brings the energy down. The shoulders should be slightly back. The chin should not stick out when straightening the spine—a very common and wrong position among singers (Bartle 19).
V. EXPERIENCES WITH CHILDREN’S CHOIRS

In order to give some background for my choices in writing music for children’s choirs, I would like to share previous experiences with children’s singing groups, since they may serve as musical memories contributing to the culmination of this work. I grew up singing in the children’s choir of Universidad de Los Andes, Venezuela. I spent almost nine years there during which I cultivated a passion for choral music. My conductor, Argenis Rivera, facilitated my access to solfeggio and harmony, and the pianist Amilcar Rivas took me as his student to perform piano as a soloist. So, by the time I had the opportunity to work with children I had what was considered a good background in music for a high school student.

My first experience with a children’s choir came while completing my last year in high school. There I had the opportunity to teach music to children from grades one to six as my community service project from January to July 2001. Since the educational system provides a source of books for teaching music and an outline of the expectations for each grade to fulfill, it was not difficult for me to prepare the material for my classes. I found it very enjoyable working with children from first and second grade. It was easy for me to come up with interactive activities and games for them to start their first steps in understanding some of the more identifiable characteristics of sound—pitch, intensity, duration, color (Bartle 40-45, Grau 101).

Although singing was present in my daily teaching for each grade—mostly traditional Venezuelan or Latin American songs like rounds and lullabies—I focused more on this issue for grades three to six. I found that children from these grades were
able to understand more difficult rhythmic patterns and had a more accurate response in matching tone. For grades one and two singing was more often improvised, allowing them a greater capacity for exploration and freedom.

During my two trimesters of teaching, I prepared each of the grades to perform during Mother’s Day. In Venezuela, Mother’s Day is one of the most celebrated national events. The Venezuelan National Congress approved this day as a national holiday in the year 1924 and since then it has not lost its popularity (Nava). On this day all schoolchildren are encouraged to perform. My students in first and second grade prepared a children’s song played on water bottle xylophones—“Los pollitos dicen”—composed by the late nineteen century Chilean composer Ismael Parraguez that later Venezuela absorbed as part of its own traditional children’s songbook. Students from third to sixth grade each prepared unaccompanied folk songs. I only remember two of them. One was a traditional waltz called “En la mano traigo” from an unidentified composer. The other one was “Que bello es el amor” by the Venezuelan mid-twentieth century singer and songwriter Reynaldo Armas, whose style is classified as “música Llanera”, which represents the musical heritage from Los Llanos, VE.

The performances met my standards for such an event; students showed a positive attitude and supported each other, and the audience was able to enjoy the music while understanding the meaning of the songs though the expressions of the performers. In the end, it was a good experience for me since I was able to make my first steps in teaching young people, which in turn helped me to be more of an understanding, patient, and creative instructor in general.
My second experience came more or less a year later in the same city. This time I was assisting the conductor of a children’s choir at CEMI, a private music school for children led by my former conductor Argenis Rivera. For their choral program, children were chosen for their voices’ color and for their response in matching tones by imitation—technique also describe in Bartle’s book (7). There lies the biggest difference between music classes and rehearsals. In music classes the entire class participates. In a choir like the CEMI that accomplishes its activities outside the daily primary school’s classroom, however, all singers must be chosen. Therefore, in CEMI’s case, the group selected was able to reproduce a more homogenous and clear sound compared to the group of children I worked with previously.

We used to meet three times a week in rehearsal for one hour and a half. The conductor, a professional Ukrainian pianist named Yulia Kytlyar, was very serious in character but playful in her way of teaching. Since she grew up without any knowledge of Venezuelan children’s music, she came up with her own way to approach choral teaching—an unusual path since in Venezuela probably more than half of a choir’s repertoire comes from national composers or national musical forms. She wrote children’s songs in Spanish with piano accompaniment about daily events in a child’s life. She wrote about trying to learn Mom’s cooking secrets, or about having a sperm whale pet that needed to eat rice in order to grow up, for example. I have to admit that, at that time, these songs were a hit and very captivating; they were fresh new songs that nobody had heard before, and children enjoyed performing them. Unfortunately, they were never documented as far as I know.
My third experience was in Fall 2004 in the capital of Venezuela, Caracas. Under the guidance of the organization Fundación Schola Cantorum de Venezuela (FSCV), I had the opportunity to assist the conductor Luimar Arismendi, in one location of the FSCV’s program called “Construir Cantando” (Building While Singing). As described in the FSCV webpage, the program is meant to employ choral singing as an educational tool to develop intellectual, physical, expressive, and emotional capacities (Fundación Schola Cantorum). With approximately 26 choral conductors involved plus other kinds of assistants, this program has come to serve no less than a thousand unprivileged children per year in four different states of Venezuela.

The capital of Venezuela, Caracas, is considered to be one of the most dangerous cities in the world. “[T]here are more murders in Venezuela than in the United States and the 27 countries of the European Union combined” says Nick Allen in an article published in December 2012 (“Venezuela Murder Rate Soars”). With the support of national and international organizations, the FSCV has managed to be “one of Latin America’s most important choral societies” (Nisbett).

I remember my experience with the FSCV during Fall 2004. My weekly agenda included three rehearsals with Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, a mixed choir founded in 1967 and the core of FSCV; two rehearsals with Cantoria Alberto Grau, the female choir of FSCV founded in 1976; and two rehearsals with Pequeños Cantores de la Schola, the children and youth choirs and the central eye of the program “Construir Cantando” of FSCV founded in 1988 (Fundación Schola Cantorum). These two-hour rehearsals were

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1 A pioneering institution that has developed a unique methodology for training conductors and choristers in Venezuela, while focusing on teaching, research and diffusion of choral singing with excellence and social commitment (Fundacion Schola Cantorum).
complemented with workshops during the weekends and a seemingly ceaseless concert agenda. The rehearsals with Pequeños Cantores de la Schola took place in various locations. In my case, I was appointed to be in the rehearsal held at a primary school in Petare. Petare is a city characterized by “steep slopes” covered with “red-brick, tin-roof shelters, patched with cardboard and soil”, where the population is affected by “a poorly maintained or missing infrastructure, a lack of security, high crime rates, drug trade, amateur construction, and a lack of public spaces”, as noted by Whitney Eilich (“Slums: The Future”). After hearing the above description, one would not imagine that there could be any space for the arts in such a place. On the contrary, I felt that cultural and social programs are welcomed there due to the residents’ lack of opportunity.

Since working in this kind of environment is not an easy task, particular procedures needed to be taken into consideration. During a previous talk with the conductor I was going to assist, she gave me a subtle description of what to expect from the population I was going to be working with and even some advice about how to present myself. She mentioned that children there had suffered not only from poverty or social marginalization but also from child abuse, bad nutrition, or tragic incidents like injuries from stray bullets or the early deaths of relatives. Then she gave me this advice: under all circumstances I should always show them love and appreciation. Her second word of advice was to dress in a “safe” way, which included wearing very little jewelry and conventional clothing—no branded or showy apparel. I did as she said.

Going to Petare was always a time-consuming activity. Due to the road’s condition, the only way I could access Petare was by public transportation in the form of old Toyota model Troop Carriers. These vehicles were located just outside of what used
to be the last subway stop back in 2004. Therefore, the organization FSCV would make
the arrangements so the Toyota would pick me up from home after picking up Luimar
Arismendi, the conductor. The car was hired exclusively to drive us to and from the
school. I could notice that Arismendi knew the drivers, who always would express some
commentary about how they support the labor that Arismendi was carrying in Petare. The
car ride took around 90 minutes, passing through the daily traffic jam and then what
seemed to be endless slopes of cramped sand roads full of shanty houses.

Rehearsing with the children was never difficult, despite the despair that most of
these children surely experienced in their daily lives. The children were well behaved,
obedient and loveable. I cannot tell if it was due to the time of year when I was working
with them, but it seemed that the repertoire we were working on—mostly traditional
Venezuelan Christmas songs—gave them a lot of joy. Either that or they were children
who unconsciously appreciated the musical activity we were offering. Since my time
there was short I was not able to see the final performance. Nonetheless, I could say in
general that they were passionate, playful singers with a positive attitude towards
learning and performing music.

Finally, my fourth experience was during last year as a volunteer for an
organization called Music Haven based in New Haven, Connecticut. As the head of the
organization, Tina Lee Hadari, told me back in September 2012, MH was part of her idea
to give back to the community of New Haven what she once received as a graduate
student of the Yale School of Music.
According to their mission statement found in the Music Haven After-School Programs Evaluation Report 2011-2012, MH’s aim is “to use a string quartet to build a vibrant urban community through performance and music education that empowers young people, their families, and professional musicians” (1). MH is an organization that works as an after-school program. As described in the Music Haven Handbook 2012-2013, MH’s free musical education aims to build “long-term relationships between professional musicians, children, and families in four high-poverty Empowerment Zone neighborhoods—Newhallville, Dixwell, Dwight, and Hill—of New Haven, CT” (Music Haven).

MH activities are organized in mostly three different spaces: Wexler-Grant School located in Dixwell neighborhood, John C. Daniels School located in the Hill neighborhood and MH headquarters in the Dwight neighborhood. Its musical activities include a permanent string quartet in residence called the Haven String Quartet, music courses, private lessons, a youth orchestra, workshops, performance attendance, community activities, and performances by both students and teachers.

My affiliation with MH started with a conversation with Netta Hadari, Part-time Development Director. The timing of our meeting was very opportune, since they were planning on starting a choral program. I met with the staff and teachers the week before the school year began. We began to get to know one another, schedule the rehearsals, and establish our musical objectives. During our talk, I realized that they did not have a clear idea of what to expect from a choir. I got the impression that they thought of choir mostly

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2 Urban and rural communities that have encountered economical struggle around the US joined together in a program by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the US Department of Agriculture, along with the Federal Government, in order to subsidize and assist these communities in order to improve the areas’ way of living (US Department of Housing and Urban Development).
as a sort of vocal lesson such that students could apply their choral studies to help support their string instrument practice in order to increase their musicality. Although I liked the idea, I explained to them that my work would target two issues. First, I would establish the basic structure of the choir, with the goal of singing in more than one part, which for sure would increase musicality; second, I would establish the musical material, which would entail the MH choir performing new and customized material that I would compose for them myself.

Dealing with instrumentalists has always been challenging for me as a singer. I have often heard instrumentalists expressing the belief that singers do not work hard enough. Therefore, I made sure to take some time explaining to the MH team the differences between having a group voice lesson and establishing a serious regular choral activity.

Maria Guinand, the conductor of the Schol Cantorum de Venezuela and a 2009 recipient of the Helmuth Rilling Award, claims in her article “El canto coral en Venezuela” (Choral singing in Venezuela), that choral singing is the easiest way to include children and youth in an artistic practice that promotes excellence, leadership, self-discipline, and self-improvement. I felt that the fact that I had partnered with El Sistema in the past—a Venezuelan organization whose MH’s model is based on—gave my work merit. Consequently, they supported the idea of test running a choir program, and with some effort they managed to fit in three hours of choral practice a week: two hours on Monday as a general rehearsal, and one hour on either Tuesdays or Wednesdays.
The reason why this schedule was chosen is because MH programs work in the following way: one group of students attend classes on Mondays and Wednesdays at Wexler-Grant School, another group goes on Tuesdays and Thursdays at John C. Daniels School, and Friday classes are held at MH headquarters—Whalley Avenue in New Haven, CT—for those who belong to the newly formed youth orchestra. Since MH headquarters only consists of one large room, there is no way to hold more than one class.

On the day of the meeting I was told that the students may take time to adjust to the transition of adding a new activity, and that not all of the students were going to be able to attend the rehearsals due to overlaps with their own instrumental lessons. I also got some descriptions of how MH students could require a little more energy than other students I had worked with in the past, in terms of their behavior and attitude during lessons. I was told that this difference could be due to their surroundings, which are not necessarily positive for developing concentration, good manners, and respect towards others and towards the study of music.

The first rehearsal took place on a Monday, at the music room at Wexler Grant School, located at the end of a “long and dark hallway, where you have to chase the students sometimes,” as Yaira Matyakubova, one of the violin teachers once described it to me during an informal conversation. And she was right. All I remember from that first day is the feeling of being overwhelmed and trapped in that music room with walls overstuffed with suggestive musical images and cold lighting fit for scientific lab experiments.
I would say that approximately 30 students came that day for auditions. Although MH does not apply any selection process for the instrumental students, we agreed that if the purpose was to have a strong choir able to sing polyphonic material with the goal of one day accompanying their youth orchestra, then only students with positive attitudes towards singing should be selected. So there I was, applying a sort of communal audition because more than half of the students were not able to stand silently. Honestly I would say it was chaotic, and perhaps it would have turned off other teachers with less patience or less optimism. Also, I would add that since my voluntary purpose was purely based on my passion for working with choirs, with no intention of receiving any kind of reimbursement, I restrained my desire to quit based on that messy first day, and instead continued my work with the selected students.

Tina Lee Hadari, the founder/executive director and also one of the violin teachers, was there to help me keep calm. At some point I more or less managed to do some pitch-matching exercises with easy melodies using the syllables ‘la, ma’, and open vowels ‘ah, ay, ee, oh, oo’, or what Holst refers as “pure vowel sounds in Latin… purer than English diphthongs”, which are a great tool for unifying voices and promote a clearer sound (53). The result of the audition was not as good as I had hoped. Only fourteen students, from ages six to fourteen were selected with no promise that all of them were going to be able to attend choir. I am sure that there were more children capable of singing—of course there were! But due to the lack of attention and poor behavior they showed, they were not selected, which is a shame.

As the rehearsals went by, I could see the cautionary words that were shared with me that first meeting with the staff and teachers come alive. The difficulty I faced in
these rehearsals is vividly echoed in the following common musical exposure issues detailed by Jean Ashworth Bartle in her book *Sound Advice* (7, 8).

“They have not yet identified with nor heard anyone sing with a head tone. Children learn by imitation. If they have not heard it, they cannot imitate it” (Bartle 7).

It struck me that during warm ups some students would always complain about how high a C5 was for them. I do not know exactly what the problem was because they all could sing it perfectly when lyrics were added. So I inferred they were not accustomed to hearing these sounds that are usually reached by using the head voice, or alternatively they are so used to hearing singing with accompaniment that they have not had the chance to hear a pure vowel sound by itself.

“They have not yet sung in an environment where they have been encouraged to sing alone with tone matching. They have always sung with the entire class, in too low range, and accompanied by a piano” (Bartle 7).

Throughout my work with them, I had one case that was not simply one of musical knowledge. It happened that a week before the concert I chose the group that after a month and a half was to perform in front of an audience. The grandmother of one of the students who I decided needed more training before performing on stage came to the end of the rehearsal and asked me the reason for my decision. I explained that her child still needed more practice, and that the time needed for each student to learn to sing in a choral group is different. Then she responded that the child is known for being a good singer in the church choir and that therefore there was no reason for me to keep her from performing. I apologized to her if my decision offended her and explained myself as clearly and tactfully as I could. I told her that perhaps the church choir and I have different methods for training choral groups and therefore she needed to trust in my decision so we could work together in the vocal development of her grandchild. Finally I
told her that I would be keeping my eye on her child in order to prepare her for the next coming concert—a month and a half after the first one, which is quite a short amount of time considering that organized children’s choirs mostly get to have a whole year of preparation before even considering going on stage.

I do not know how this child’s church prepares its children to sing, but I suspect it involves methods consistent with Bartle’s words above in terms of singing with larger groups where members are unable to hear themselves clearly. This situation made me realize that this case was surely not the only one and could be repeated in other children’s lives. I came to see that communal singing practices in the US could be completely different to my own experiences back home.

In this light, what I was doing could be interpreted as a forced activity where children were taught to learn a specific way of singing that was inconsistent with the upbringing of both the children and their parents or custodians. Though I had taken knowledge of western choral tradition for granted when working with choirs in Venezuela, I came to believe that the parents as well needed to be trained to understand my way of teaching based on Western tradition.

“They have poor concentration and an inability to focus. Children with underdeveloped auditory memory are often deprived of the joy of silence. They are constantly barraged from morning until night with some form of distraction” (Bartle 7).

This could be supported by a variety of observations I made about the new MH choristers. I remember the first time I was in a school classroom here in the US and I was amazed by all the decorations with which teachers cover their classroom walls.

As a counterexample, in Venezuela, teachers are not assigned to a specific room. Instead, teachers have to move with all their belongings from one room to another, more or less like college. Therefore teachers do not decorate classrooms in such a personalized way as
happens in the schools I have visited in the US. Although I enjoyed these colorful decorations in the beginning, after a while it made me feel overwhelmed and restless because I could not find any point in the classroom where there were no figures or colors vying for my attention.

In my rehearsals with the MH choir, I started to notice that after a half hour of rehearsal, many children became restless and unfocused, wanting to draw on the board, asking questions about what was written on the walls, grabbing percussive instruments that were visible. And even beyond that, they would start jumping, rolling on the floor, commenting or making fun of each other. Needless to say, it was very challenging and exhausting to work with the majority of these kids, especially when I could not do anything to change the environment. This behavior was presented in every rehearsal, with some improvement as the day of the performance approached.

I noticed, however, that during the three times that we had extra rehearsals at MH headquarters, they would behave better. They would remain seated in their chairs longer than in any of the daily classrooms, their ability to focus was higher, and the rehearsals were more effective.

I came to believe that there were two factors that helped determine their reaction. One was that the fact that the rehearsals were held out of the school—out of their comfort zone—influenced them to behave more seriously and less informally than they would at the schools, where I think they feel more confident to behave however they want. This is a powerful aspect since aside from their homes the school is the place where they spend the most time. I imagine that for some of these children, school may feel even more like a comfortable home than the place where they actually live.
The other factor was that MH headquarters offers a more open, breathable space. It has fewer visual distractions than any of the school classrooms. It even has a small divider to separate the main room from the space where they keep the instruments. This divider is painted in bright yellow, and there is some evidence that this is a good color for an educational environment. As described by Margo Berman, professor at Florida International University, yellow is a “color of happiness” (146, 147). Related to the color and its effects on humans, David Johnson states that there is evidence that this color can enhance attention (“Color Psychology. Do different colors affect your mood?”).

The space has two other white walls with simple decorations—a MH family tree drawing—and the third wall houses a large window that allows a great deal of sunlight to come inside the room. Researchers recently spent over a year carrying out the first holistic study about how classroom design can influence academic performance. The study directed by the University of Salford, UK, submitted a report at the end of 2012 that suggests that classrooms’ design could affect up to 25% of a student’s academic progress (“Study proves classroom design really does matter”). The research will continue for the next eighteen months and expects to have specific conclusions relevant to the matter of education and the process of learning.

As for the students’ lack of concentration, I remember once talking about this issue with Tina Lee. She mentioned that, as the head of the organization, one of her main focuses is earning the trust from the students and their families. In this pursuit, she has managed to fit some time in her schedule for visiting the homes of MH students in order to have a better understanding of the students’ living situations. For example, one detail that distresses her is that the majority of the families living in these underprivileged areas
are more likely to own TVs and phones than any other electronic equipment. She has seen houses where they have TVs in every room. Moreover, sometimes they are all turned on, even when they are listening to music on their headphones or nobody is watching a program. Therefore one of her difficult tasks is also to teach parents that they need to offer some time during the day when children can practice with their instruments, which of course demands concentration on the part of the student and adequate space in their homes. She even encountered situations where she has had to suggest that children could practice while parents are washing the dishes so that parents can deal with the sound of an amateur string player by obscuring it with the sound of running water and clanging tableware, and, at the same time, children are not interrupted by the sound of their parents watching TV, listening to the radio, speaking loud, etc.

One can only imagine how little time these children have to experience “the joy of silence,” I would say, when they probably even fall asleep to the sound of the TV on the other side of the wall. I also wonder how much these kinds of surroundings induce children to demonstrate restless behavior throughout the day, affecting their emotional balance. As supported by Maurice Elias, professor at Rutgers University, NJ, emotional balance is key to the development of aptitudes towards the process of “social-emotional learning,” which conveys educational and social environments (“The Connection Between Academic and Social-Emotional Learning,” 4, 12).

“They are from homes where their parents do not have time to sing to them or with them or where the music they hear on tapes and videos is not conducive to developing the beauty in a child’s voice” (Bartle 8).

Even though these social behaviors exceed the limits of my thesis, I was able gather some relevant information during conversations with the members of MH. I came across this topic on a few occasions while rehearsing with the MH choir. I learned that, of the eight
children that were able to perform in the premiere, none of them had heard a choir before, except for their church choirs. They had never heard an opera soloist or even a performance of choral music outside of church activities. Moreover, the musical performances they had in mind were those from current pop artists such as Kanye West, Jay-Z, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Rihanna, Pink, Alicia Keys, Justin Timberlake, Katy Perry, etc.

It struck me how they reacted when I first shared with them recordings and videos of choral performances. They were amazed by the brightness, clearness, and ease with which children their age were singing. It required persistence, repetition, and creativity just to explain to them what the head voice is, and much more to train them. With that in mind, I came to realize that I was still an outsider in the American children’s music scene. As for my home country, I have the impression that children adapt easily to the head voice without so much explanation and training. Perhaps their surroundings and mostly homogeneous society make it easier than the US, where one can easily find ten different social backgrounds in one same classroom. Perhaps it is the scarcity of current technology and easy internet access there that still encourages underprivileged children to sing folk or traditional songs they have learned through oral tradition that makes underprivileged Venezuelan children more in contact with singing than underprivileged children in New Haven.

The music teacher at John C. Daniels School, New Haven, shared a relevant example when I told her I was from Venezuela. She talked to me about her experience teaching in Ecuador and told me how much difference there was between teaching underprivileged children in both societies. She noticed how the behavior of the group of
Ecuadorian students she worked with was easier to handle than that of the American students she is currently managing. She said that in Ecuador, underprivileged children had fewer opportunities to access technology and they were not yet strongly affected by globalization. She believed these issues played a strong role in why students were able to concentrate and have more knowledge of their oral musical traditions and I tend to agree.

“They are shy and lack self-confidence or may be experiencing difficulties learning in school. They are simply not interested, since the music teacher perhaps does not provide a stimulating and positive environment where the energy is high and the activities interesting” (Bartle 8).

I could add to this statement that it could also happen that children do not get their parents’ support to engage in a choral activity. For example, some parents in MH prefer instrumental lessons to singing because they consider singing less rigorous and serious. Another possibility is the lack of self-confidence. It sometimes makes them turn down the activity only based on what other classmates or friends think about it. It could even happen that they joined a choir based on how it was portrayed on TV. Shows like Glee do not exactly give an accurate idea of what a typical choral experience is like.

During my time in MH I got to have two different experiences with the music teachers from Wexler-Grant School in the Dixwell community and the John C. Daniels School in the Hill community, New Haven. Since the choir rehearsals were held in the music classrooms of these schools I got to meet both teachers. The first time I saw the Wexler-Grant teacher I was in the middle of the rehearsal when she entered the room without notice, walked to the other side of the room, took some papers from her desk, and left. This interrupted the rehearsal and disrupted my students’ concentration. For some of the children who did not attend that school, it felt like some stranger just walked by. Subsequently, questions like “who is she?” or “why she did not knock at the door?” had
to be answered. I cannot evaluate if that lack of respect towards my rehearsal is the way she acts towards music education, but of course this is my fear. I managed to discuss that situation with the intermediary of the school in order for it not to be repeated, which it was not.

At John C. Daniels, I experienced the opposite. The teacher welcomed me into her room, and talked to me about how it was to teach there. She even gave me some names of students whose voices would do well in the choir. I cannot take for granted that she keeps the same attitude in the classroom, but judging from how I heard students talking about her when sharing stories about their music classes, I could say with some confidence she is an advocate for good music education.

“They are accustomed to using a raspy voice as they speak. The speaking voice and singing voice are closely related” (8).

This is a common problem, as the registered dietitian Vicki Kobliner writes in her article “The Epidemic of Learning Disabilities… Is It Something in the Air?” She describes the effects that exposure to pollution, rapid and extreme climate change, chemicals (artificial food additives, certain kinds of plastics, perchlorate\(^3\), lead, mercury, etc.) and volatile organic compounds (gas emissions from some paints, cleaning products, glues and adhesives, pesticides, and copier equipment among others) can have on children (Kobliner). Aside from increasing the risk of allergies, they also could affect our health, including our voices. Furthermore, a general increase in the occurrence of allergies without any single known reason has been observed, as noted by Rachael Rettner (“Americans Sneeze More as Allergies Mysteriously Increase”).

\(^3\) Element used in the creation of rocket fuel, fireworks, flares and explosives that has been found in tap water, ground water, and soil. This chemical “can disrupt the thyroid’s ability to produce hormones needed for normal growth and development” (United States Environmental Protection Agency).
Aside from these external factors, children can also develop sensitivity in their vocal organs by an improper use of their voice in the form of raspy or husky speech. Perhaps they have developed bad habits in the way they speak and their voices might be stressed repeatedly by a lot of yelling, crying, or anxiety, for example. These actions could even harm our organs and muscles by contributing to the development of nodules or even polyps on the vocal cords (“Vocal Cord Nodules and Polyps”). This kind of afflictions can result in temporary or permanent hoarseness, or reduction of the vocal range, and can hinder the ability to produce a homogenized sound for choral singing.

One of my former MH students exhibited hoarseness to a surprising degree. She had a positive attitude towards singing but, unfortunately, after three weeks of training I could not observe any improvement in her ability to match pitches or produce a clean sound. Eventually she elected to quit. Her mother told me that her child always had spoken in that way. I suggested to have her vocal cords examined but I suspect the mother disregarded my advice, since apparently her daughter was a “good church singer.”

My work with the MH choir did not go beyond our concert on October 26th of 2012. Unfortunately, after test running the choir, MH was not able to provide adequate support on matters I was expecting for and from the choir as its conductor: consistent rehearsal space, engagement, commitment, publicity for recruitment, and understanding and awareness from parents of what MH choir is vs. church choir or school choruses, among others. The fact that the students were enrolled in multiple activities, that choir collided with instrument lessons, and that there was no direct communication with parents—parents had the habit of going to others instead of me with their concerns—made things even more difficult.
Although MH understood what it takes to build a choir from nothing, and they concluded that my “product was undoubtedly excellent and impressive”, they found my work very demanding and rigorous in a way that parents did not understand (Lee). Perhaps our philosophies in music education are too different and my search for excellence in choral music is so determined that it did not align well with MH’s goals for social work.
VI. WRITING FOR CHILDREN’S CHOIRS

Being surrounded by children is something I have always enjoyed. While at this point in my life I may not have the same desires as I had when I was younger, I have always been an advocate of preserving the oral tradition of children’s music. When composing music in this realm, my main influences include Venezuelan children’s songbooks and folk music, as well as the vast repertoire I have been exposed to during my time in a children’s choir.

There are two ethnomusicologists, folklorists and composers who during the 1950s and 1960s worked intensively to archive Venezuelan folk music. One of them I have already mentioned, Luis Felipe Ramón y Rivera, and the other is his wife, Isabel Aretz. During the year 2004, I happened to get access to some their writings preserved by the National Foundation for Ethnomusicology and Folklore (FUNDEF). In her undated article titled “Los Cancioneros Musicales de Venezuela” (Venezuelan’s Songbooks), Aretz describes how the study, transcription, and analysis of the music from the countryside are crucial (141). She concludes that such music cannot be adequately analyzed through one musical language and instead she identifies different musical families with particular characteristics; only when all the particularities are united can a whole body of music be considered (Aretz 141). From this idea, she develops a way to divide Venezuelan music in terms of common musical familiarities—Spanish, African, or Indigenous heritage—by organizing them into songbooks.

The first of them is *Cancionero Europeo Antiguo* (Songbook from Old Europe). Here she collects examples of musical forms of Spanish heritage from the times of
Alfonso X de Castilla—“The Wise King”—around the thirteenth century (Aretz 142). These are lullabies and children songs, songs for education and recreation, and carols.

Mostly, we consider lullabies to be performed by parents to their children. Commonly, these songs are performed by the mother and passed on to younger generations as part of the oral tradition. The following is an example of a lullaby from Isla de Margarita, an island located in the northeast of Venezuela. Sociedad de Ciencias Naturales “La Salle” (Society of Natural Sciences) collected it around fifty years ago (Ramón y Rivera 15).

\[
\text{En la orilla del rio parió una blanca
veinticinco a la cabeza y una potra ca.}
\]

\[
\text{Translation: In the river shore, a white gave birth to twenty-five scorpions and a filly.}
\]

Although they are not notated, rubato and glissando are used as elements of expression. For example, the use of tuplets could be suggestive of freedom in interpretation, and the tied quarter notes might last even twice as long and be followed by a spacious breath if desired by the singer. Harmonically, the alternation between minor and major keys could be seen as a reflection of the Spanish heritage’s composition style. Sometimes both major and minor can exist at the same time according the spontaneous discretion of the performer.

Nevertheless, the lullabies that have gained popularity in current times are more likely to be centered in a single tonality, and are more likely to be regularly metrical. The
next example, collected during the first half of the twentieth century by Ramón y Rivera and his wife, is still routinely performed in this century.

Translation: Little white dove, blue crest, take me in you wings to see Jesus.

Lyrically, the style usually approached in these lullabies, and in most children’s music of the Venezuelan countryside, is the *copla*. At times they are longer than the characteristic four-verse style.

The next example is the first of my compositions, “My Dream.” It takes the dual form of a lullaby and a canon. One particularity of it is that, even though it is a lullaby, the lyrics are based on what a child would sing to his or her mother, instead of the inverse. Although the piece could be performed by a parent, it is intended instead to be sung by the child to sooth his or her own parents. I made it this way because it distressed me to see MH parents battling life every day. For example, there were two siblings whose both mother and father were dealing with issues involving the police, and another set of three siblings whose mother has two more babies and whose lives depend on governmental income. Therefore, my purpose was to have a song where children could express something positive to their parents, and that is why it starts with the words, “Yesterday I fell asleep with the stories you told me.”
In terms of its form, it has an intro followed by a four-stanza verse with changes in meter, and a conclusion. To sing it as a lullaby, the suggested interpretation is from beginning to end with no repetitions. As a round, the four-stanza verse is written as a cycle with no tonic chord at the end in order to suggest continuity. It could be repeated endlessly. As for MH choir performance, we sang it as follows. The ensemble sings the piece from beginning to end once. Then group A (four singers) starts the four-stanza verse. Group B (four singers) enters at the beginning of the four-stanza verse once A has finished the first verse. Each group sings the verse twice. Once group B has finished the verse, everybody sings the finale in unison.

“My Dream” was the first song written for this choir and the first song they worked on. It was first written in C major, as I thought it would be easy for the whole group. But it did not work out that way. I had four singers in the first stages of puberty.
One of them was a boy. Sometimes he would sing in the same range as everybody else but he would often shift an octave lower unconsciously and unpredictably. For example, he would sing *yesterday I fell asleep* in the C3 octave, followed by *with the stories you told me* in unison with the rest; otherwise it was too low for him. Fortunately, he had a very good sense of tuning and shifting octaves back and forth was rarely a problem. On the other hand, the other three girls were having problems with maintaining a bright tonal color when singing the A3 during the first verse. In general, the A3 would sound unpleasant.

Faced with these problems I followed conventional wisdom and tried the piece a step higher. Finally, adjusting the piece to E major yielded positive results. The boy learned to sing the piece comfortably an octave lower, and we worked on blending his color with the rest of the other singers, all females. The three girls were able to improve their transition between head voice and speaking voice.

The fact that the performance was meant to take place a month and a half after our first rehearsal meant that I needed a song where I could develop a) homogeneity: having all of them singing the same line, finding the head voice, and unifying sonority especially in the vowel sounds; b) tuning: having a tonal piece where they could sense a centered sound to support each other, in this case E in the tonality of E major; and c) independence: a round form piece is a way to subtly have them sing independently from each other without the feeling—and fear—of singing alone. Having these goals is not just a way to keep myself focused, it also strengthens their confidence. To set a target is to set expectations, and when expectations are accomplished satisfaction follows.
Encountering these issues encouraged me to write a song that could be adaptable to the abilities of my singers. I felt that writing pieces that could cover specific needs was a good challenge for me as a composer and as a conductor. From this song, I also made a three-voice mostly homophonic arrangement. Its simplicity makes it a suitable piece for novice treble choirs. I can be seen at the end of the chapter along with the rest of my compositions.

One specific composer whose work for treble choir inspired mine is Modesta Bor (b.1926-1998). As noted in the publication Obra Coral Original de Modesta Bor (Original Choral Compositions by Modesta Bor), Bor started composition under the guidance of Vicente Emilio Sojo, an advocate of the Nationalist movement in Venezuelan’s music history. She then continued her studies at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow under well-known Russian composer Aram Khachaturian (‘Obra Coral Original de Modesta Bor” 9).

She was a passionate conductor, known for her strong temperament. She was also part of the committee inside the national division of folkloric research. Her composition list shows her passion for children’s music and her advocacy in promoting the value of traditional music and nationalism. As described in the songbook Modesta Bor, she wrote a total of 12 original compositions and 83 arrangements for children or treble choirs (5).

Stylistically, my work might not resemble hers, but we share similarities when it comes to how we view our music’s role in communities. Although I normally would not find my work to be relevant to American nationalism, I do feel that my work has, at least in some small part, supported nationalist goals, insofar as the music that I wrote for MH
was a contribution to a small portion of American society. It is here that I find common
ground with Bor, in our shared passion for writing music that grows within a particular
population, generated by them, for them, and for its environment.

After “My Dream” the following piece I wrote for MH is called “Living In The
Water.” It is piece that can be categorized as an educative children’s song. The lyrics are
based on the MH singers’ answers to questions I asked them concerning ecosystems:

Ah!
I want to live in the ocean, nobody seems too hot
I want to swim freely, I want to see the world

Ah!
If I were a fish in the ocean I would explore it all
Swimming in salty water or even fresh

Wishing that every fish in the water enjoys the same
Wishing that all the living things are important for you as well x2

The piece is written in 6/8 with a feeling of a waltz that is meant to resemble the
movement of the waves. At the beginning, the piece employs the pentatonic scale in order
to offer a subtle variety in sonority to the students. We were able to perform the piece in
C major without affecting the quality of their voices much. “Living In The Water” has
piano accompaniment that could be described as impressionistic. Is written not exactly to
provide a bed of chords to support the voice but to highlight the atmosphere of the ocean
and the movement of the waves.

The reason why water constituted the basic subject matter for the piece is very
simple. I wanted a piece where children could easily move their bodies to a steady beat
while avoiding march-like movements. For inexperienced singers, walking and moving to
music in 2/4 or 4/4 could result in stiffness. Instead, doing the same movements to a
waltz rhythm brings a natural dance-like feeling that inspired even the more reluctant children to move. These characteristics can be seen in the first page as follows; the complete piece can be seen at the end of the chapter.

Sweet Villains” and “Trick or Treating” are pieces written exclusively for children and with their collaboration and could be categorized as songs for entertainment.
MH choir was scheduled to perform four days before Halloween, and I wanted two pieces that could do two things. One was to bring out playful feelings that would allow the students to instantly enjoy the piece without thinking much about specific musical aspects. Two, I wanted to give students a chance to participate in composing music. Therefore, we needed a subject common to everybody so that anyone could make suggestions. The timing could not have been better for us: Halloween proved to be an ideal context for playful music.

I was hoping to create an atmosphere that would make the students eager to sing. Therefore, I found encouragement in the work of the already mentioned Alberto Grau. Although he was born in Spain, he moved to Venezuela at a young enough age to be part of the second generation of nationalistic composers like Modesta Bor. The difference between them is that Grau’s compositions also adapted to the demand for innovation within the use and adaptation of traditional forms. Grau’s work embraces some aspects of music making developed by the Swiss composer and music educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (Grau 119). To be more specific, Grau takes the basics of Eurhythmics—the study of music through movement—and incorporates it into choral compositions (Grau 120).

In this instance, aspects of dance and theater are incorporated into choral music, without crossing the line into the genre of musical theater. In Grau’s compositions, body movements are added to enhance music visually and sonorously. There is one piece of his that I would consider an inspiration for my work, Opereta Ecológica. As I learned in a rehearsal with him, it was written in 1999 for his female choir, Cantoría Alberto Grau. It is a tonal piece consisting of four movements that embody these four subjects: wind,
river, ocean, and trees. It is written for two treble parts performing eurhythmics, and is accompanied by piano, electric bass, and Latin American percussion.

Although there are no movements specifically written in the score in “Sweet Villains” and “Trick or Treating,” I gave the choir verbal instructions on how to physically dramatize each part of the songs. During the refrain of “Trick or Treating,” for example, the choir acted out movements like walking in place to illustrate children walking from house to house.

“Trick or Treating” is quite particular in that it is a Halloween song inspired by two members in the choir, brother and sister. The older sibling was one of the oldest in the choir and the only boy who got to perform. His sister was one of the youngest singers and could not make it to the final concert. They seemed to share a very tight relationship; it seemed as if they were attached by an imaginary rope so that whoever moved first, the other would react. Their relationship made me think about having a brother or sister and not realizing that he or she could actually be a best friend. So this song represents the caring and admiration that a younger sibling could have when observing the older one.

The lyrics are:

Walking with myself
Walking my friends
Where is my brother?

He is hidden behind the mask
Wearing orange combined with black
Who is he?

Walking with myself
Walking my friends
Where is my brother?
He is so tall that I cannot describe
He is just like a pumpkin alive
Who is he?

Trick or treating, trick or treat,
Today is Halloween!
Trick or treating, trick or treat,
Nobody falls asleep!

Tonight is Halloween.

This A minor piece was written originally for unison choir and piano
accompaniment. Later, I adapted the accompaniment to be performed by a string quartet.
The main reason for this adjustment was to integrate the other activities covered by MH. I
was originally hoping that young string students could accompany the choir but instead,
the Haven String Quartet—consisting of the MH violin I and II, viola, and cello
teachers—joined us.

The last song I wrote for the choir was “Sweet Villains.” This could be considered
a companion of the last piece. Its main topic is the consequences of all the candies eaten
after Halloween. The piece does not have a chorus like the last one; instead it is through-
composed. I wrote the lyrics of the first two verses, and MH students added the short
refrain “creepy, creepy villains.”

These invaders don’t rest in peace
They go in circle, stop it please
Creepy, creepy villains

These invaders don’t let me sleep
I chewed them all with my teeth
Creepy, creepy villains
We all collaborated on the third verse. I showed them the first two verses and a final verse and told them that a third verse should be added as a transition. The fourth verse reads as follows:

Candy, sweet, chocolate
All the things I ate
Now I have
A painful stomachache

When they started thinking about who was more likely to take care of them if they could not sleep, or had a stomachache, we all agreed that our grandmothers would do the hard work. So I guided them to facilitate things for them by recreating the scenery of that situation, and that is how the third verse came about:

What is happening?
I don’t know what to do
Grandma, toothbrush!

The piece ends very dramatically with these words:

Grandma!
Help me please!

The piece is written in harmonic E-minor with a Picardy cadence at the end. It has four measures of piano introduction followed by the entrance of the choir. There is one detail that makes this song different from the rest, and it is that it has a motif in the piano part. The motif as follows repeats in the piano intro and during the refrain.

The motif also can be noticed during the verses but here it is slightly modified, taking the form of two quarter notes on the first two beats of the measure instead of the eighth-note off-beats.
The pieces were performed in the following order. “My Dream” was first as it is the only one without accompaniment. “Living in The Water” was the second one because it was too sentimental to be the last and I did not want to break up the two Halloween pieces. Although “Sweet Villains” is about the aftermath of a Halloween celebration, I felt that “Trick or Treating” was a stronger piece overall and would leave the audience with a more favorable impression, so I made it the last song on the program.

Before ending the chapter, I would like to share a few details about the performance that are not in the score. Two such events took place in the song “Sweet Villains.” The first was that the students pulled out a toothbrush on the last syllable of the line ‘grandma, toothbrush’. Although that was their idea, for the performance only one of them brought a toothbrush. Still, everybody at least performed the gesture of pulling out an imaginary toothbrush and holding it above their heads as if it were a precious weapon to protect them from a monster. The second one was that at the end of “Sweet Villains,” a few students came up with the idea of having a theatrical ending by adding the motion of getting on their knees and pleading for help with hands clasped together on the word ‘me’ of the last verse ‘Grandma, help me please.” At this moment, two girls would have a recitative with the words “I don’t want cavities” to make the message of the piece very clear to the audience. The last detail was that for “Trick or Treating,” the choir wore Halloween costumes and held props to help bring the song’s subject matter to life.
My Dream

Natalie Plaza for MH Choir

Dreamlike \( \text{♩} = 80 \)

Yes-ter day I fell as-leep with the sto ries you told me.

My dream of e-le-phants, my dream of deer,

My dream of ra-bits, my dream of birds.

In my dream of fan-ta-sy

I was there and you with me,

you with me...
My Dream

Dreamlike \( \frac{3}{4} = 80 \)

Yesterday I fell asleep with the stories you told me.

Yesterday I fell asleep, asleep, you and me.

My dream of elephants, my dream of deer,

Elephants, deer!

My dream of rabbits, my dream of birds.

Rabbits, birds!

Natalie Plaza for MHChoir
Arrange for treble choir by N. P.
In my dream of fantasy

I was there and you with me,

you with me

you with me
Living in the Water

Natalie Plaza for MHChoir

\[ \text{\textit{piano and legatto}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{tempo primo}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Keep pedal as indicated}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{with joy}} \]

\[ I \text{ want to live in the ocean, nobody seems too hot.} \]
I want to swim freely, I want to see the world.

A A A A I f

tempo primo

I were a fish in the ocean I would explore it all.
swimming in salty water or even fresh.

Wishing that every fish in the water enjoys the same,

moving forward

Wishing that all the living things are important for you as well
Wi-shing that all the li-ving things are im-por-tant for you as well.
Trick or Treating

Natalie Plaza for MH

Andante

Voice

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

like an old door

Walking with myself, walking with my friends,
Where is my brother? He is so tall that I cannot describe,
He is hidden behind the mask.

We are orange combine with black. Who is he?
He is just like a pumpkin alive.
Trick or treating, trick or treat to-

day is Halloween.
Body falls asleep: tonight is Halloween! Optional laughs
Sweet Villains

Andante

5, dense, with intention
These invaders don’t rest in peace,

7,
they go in circle, stop it please!

Natalie Plaza for MHChoir
light, with suspense

Crea-py crea-py vi-llans,  Crea-py crea-py vi-llans,
light, with suspense

Cra-py cra-py vi-llans, Cra-py cra-py vi-llans,

f

helpless

What is hap-pen-ing? I don't know what to do, Grand-ma! Tooth-brush!

f

suspen-se

Can- dy, sweet, cho-co-late, all the things I ate, now I have a
pain ful s-to-mach-ache
Grand - ma, help me please!
FINAL WORDS

When I look back at my experience with Music Haven, it is heartening to think of a group of young musicians collaborating with the goal of improving children’s education with a program that supports diversity and inclusivity. Yet, even though I support so many of their basic beliefs and actions, I found it strangely difficult to adjust to their environment. I felt at times that my spirit and passion for teaching were not enough. As much as cultural differences between my students and me enriched our interactions, there were moments when lack of mutual understanding hindered our progress.

I am especially appreciative that my experience with MH allowed me to use my time as a composer at Wesleyan to write music for the benefit of a community, however small it ended up being. This organization placed me in the heart of a society that I would not have been able to reach if I would have remained surrounded by university activities. The experience was overwhelming at the time, but the feeling of being relied upon by such a group fed my creativity and enthusiasm.

This experience also made me aware of several significant divergent attitudes regarding the goals of music education. Bartle, for example, believes that all children should be allowed to sing, while Grau goes one step further, insisting that all children should be encouraged to sing. As for me, I share both beliefs, but go still further; I believe that excellence is the ultimate goal of music education. Music can be entertaining and enjoyable, but at the same time it requires responsibilities and commitment. Choral singing can be a valuable way to instill these qualities in a child. Nevertheless, good qualities need to be planted at home. As the Trinidadian choreographer Geoffrey Holder
said, “[E]ducation begins at home. You can't blame the school for not putting into your child what you don't put into him.”

As a musician, and in consequence an advocate of music education, I look forward to continuing to work with different kinds of choirs while exploring and refining my own composition, musical affinities, and my philosophy as an artist. Wherever this work may take me, my hope is to find creative, progressive and mutually beneficial ways to preserve both my own heritage and that of any of the people with whom I make music.
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