




CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE CHOIR

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What is critical pedagogy? Since the release of Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a singular definition and application of critical pedagogy has been elusive. Broadly speaking, critical pedagogy may be summed up in Freire's original term *conscientização*, which roughly translates as conscientization. Conscientization refers to the process by which the unjust workings of a society are realized by the oppressed. The oppressed are then able to reclaim their right to speak as liberated persons, thereby transforming both themselves as individuals and the societies in which they live.¹ Freire's pedagogy stems from his work in educating the illiterate peasant population of Brazil in the mid twentieth century. However, when Freire speaks of the oppressed and the oppressor, he is not just speaking to Brazilians of the time. Freire's critical pedagogy may be applied in any context and across disciplines.

As choral conductors and educators, where in our field can we find the oppressed and oppressors? How can we transform our practices? How can we facilitate the process of conscientization among our singers? Using strong words such as oppressed and oppressor to describe the choral field might seem jarring, but by using these terms, we are not defining choral music as an innately unjust or oppressive art form. Instead, we are acknowledging the hierarchical nature of our field. Since the relationship between conductor and choir naturally lends itself to a system of hierarchy (oppressor and oppressed), we can ask how critical pedagogy can guide us to a more liberated system. In this new mode, conductor and ensemble can work together dialogically to transform themselves and the world in which

they live.

Critical pedagogy does not begin with predetermined answers; it begins with a problem. Through problem-posing, "People develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."² Critical pedagogy for choir could invite dialogue around a problem which exists in the world outside of the rehearsal space. It could also present a problem found within the confines of the choral classroom. It is essential that the unveiling of the world comes from within—the choristers—rather than from the conductor telling them what the world is and how they exist within it. Critical pedagogy is a collective process of both discovering and engaging with the world.

Critical pedagogy is not a sequential process to be applied to any situation. It is a way of engaging with the world in any given context through praxis (reflection and action), solidarity, and dialogue. Praxis is formed by both reflection and action. Through praxis, we as human beings can examine the world in which we live, understand it, and work to change it.³ Freire stresses the importance of both reflection and action, positing that without reflection one is left with activism, and without action one is left with armchair philosophy, neither of which is sufficient.⁴ Where praxis is existing within and changing the world, solidarity is entering into the lived reality of another. It is more than passing charity. It is an act of communion and trust, which can in turn inform praxis. Interwoven throughout the entire process of critical pedagogy is dialogue.⁵ How might praxis, solidarity, and dialogue inform our choral practice? What problems in our field or in



our world might we work to transform?

The following problems serve as broad examples that may be encountered by most choirs. Each problem will be viewed through the primary lens of a key component of critical pedagogy to examine in greater detail how each component can be applied. Because the components work together and not sequentially, they will inevitably intertwine in each problem.

Problem: Repertoire & Programming **Lens: Praxis**

For those conductors or ensembles who are engaging with critical pedagogy for the first time, repertoire is an accessible point of entry, as it is something all choirs regularly encounter. Repertoire could be problematized in a variety of ways including culturally, socially, and historically. How could praxis (action and reflection) lead to a transformed understanding of repertoire? Julia Shaw, writing as a culturally responsive pedagogue, offers a culturally responsive approach to repertoire that also invites critical pedagogy.⁶ Reflection upon meaningful dialogue with students may lead to the act of programming culturally diverse repertoire reflective of the students in the ensemble. Conversely, it could lead a conductor to program repertoire outside of the everyday lived experience of their students.

Or perhaps the students are part of the programming process and programming becomes part of the students' praxis. The process of selecting repertoire is abundant with opportunities for reflection as an individual or as a group. Reflecting upon repertoire selection, or repertoire left unselected, may reveal hidden biases or silenced voices. When it comes to programming culturally responsive repertoire, it is important that dialogue informs praxis. It should never be assumed that a person of a certain demographic will feel seen or heard by singing a piece of music from that demographic. Praxis—in this case the choice to program music from a particular demographic within the choir—should always be informed by meaningful dialogue.

Praxis and repertoire go beyond programming. Repertoire may also be used to develop an awareness of contemporary issues of injustice. Shaw suggests choral directors can do this by purposefully choosing reper-

toire that invites dialogue, thus encouraging students to “discuss, interrogate, and delve deeply into related sociopolitical issues.”⁷ From dialogue, students may find opportunities for praxis, enacting social change, or participate in social critique.⁸ Patricia Campbell also notes that issues of injustice can be made into opportunities for learning and affirms Shaw's stance that students should be encouraged to critically engage with present social injustices.⁹ This could also be expanded to include musical injustices. Shaw suggests how a culturally stereotypical piece could be part of an ensemble's praxis.¹⁰ An ensemble might analyze the work, discuss why the repertoire is problematic, and consider appropriate solutions or alternatives.

Problem: Going Beyond the Building **Lens: Solidarity**

Shaw's approach places repertoire as a *means* of furthering dialogue and action, not an end. It is not enough for a choir to sing diverse repertoire, they need to find a way to go beyond repertoire. Similarly, critical pedagogue Jan McArthur succinctly states that, “Critical pedagogy seeks not just to observe society, but to change it.”¹¹ For example, a choir could present a concert program that chooses to address a social issue (e.g., homelessness). But, according to McArthur's statement, it is not enough for a choir to observe the issue of homelessness and to sing about it. Rather, the participants of a critical choir must engage and work to transform the injustice at hand. How can choirs engage deeply? They could begin by engaging with people.

Choral music inevitably involves people. There is no way around it. Our art requires the human voice. Because of this, choral music is inescapably relational. How do we form relationships through choral music? Through critical pedagogy, one might work toward being in solidarity. Solidarity requires us to leave our own lived experience and enter into the lived experience of others. Solidarity with others outside of the rehearsal hall requires commitment and is a process, which takes time. While solidarity can be difficult to achieve, working toward solidarity in the choral classroom is not impossible. As a critical pedagogue, Frank Abrahams uses critical pedagogy to “break down the barriers that

exist between the music students hear and love outside the classroom and the music their teachers want them to learn.”¹² Entering into the music and music making of another person is an act of musical solidarity. In critically engaging with music from a culture that is outside of the culture represented in the classroom, Abrahams argues that students can connect with people without ever meeting them.¹³ This makes the challenge of engaging with the world practical and accessible, especially for a K-12 setting where physically going beyond the walls of the school is not always feasible.

On the other end of the solidarity spectrum, history professor Anne Rapp seeks to encourage student participation in societal change by “extending sites of learning to the real world and opening up the intersections between lived experience and new knowledge.”¹⁴ For Rapp, critical pedagogy physically travels beyond the classroom. She achieves this by employing Community-based Service Learning (CbSL) in her teaching, which invites students to go beyond the classroom and experience the realities of the other (or sometimes their own background) in solidarity with, rather than token charity for, members of oppressed communities. Rapp, echoing Freire, acknowledges the potential danger of such activity arousing paternalistic charity rather than an awareness of systemic oppression.¹⁵

This notion of going beyond the physical barriers of an educational institution is not unfounded in the choral world. For choirs, this dismantling of physical barriers most frequently occurs through musical outreach, concerts outside of the school/traditional venue, or bringing our music to those with limited access to live music performances. While these activities go beyond the halls of education, are we simply observing society or are we seeking to change it?

How many times are these events an act of paternalistic charity and how many times does it, at the very least, spark curiosity about systems of oppression and injustice? When a choir goes out to sing for what is deemed an underprivileged population in their community or while on a choir tour, what is achieved? How is dialogue a part of the process? Is praxis present? Was a stance of solidarity made, or was it passing charity? How is a transformation of the individual self or system encouraged? Is musical outreach a form of soli-

darity, or is it an exercise in false charity to calm our minds? To be clear, it is not being suggested that every instance of musical outreach plays into the hand of systems of oppression or that every activity outside of school must make shockwaves in society. What is being suggested is that solidarity is more than passing outreach; it is relational.

Problem: The Hierarchical Structure of Conductor and Singer **Lens: Dialogue**

Conductors and choirs make music together. The choral structure is inherently hierarchical, however. Because of this, it is easy for some conductors to act as the only voice in the room. As the only voice the conductor tells the choir what to do (verbally or non-verbally) and the choir responds. The conductor listens to determine whether or not the response is satisfactory to their vision and the cycle repeats. In this case, the conductor acts as the giver and the choir as the receiver, yet music is made under the guise of “together.” Not only is this approach hierarchical and representative of false solidarity, it also adheres to a banking model of education that stands in stark contradiction to critical pedagogy.¹⁶ The banking model assumes the teacher is in charge of all knowledge and students are receptacles waiting to receive knowledge. It is a hierarchical and passive model. Music educator Randy Allsup criticizes this model stating, “This [receive, memorize, repeat information] is nothing more than mere enactment if initiates aren’t trusted—at all stages of the learning process—with the creative capacity to make the work they do personally meaningful in concrete ways.”¹⁷

How can conductors show they trust their choirs? How can they facilitate choral music making that is more than mere enactment? Dismantling this hierarchical banking structure requires the conductor to let go of some speaking power and make room for dialogue. Rather than tell the choir how to be musical, ask them what they might do during a particular phrase. Give them time to think about it. Sing it. Then ask what musical choices were made. Get multiple ideas going and talk about them. Allow the singers to experiment as individuals and talk about musical decisions as

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a community. Let their work be independent of what you tell them or do nonverbally from the podium.

Abrahams references a curriculum by Miles in which dialogue among ensemble members, inviting a community member to come speak, and allowing ensemble members to have the opportunity to experiment and perform their own ideas as one example of a music classroom influenced by critical pedagogy.¹⁸ In this form, the role of the conductor is minimized, and ensemble members dialogue with each other to explore and present musical possibilities. How does this play out in a rehearsal? Perhaps a choir could be divided into small groups, given a simple piece of music, a melody, void of any markings or instruction, and then the groups prepare their own renditions of the melody. Explore musical possibilities, and after sharing their performance discuss why they chose to make the musical decisions they did.


Conductors can also make use of dialogue when coaching choirs on issues related to voice pedagogy. The conductor may dialogue with a chorister during rehearsal, working with the singer in what is essentially a mini voice lesson. Ensemble members should be encouraged to listen and share what they heard. Likewise, the student demonstrating should share what they did, what they changed, what they felt. This dialogue works to effect transformation in technique. No matter how dialogue is involved in the rehearsal process, continue to invite the singers to participate. Ask questions and allow them to ask questions.

Repertoire itself is filled with opportunities for dialogue, as already evidenced by the above discussion on praxis and repertoire. When used to transform the hierarchical choral model, it is necessary that this dialogue is not simply the conductor talking to the singers about the music. That resorts to the banking method and does not foster dialogue.

How can conductors foster dialogue while not acting as the sole keepers of knowledge? It could be possible to bring in other voices from outside of the choir. Perhaps another ensemble or an individual with different insights or experiences to share as they relate to the music, the history, the culture, etc. If there are no voices to bring in, allow the voices in the choir to speak to the music. Students could take charge of writing program

notes or could share their process of encountering the music at a concert, thereby extending the dialogue to another group of people.

Each choir exists within a particular context, and every conductor in theirs. How one choir practices critical pedagogy may not look the same as another choir. The problems a collegiate choir faces are different from a middle school choir. The possibilities of social engagement beyond the school building will look different for urban and rural choirs. This is the beauty of critical pedagogy. It is responsive to people. When writing about dialogue, Freire states that “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love.”¹⁹

Critical pedagogy, with its language of the oppressed, oppressor, and injustice, is about love. It is a love of liberation, of transformation, and of people. Critical pedagogy offers choral musicians opportunities to transform every aspect of our music making through conscientization, putting our love into critical choral action. 

NOTES

- ¹ Donaldo Macedo, introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition*, by Paulo Freire (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018): 16.
- ² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018): 83.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ⁶ Julia Shaw, “The Skin That We Sing: Culturally Responsive Choral Music Education” in *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 4 (2012): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41692642>.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁹ Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Music, Education, and Diversity: Building Cultures and Communities* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018): 75.

¹⁰ Shaw, "The Skin That We Sing," 79.

¹¹ Jan McArthur, "Time to Look Anew: Critical Pedagogy and Disciplines within Higher Education" in *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 3 (2010): 304, doi: 10.1080/03075070903062856.

¹² Frank Abrahams, "Musicing Paulo Freire: A Critical Pedagogy for Music Education" in *Counterpoints* (2007): 225, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42979408>.

¹³ Frank Abrahams, "The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning: A Literature Review," in *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 23, no. 2 (2005): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233050230020103>.

¹⁴ Anne Rapp, "On the Emancipatory Thought of Bell Hooks: Translating Critical Pedagogy into Action" in *The CLR James Journal* 17, no. 1 (2011): 38.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy*, 72.

¹⁷ Randall E. Allsup, *Remixing the Classroom: Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016): 85.

¹⁸ Frank Abrahams, "A Literature Review," 15.

¹⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy*, 89.

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