

# **Finding a Voice through Music: Implications for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

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## **Abstract**

This article will focus on the role music played in the life of a young African American girl growing up in the south during the civil rights movement. Born into an authoritarian household, the young girl found comfort in the sound of singing and in the music she heard in the church. She received lessons singing and playing piano at a very early age; her music helped her feel a sense of self-worth. In 1961, amid the backdrop of civil unrest, the young adolescent was enrolled in what had been an all-white junior high school. For two years, she was the only African American student to attend the school; her life reflected the struggle played out across the country in acts of violence and racial tension. As a young girl struggling in an oppressive school environment, she again found solace in singing. Silenced by teachers who ignored her, and by classmates who taunted her in the halls, the shy student found some sense of relief in the choral classroom where the act of singing gave her a voice. Music continued to play an important role in her life as she grew up in the quickly changing landscape of the south during the 50s and 60s. Drawing upon these experiences, we will explore how music can both reflect and affect a person's life and we will consider a framework for creating a positive, supportive environment for all choral musicians.

*“I was born with music inside me. Music was one of my parts. Like my ribs, my kidneys, my liver, my heart. Like my blood. It was a force already within me when I arrived on the scene. It was a necessity for me-like food or water.”* (Charles, 1978)

## **Introduction**

Music is an integral part of our society; we hear it in the workplace, at home, and during religious services. For many of us, music has played an important role in our childhood and continues to be a powerful force in our adult lives. The following narrative illustrates the importance of music as a means of self-expression. It highlights how music can connect us to our past and is a reflection of the world around us.

I (Vicki) recently met fellow faculty member, LaVerne Bell-Tolliver at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock who has a powerful story about music and life. LaVerne and I are both members of the Chancellor's Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CCRE). I joined the group about a year ago because of my interest in equity and access to music education and culturally responsive pedagogy; LaVerne has been a part of the group since its inception. At one of our weekly meetings, the Chancellor asked LaVerne to share her story. LaVerne began describing her experiences as the first and only black student to desegregate a middle school in Little Rock. It was (and is) an emotional and important story. As I listened, I heard LaVerne mention music, the role music played for her and how “choir” served as a refuge. After hearing her story, I emailed and asked if we could meet for coffee. We did, and LaVerne shared with me her experiences in middle and high school and the role music played in her struggle and survival.

As we continued our conversation we began to consider writing together. I found the story to be significant with important implications for music educators. Upon completion of the IRB requirements, we began meeting on a regular basis and completed a series interviews. After each interview, I transcribed the information and sent the transcripts to LaVerne for verification. We each read through the transcripts and identified several common themes. We then, individually, coded the transcripts and compared our coding. Early in the process we had a conversation concerning our roles, and we discussed the possible outcomes of our collaboration. We did not want our process to be governed by traditional research methods, rather we wanted to insure that both of us had a voice, that our writing was credible, and that the resulting project reflected our collaboration. We began working on this auto/biographical work combining LaVerne's autobiographical approach with the "outsider" voice of a biographer.

I, (LaVerne), had attempted unsuccessfully to write my story over a number of years and found that my language would regress as I recalled past experiences. I was able, with the help of my colleague, to establish some distance through both the interview process and through the tasks necessary to collaborate on this work. The series of interviews, as well as our weekly meetings of the CCRE provided us with the opportunity to establish a relationship and to build the trust that was needed for me to talk about the past in a way that might be meaningful for others to hear. Trust became an important component of this project. Because of the relationship forged between the two of us, we were able to ask hard questions, explore difficult topics, and look for meaning that was relevant today.

### **La Verne's Story: A Glimpse**

A headline appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* on September 5, 1961, and a small newspaper article followed that predicted there would be a "Quiet Opening Expected Today for Schools." The article later went on to explain that the Little Rock Arkansas schools were entering the fifth year of "court-ordered desegregation." The White junior high schools (grades 7-9) were due to begin the process of desegregating. Little Rock, Arkansas was the scene of a huge crisis in 1957, when Central High School was desegregated. 1961, was the first year, therefore, that the junior high schools were to be desegregated. In contrast with 1957, no problems were anticipated as twenty four African American children were expected to begin the journey of entering previously all White junior high schools and an additional 24 African American teens were being prepared to expand the numbers of those youth who were then currently enrolled in the high schools. Indeed, the September 6, 1961 *Arkansas Gazette* confirmed the prediction made in the article from the previous day: "All Quiet as Integration Expanded at Little Rock; 46 Negroes in 8 Schools."

The word "quiet" is striking to me, one of the twenty four junior high school students who desegregated those schools. There was nothing quiet about the way I felt, even though I said nothing to indicate otherwise. My entire world was being turned upside down. Even now, 49 years later, I can still recall the fear I felt as I anticipated entering a school with absolutely none of my friends from my elementary school days to accompany me. I understood, however that one other African American girl would be attending that school. "At least," I thought that morning as I prepared for school, "I will not be alone."

Although the September 6, 1961 article talked of everything being quiet, it also reported something else, but did not seem to understand the significance of what was being stated. It said in a small part of the article,

*Two return. Forty-eight had been scheduled to enter but two, one a high school student and one a junior high student, asked permission to return to Negro schools... Eleven Negroes are at West Side Junior High School, nine are at East Side, two at Southwest Junior High and one at Forest Heights Junior High.*

That one new friend I thought I would be able to meet and make at Forest Heights Junior High School never arrived. I was alone. That article also unwittingly explained the reason I would not be able to count on having my younger sister join me when she entered the 7<sup>th</sup> grade on the following year. "Pulaski Heights Junior High School now is the only city school above the elementary level without Negroes. No one asked to attend there." Apparently, the rules changed the next year. My sister and one other girl were sent to that school to desegregate it.

The words that seemed to flow so well in the *Arkansas Gazette* were not my words. I felt silenced even though I probably wanted to scream, run away, hide, or to at least to ask "why?" Why did I have to be the only one to attend this school? Indeed, I wanted to know why I had to leave everything that was familiar to me. Instead, I felt silenced.

During that time many parents, including mine, practiced a very authoritarian form of discipline. One did not ask parents questions. The summer before I entered Forest Heights, my parents drove us - I have five other siblings - to Forest Heights. My dad said "This is your new school." I asked no questions such as, "what do you mean," or "what are you talking about?" That would not have been acceptable. At school, suffice it to say, no one thought about me or cared about what was going on in my life. As a person who was already quite shy, my silence was positively reinforced.

During one of our three interviews, Vicki asked me a question that really startled me even as it prompted me to think more deeply about the experience. She asked, "Can you remember, for me, I can just see you sitting in classes and watching the clock and kind of dreading the end of the class time when you knew you were going to be in that vulnerable situation. Do you remember anything like that?" The memories that triggered serves as a sort of testimony to what the brain preserves: either by way of an actual memory or of the emotions and thoughts surrounding that experience. I replied, "I didn't magnify it like that. I just knew it was going to happen. No part of the day was any more or less stressful. It was all stressful..." The challenge of being in a situation such as that was that it was always stress-filled; the stress was pervasive.

It was only in courses such as music that I learned to express myself. We have described this theme as "giving voice." I learned I could sing and immediately transport myself away from the difficult present in which I lived. I therefore sang throughout my years even into college. From the time I was just a small child on, I was always around music, whether I was at church or home. As a small child, I remember singing but also "taking piano lessons" for a brief part of my life. That was important to me. When I got a little bit older but still in my all Negro elementary school, I was occasionally asked to sing at different events in the community or at church. Music was already important to me; but I think, it affirmed a sense in me that I needed to have, especially during that time. It was comforting but it was also comfortable or known to me because my mother would sing in the kitchen while she cooked or when she was working. Whether she was happy, or whether she was sad, she would be singing. Music, therefore, became a part of me.

Vicki asked another thought-provoking series of questions. "Why was that more comfortable for you and a good thing? Were the students different, was the choir director different or was it the music?" At school, singing in the choir was one of the few places that I felt accepted: if not

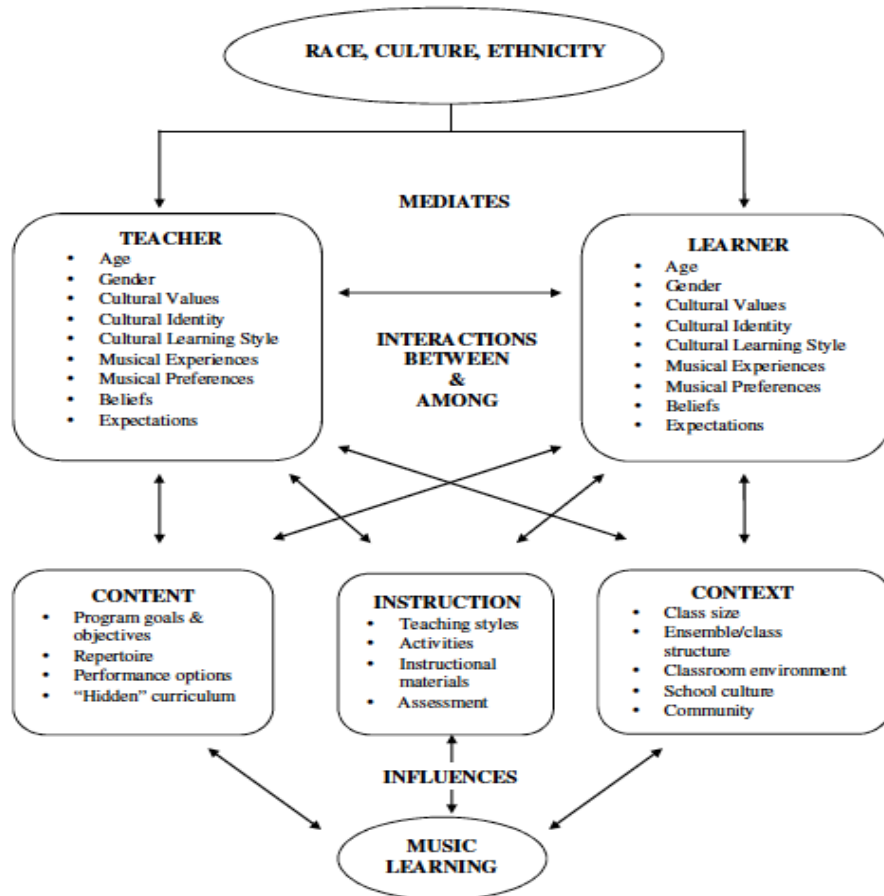
by my fellow students in the room – who did not talk to me in that class any more than they did in others. I told Vicki, “I think it was the music itself that helped me to make it through those times. I looked forward to it, I loved the music.” That experience gave me a voice with which I could express myself. I could pour my emotions into the music and create a space that was safe and comforting for me to live and be me.

Probably the most affirming experience for me to occur in junior high was when my choir teacher/conductors or teacher allowed me to try out for 8<sup>th</sup> grade choir even though I had tonsillitis – yes, even my body attempted to silence me! The conductor accepted me into the choir at a time when I was not accepted by others. That experience was invaluable to me.

That experience was repeated when I was in high school. We had to audition for choir, the “Hall High Harlequins.” Those who were accepted – or rejected- for the choir would learn of that decision at a choir assembly at the end of the school year. I had seen people in the audience be “tapped” on the shoulder by a current choir member to confirm their acceptance, and they would walk on stage to show that they had been selected for the choir. So I was so nervous on that day! At the time, for me acceptance might have been equivalent to getting the PhD!

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

My (Vicki) work over the past several years has focused on race, ethnicity, and culture and music learning. Along with two of my colleagues, I helped develop a model for exploring the issues in music education related to culture and ethnicity. In many ways, the above narrative confirms the categories that we identified in our original work dating back to 2002. As the model illustrates, learning is complex and culture matters.



LaVerne’s account of her experiences at Forest Heights Junior High School confirmed the categories and interactions outlined in the model. Her learning was certainly mediated by her teachers and the choices they made. The teacher is a central figure in the music classroom. We make decisions affecting almost every aspect of the teaching and learning process. It is the teacher who structures learning activities, paces the lessons, implements assessment, and filters these activities through his or her individual teaching style. It is the teacher who develops and enforces classroom rules, manages student behavior. Through these decisions it is the teacher, coupled with his or her personality, either consciously or unconsciously, who affects classroom environment. Given the central role teachers play in coordinating music learning experiences, it is important to understand how teachers relate to diverse student populations and how they might contribute to or disengage from culturally responsive instruction.

There has been quite a bit of work done over the past decade specifically looking culturally responsive pedagogy. Two authors, Ana Maria Villegas and Tamara Lucas, identified six characteristics of culturally relevant teachers. Culturally responsive teachers are socio-culturally conscious, that is they recognize that there are many ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are, in part, influenced by one’s culture. Culturally relevant teachers have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds and see resources for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to overcome. These teachers see themselves as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students. They understand how learners construct knowledge and they are capable of promoting learning in different ways. Culturally responsive teachers use knowledge about their

students' lives to design instruction. These teachers work to find ways to connect what students already know to what they are learning.

As LaVerne talked about her experiences at Forest Heights Junior High School, I couldn't help but wonder what her life would have been like had she been with a teacher that fit these guidelines and was in a school that understood the interaction between culture, ethnicity and race and learning. We can no longer deny that learning is impacted by culture. It is time we begin to act upon our knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy and work to better meet the needs of all students.

### **Summary: Recommendation for Choral Directors**

From the perspective of the child, the student who is in your class, I would like to encourage you to listen to the students as they enter your rooms. Listen to what they are saying and to what they are not saying. Volumes of information can be gathered through the communication forms of silence and body language. I also encourage you to reach out to those who are different in some way either from your or from the other students in the class. Find a way to get to know them, even from the hustle and hurriedness of all of the tasks you must accomplish each week or semester.

From the perspective of a clinical social worker and family therapist, I would also like to suggest that you find a way to listen to and honor the stories of people who may be different from you. This may be done as you research the types of music that come from a different cultural environment than yours. Incorporate music in your curriculum that honors and affirms various cultural groups. Finally, find a creative method of expressing appreciative inquiry, or professional curiosity for the stories of students, particularly as it pertains to music or the arts. Narrative therapists call this developing a "not knowing" stance. Students need to know that someone cares about what they are experiencing. You will learn and grown from the information your students give to you almost as much as they learn from you.

*Black song, of course, had many additional functions both in Africa and America. In Africa, songs, tales, proverbs, and verbal games served the dual purpose of not only preserving communal values an solidarity but also providing occasions' for the individual to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of his environment and his society by permitting him to express deeply held feeling which ordinarily could not be verbalized(Levine, 1977, pp. 7, 8).*

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