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Music at the Borders: A Community Music Program Implemented by Batuta National Foundation and the Colombian National Government

ABSTRACT

Batuta National Foundation implements music education programs with a focus on social transformation, especially with children and young people who have been victims of violence in Colombia. The program Music at the Borders aims to improve the quality of lives of children and young people from the borders of Colombia, which are complex territories, often facing serious problems, such as drug trafficking, contraband and human trafficking. This paper analyzed the implications of the program, its challenges, difficulties and the way it impacted the children and families who participated.

Keywords: Fundación Nacional Batuta – Music – Music and social transformation – Música en las Fronteras

INTRODUCTION

Colombia shares terrestrial borders with Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil and Panama, and maritime borders with Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras and Jamaica. Each of these borders presents a challenge to the Colombian government in terms of security, drug trafficking, contraband and other issues threatening national security. Such issues also affect local communities, who in most cases are impoverished and share common elements with their neighbors from other countries: vulnerability, lack of social services, poor education systems, and recently, the arrival of thousands of migrants from Venezuela. Batuta National Foundation has implemented the program “Music at the Borders” since the year 2013, with funding from the Colombian Foreign Affairs Ministry and recently from the Colombian Ministry of Culture, as a way to alleviate the impact of the aforementioned problems on the communities of the borders of Colombia.

Music education is one of the fields that has not been sufficiently studied in the context of war and conflict, especially in developing countries. Furthermore, Batuta’s music teachers often find themselves dealing with difficult situations with students and their families,

due to the state of mind that results from the violent and traumatic events that they have faced in the past. However, their work often transcends the field of music education and permeates other areas of the beneficiaries and their families, as well as political and social areas, as will be explained in this paper.

Music at the Borders has been successful in its aim of improving the quality of the lives of children and young people in the borders of Colombia, through the implementation of actions that generate opportunities for social inclusion and the strengthening of bonds with children from neighboring countries. Furthermore, the program has yielded unexpected positive results, such as the deepening of relationships between local authorities of Colombia and its neighboring cities of other countries, fomenting a constant cultural exchange between bordering cities and villages.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the body of literature that studies the role of music as an agent for positive social transformation. The paper will provide a review of the program, a context of the socio-political situation of the country, which has led to many of the problematics that Music at the Borders aims to tackle, as well as the implications of the program.

Music at the Borders

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

The program offers free music education in choirs, Orff ensembles and symphony orchestras in 15 music centers, located in 10 cities and villages across the borders of Colombia. During its seven years of existence, “Music at the Borders” has benefited around 10,200 children and young people of different ethnicities and backgrounds; many of them non-Colombians, who cross the borders into the country to receive free music education, while at the same time enriching the program with their social and cultural background. “Music at the Borders” spends an important economic resource renting spaces for the implementation of the activities, and employs an average of 45 people per year, including music teachers and administrative assistants. Furthermore, the program also provides the instruments for the students, however, they cannot remove the instruments from the music centers, as different students use the same instruments. This is one of the main constraints of the program, however, students spend a great deal of time practicing in the music centers, which makes up for their inability to own their own instruments to practice at home.

The program implements a specially designed curriculum that emphasizes large group instruction and group performances, which foment social interactions between participants, their families and the communities. Children in symphonic programs attend an average of nine hours per week, distributed as follows: one hour of instrument instruction with up to four mates (violin, viola, cello, bass, trumpet, clarinet, trombone, etc.), one and a half hour of instruments of the same family (high strings, low strings, brass or woodwinds), one and a half hour of “fila” rehearsal (violins one with viola one, cello one with bass one, violin two with viola two and cello 2 with bass two), and finally, a “tutti” rehearsal, which usually takes place on Saturdays with the entire orchestra present. Children in the Orff ensemble program attend a total of five hours per week, distributed as follows: two hours of choir and three hours of hands-on Orff ensemble practice. The facilitators also organize family gatherings, music center committees, activities for embellishing and decorating the music centers, and a special strategy called “ampliación de horizontes culturales”, which translates into expansion of cultural horizons, and consists of looking for cultural activities for the students to participate. These include watching movies, reading books out loud, attending theater plays, playing sports, and other activities of that nature. This is one of the most important strategies of the program, because it supplies important cultural activities

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to communities that would otherwise have no access to such fundamental activities.

Each music center works with groups of 80 or 140 students, divided into average groups of 35 students in each session. Each of the music centers works with a minimum of one and a maximum of three music teachers, as well as one administrative assistant. The role of the administrative assistant is of utmost importance for the implementation of the program, as they are in charge of coordinating schedules, following up with student’s families, communicating important information, processing information, and providing support for teachers in daily tasks. Batuta strives to find administrative assistants who are native from the city or village where the program operates and who have recognition from the community. This helps to establish trust with the communities and to improve the success rate of the program.

Aleman *et al.* (2017) affirms that students with one-year tenure in a similar program improved self-control and reduced behavioral problems. Results were especially beneficial in children with less educated mothers, and in boys, especially the ones exposed to violence at the baseline. Moreno *et al.* (2009) found similar results, but using non-musician children, who after nine months of musical training, improved in pitch discrimination and reading abilities in speech. Finally, Zapata and Hargreaves (2018), point out the benefits of musical activities on the self-esteem of displaced children in Colombia. These are just small samples of how musical training can improve the quality of life of children, and benefit other areas of their development. However, there is numerous literature that reaffirm such findings, such as Garrido, Baker, Davidson, Moore and Wasserman (2015); and Schellenberg (2004), among others.

There are different reasons why the borders of a country are natural spaces for exclusion. They need to be controlled in order to limit the number of migrants entering a country; populations may be excluded from the city centers, while at the same time from their neighbors from other countries. The borders of Colombia are full of people of different ethnic groups, who do not recognize the power of the national government. Indigenous peoples inhabiting the borders of Colombia have been in the territory before the Spanish colony, however, they suffer and complain about the restrictions implemented by the national governments regarding freedom of movement through the territory. All of these issues put pressure on the implementation of the program and they are challenges that it must face. Teachers often have to learn how to deal with such complex

issues *in situ*, which requires a great deal of commitment and a great capacity of adaptation on behalf of the entire teaching and administrative staff.

One cannot foist the solution of the aforementioned problems and tensions inherent in the borders of Colombia to music instruction. Political, economical and social problems require equally political, economical and social solutions (Gil, 2018), however, the weight of the benefits of a program such as Music at the Borders cannot be denied. Suffice it to say that music instruction works in areas that public policy does not. Gil (2018) affirms that it intensifies the sensible, the affective, the imaginative and the poetic elements of the human spirit. It is in those elements that Music at the Borders has played a definitive roll, building bridges between populations looking inward and outward of the Colombian territory. In other words, it has helped to establish effective communication between people living at the borders and people in the city centers of the country, as well as with people living in close-by communities outside of the Colombian territory.

According to Batuta National Foundation 2018's annual report, the program provides 1,648 slots nationwide, however, in average it reaches 123% of coverage and 108% of assistance; 68% of the total population lives in vulnerable conditions, 25% of them are victims of the Colombian armed conflict, 6% are indigenous, 77% are "mestizos", and 1% are "raizales". Finally, it is worth mentioning that 81% of the children who attend the program belong to the lowest social stratum, while the remaining 19% belong to the low and low middle class of the country (Batuta, 2018).

The aforementioned numbers speak of the relevancy of the program, as well as its inclusive nature. Therefore, Music at the Borders is a community music program at its core. It supports the idea that participants act local, but think global (Bartleet and Higgins, 2018, p. 5). It also serves the children and young people of the communities of the Colombian borders, acting with them in their search for inclusivity, rather than acting on the communities (Higgins, 2012). "I like music, I like to express myself through music. The most important thing about the program is that I make friends, I learn how to make friends", said Elisabeth, a 9-year-old participant from Riosucio, Choco, in the border of Colombia and Panama. "Music helps me to calm myself. It helps me to express myself better and playing my instrument helps me to enjoy music, to make new friendships and to live unique experiences", said David, a bassoon 16-year-old student from Villa Del Rosario, in the border with Venezuela.

Finally, a central element of the program is concert performances. Annually, each music center plays at least two high visibility concerts, and two or three recitals for parents and for the schools in which they function. In order to be able to play so many concerts and recitals, the program implements a hands on approach, in which participants and facilitators work together in active music making, emphasizing equal access for everyone involved and allowing participants to learn from their facilitators, as well as from their mates (Veblen, 2008). The repertoire varies from classical music such as Mozart, Beethoven or Tchaikovsky, to Colombian and Latin American repertoire.

CONTEXT: CONFLICT, DRUGS AND MIGRATION

Colombia gained its independence from the Spanish colony on August 7th of 1819. Sadly, in its 200 years of republican history, the country has suffered long periods of violence. The reasons for such violence have been diverse, mostly having its roots in differences in political views of the current historical events of the country. However, there has been a commonality in the different types of violence extended over time, which is the fight for access to land. Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, with a GINI index of 0.49 in 2017 (Our World In Data, 2019). Inequality is a major source of violence in the country.

Despite its political and security problems, the country has shown steady growth in its economy since the 1980s. The central government has implemented a liberal economic model that supports business investment and foments employment creation in the cities, while at the same time encouraging an exacerbated social and economic assistance model in the rural areas that are away from the urban centers (Melo, 2017). This does not differ much from a socialist interventionist model. Melo (2017) affirms that this complex economic model has helped keep local politicians in power, governing for their own benefit and depriving rural population the access to the land. Furthermore, the excessive subsidization of welfare has prevented populations from implementing their creativity and there are very few entrepreneurs in the areas, which affects the number of jobs that are created in the borders.

The lack of access to land during the 1960s led to the formation of communist guerrillas that were inspired by the outcome of the Cuban Revolution. Guerrillas have operated since then throughout the Colombian territory, but as it tends to happen in long-winged wars, the ideals of equality and the struggle for access to land faded away. Guerrillas became organized armed movements that not only fought for the vulnerable and the un-

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protected, but for illegal businesses such as illegal mining, narcotics and contraband.

The abuses of the guerrillas in the rural areas, in turn, encouraged the creation of paramilitary groups in the 1980s. Landowners who saw their properties endangered decided to hold arms and created such groups. However, paramilitary groups quickly found an easy way to finance their operations in drug trafficking. Colombia lived a time of horror during the 1990s, when a mix of guerrillas, paramilitaries and common drug traffickers intensified their violence against the government and the civil population. The civilian population was always in the middle of the struggle and many towns and villages suffered massacres and displacement, due to accusations from one side or the other of helping the contrary.

In 2016, the Colombian Government managed to sign a peace agreement, in a negotiation process that lasted over five years with FARC, the biggest and oldest guerrilla group in Colombia. However, in such a rarefied environment, the peace process is still to be consolidated. Paramilitary groups present serious threats to spoil the agreement (Maher & Thomson, 2018) and there are newly founded groups occupying the spaces left by the FARC guerrillas.

In recent years, more than two million people have left Venezuela fleeing from economic and political crisis (Venezuela: Despite challenges, 2018). This has caused Colombia to react in a positive way and create initiatives to receive Venezuelan people into the territory. However, Venezuelan migration has put a lot of pressure on the government's agencies and their budgets, as well as on the local communities and their economies, lowering the prices of services and causing the unemployment rates of Colombian nationals to go up due to a lower cost of labor. These problems are more evident in the borders of the country, where a high percentage of the migration concentrates.

It is evident that the borders of Colombia are very complex territories. They are away from urban centers and do not enjoy the benefits of the cities in terms of basic public services, access to education and other basic rights that are not guaranteed in such communities. Contraband, drug traffic, slave traffic and other illegal activities take place in the borders of the country. Finally, communities are still harassed by illegal armed groups of different ideologies, and they have not been able to achieve their longed for peace. This has caused communities to become distrustful, suspicious and chary.

One cannot expect music, or arts in general, to solve such complex issues, and as was mentioned before, political, economic and social issues require equally political, economic and social solutions. The program Music at the Borders does not seek to solve such issues, nor does it aspire to be a replacement for social politics. However, the program is born from the necessity to amplify the cultural and musical offering to the communities that live in such convoluted areas. It seeks to create bridges between these communities and the city centers, as well as to aid in the relationship of the communities and their neighbors from other countries. Teachers, facilitators, schools, local authorities and private companies contribute to the operation of the music centers, in a type of "polyphonic" community (Gil, 2018), in which everyone puts aside distrust in order to achieve a higher good.

THE BI-NATIONAL ORCHESTRAS

One of the greatest accomplishments of the program are the bi-national orchestras. Batuta National Foundation has led the creation of orchestras integrated by children from Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil and Ecuador. This has taken great efforts locally and nationally, as in some cases the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Colombia has had to interact with its counterparts from the neighbor countries in order to get permissions, visas and find funding sources in the other countries. As Colombian former Minister of International Relations, Maria Angela Holguin, said in an interview: "it is diplomacy at the highest level." However, it also takes a great effort at the local level. In order to get a bi-national orchestra up and running, artistic directors have to settle on repertoires, dates for concerts, venues, and other operative issues. This takes a negotiation process that is not always exempt of tensions, but in the end, does facilitate alternative means of communication that result in trusting relationships between the neighboring countries.

After negotiations have taken place, rehearsals start, and that is when students interact with their peers from other countries. The value of the process for the children and their families is priceless. Entire communities get together at the borders and share experiences with their neighbors from other countries. Rehearsals open spaces not only for the children, but also for families to create bonds with people from the other country, as well as for local authorities to converse and look for common grounds in which they can work to improve the quality of life of their populations. Lina, a 17-year-old student from Villa del

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Rosario, in the border with Venezuela, mentioned the following about the bi-national orchestra:

“My fondest experience in Music At the Borders was participating in the tri-national orchestra, where I belonged to the youth symphony orchestra formed by musicians from Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. This was my first encounter with so many musicians and thanks to this, my motivation kept rising. I wanted to keep getting better, to be able to keep participating in these special and magical encounters. Due to this first encounter, I made up my mind to learn more and more, so that I could keep attending different encounters in different parts of the country.”

Colombians have always been subject to stereotypes due to the country's violent past. The problems with drugs, guerrillas and paramilitary groups have induced the international community to create a false imagery of Colombian nationals. The joint activities of the orchestras have helped to alleviate such stereotypes in the border areas of the country. Thanks to the creation of bi-national orchestras, distrust has turned the understanding of the other as different, but not necessarily bad or dangerous (Gil, 2018). War, conflict and the constant proximity to illegal activities, like the ones that were mentioned in previous sections of this paper, naturally shape personalities and social dynamics. It is easy for entire communities to become alienated and stigmatized.

The experience exchange that the program allows generates spaces to learn about the others, and that permeates other areas of society. Furthermore, the concerts that are played are highly visible, which allows the program to be known nationally. A great deal of effort and money is spent publishing life stories, news and anecdotes on local and national newspapers, social networks and other print and digital means. This allows people from other areas of Colombia and its neighbors to learn not only about the program, but also about the communities in which the program operates. This creates awareness about the social, political and economic problems of the border areas of the country, which at the same time helps find funding to continue with the program.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROGRAM

Bi-national orchestras depend on the political will of the current mayors on the Colombian side, as well as on the Peruvian,

Ecuadorian, Brazilian and Venezuelan side. The Venezuelan crisis has affected the political, economical and social stability of the entire Latin American region, and a great deal of human and economic resources has had to be redirected to the attention of Venezuelan migrants, and in the year 2020 to the attention of the Covid-19 pandemic. The implementation of the program is very problematic: finding teachers in such remote areas is difficult, the costs associated are high, and teachers and administrators often find themselves dealing with unfamiliar and difficult situations. Furthermore, keeping children and families engaged is not always easy, since many of these families face difficulties of their own, which sometimes prevent them from being fully engaged.

One of the major success elements is that Music at the Borders implements a holistic approach, that transcends the merely musical component and implements strategies that involve the families and explores other interests of the students. The strategy “Ampliación de Horizontes Culturales” allows the students to spend time together outside of the music classroom, which at the same time helps students to deepen their relationships and improves their community bonds. Having students occupied in musical and non-musical activities also serves the purpose of keeping them away from drugs, illegal armed group recruiting, and other dangers that they face in their territories.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the program has become so strong and so rooted in the border communities, that current politicians will always have to respond to their voters if they mean to stop the program.

Music at the Borders is a sample of how a community music program can have a profound impact on the community. As was mentioned before, one cannot expect music to solve political, social and economic problems. This is not a burden that can be bestowed upon the arts; this is not the role of the arts. However, the implementation of Music at the Borders has proven to have a direct impact on these issues. When one speaks to participants, families, local authorities and music facilitators, one only hears about the wonders of the program. Every party involved makes their own sacrifice to get the program working: the government needs to find the resources, which as was seen before is not always easy; Batuta goes far and beyond to operate the program; parents put their share of effort by accompanying their children to the activities; finally, local authorities find spaces in their often divergent views of the world and help children meet with their peers from other countries

in bi-national orchestras. The end result, despite its problems and shortcomings, has so far been outstanding. It is safe to say that the majority of the people who have been in contact with Music at the Borders have been deeply touched by its results.

BIOGRAPHY

Camilo Puche holds an arts diploma from the National School of Arts in Habana, Cuba, a Bachelor of Music in Music Business from Berklee College of Music, a Master of Music, Music Education in Boston University and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Music Education in Boston University. He teaches trumpet at the Universidad del Norte, in his hometown of Barranquilla, Colombia and holds a position as North Regional Manager for Fundación Nacional Batuta, where he is in charge of the execution of all the programs of the Foundation in the Caribbean region of the Country.

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