

# Choirs and cultural identity: a children's choir in Belgrade

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## Abstract

In 2013 Campbell and Wiggins edited *The Oxford handbook of children's musical cultures* which described different musical experiences and diverse child populations across the world. This paper contributes to this particular interdisciplinary genre by contextualising and describing a well-known children's choir in Serbia that practices and performs in the Belgrade Orthodox Cathedral (Saborna Crkva). This church occupies an important geographic, political and religious position in the culture of historical Belgrade. There has been a choir in this space operating continuously since 1853, The First Belgrade Singing Society, Prvo Beogradsko Pevacko Drustvo (PBPD), and in 1981 the children's choir (DHPBPD) was founded. In this paper we historically locate the church and choir and describe the present activities of the children's choir. This latter we do through an interview with the director and some illustrative observations of two sisters who are participants in the choir. The concluding discussion includes an exploration of musical culture, community and identity. We use the Vygotskian concept of *perezvivane* to link the emotional experience of the children with the adult culture and history to explain why participation in the children's choir has been such a significant part of cultural learning and identity formation.

**Key words:** children's choir, Belgrade, musical culture, music and identity, *perezvivane* – music as emotional experience

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## Introduction and background

This study was initiated by Campbell and Wiggins' 2013 edited work *The Oxford handbook of children's musical cultures* which described different musical experiences and diverse child populations across the world. The article is part of this particular interdisciplinary inquiry approach (Campbell & Wiggins, 2013) which covers ethnomusicology, education and folk-lore. It contextualises and describes a well-known children's choir in Serbia that practices and performs in the Belgrade Orthodox Cathedral (Saborna Crkva) also known as St Michael's Church. To explore the experience of belonging to the children's choir we have used Vygotsky's idea of *perezvivanie* which has been described as:

*an expanded understanding of the ZPD that includes affective factors reveals it as a complex whole, a system of systems in which the interrelated and independent elements include participants, artifacts, the environment or context, and the participants experience of the interactions within the zone.* (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2000, p. 2)

We therefore focus on both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal which makes the context; Serbian history and religion as well as this particular church, St Michael's, artefacts; the liturgy, songs and prayers performed by the children and interactions; the choir and the intergenerational nature of the activity, which are all important elements of the emotional and formative experience of the children's choir.

There has been a choir in St Michael's church, operating continuously since 1853, The First Belgrade Singing Society - Prvo Beogradsko Pevacko Drustvo (PBPD), and in 1981 the children's choir was founded. In this paper we historically locate the church and choir and describe the present activities of the children's choir. This latter we do through an interview with the director and some illustrative observations of two sisters who are participants in the choir. The concluding discussion includes an exploration of musical culture, community and identity.

## The church

St Michael's Church, also known in Belgrade as a temple (*hram*), was built between 1837 and 1840 on the site where a previous church had existed. The architecture is a mix of classicism and baroque. The church occupies an important geographic, political and religious position in the culture of historical Belgrade. St Michael's Church has a special meaning for Serbs because it was one of the few churches that survived the Ottoman invasion of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Pavić, 2007). This church, dedicated to the Archangel, has a richly decorated interior, contains works by well-known artists. For example, the gold-plated carved iconostasis was made by the sculptor Dimitrije Petrović, while the icons on the iconostasis, thrones, choirs and pulpits, as well as those on the walls and arches were painted by Dimitrije Avramović, one of the most distinguished Serbian painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The church is specially valued for its relics of Serbian saints, including the despot Stefan Stiljanović, as well as other heads of the church and the state. During the 35 years of Tito's leadership of the former Yugoslavia the church was often marginalised but the PBPD choir continued to perform. Today, the church in Serbia has come to be seen as a representation of Serbian national pride and identity and therefore this space has historical and cultural relevance that is significant (Forest, 2004). Evidence of this is the fact that the church was declared a Monument of Culture of Exceptional Importance in 1979 and is protected by the Republic of Serbia.

The church and its buildings are spread across a number of blocks of Belgrade near the famous white fortress Kalemegdan. The fortress is the oldest urban area of Belgrade and dates back to the third century, although repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt across the centuries (Pavić, 2004). The PBPD and the children's choir have practice space across the road from the church. This rehearsal space has a particular aesthetic as the antique furniture and artefacts are surrounded by paintings and photographs of a few selected concerts of the choir, celebrated conductors and Serbian Patriarchs. There is an area for dining as well as a small kitchen. This venue is used for choir meetings, social gatherings and celebrations where children, older members of PBPD and their families and friends are welcome.

## The choir

The PBPD is the oldest official choir in Serbia. As the choir of the Royal Court, it takes part in the crowning ceremonies of all Serbian monarchs, the enthronement of the Serbian Church patriarchs and performs for the sovereigns of Europe. The PBPD's conductors and choirmasters have all been eminent music scholars (e.g., Kornelije Stanković, Davorin Jenko and Josif Marinković); its golden age was its thirty years under the artistic guidance of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, regarded by many as the most important Serbian composer and music educator. Traditionally, the choir's repertoire consisted of sacred and secular compositions and they have sung the liturgy and for christenings, weddings, memorials and saints' days as well as performing Slavic and Serbian folk heritage music. The choir considers it has a responsibility to preserve historical musical forms while remaining open to new musical ideas and taking a dynamic approach to the music. The children's choir sings a combination of Russian folk liturgy and Serbian liturgy specially arranged for young voices.

The PBPD formed the children's choir in 1981; there was a cessation during the 1990s with the choir becoming active again in 2001. Affiliated with the PBPD and St Michael's Church, the children's

choir has a fixed liturgy schedule that they perform on the third Sunday of each month. Children up to the age of 15 are welcomed into the choir. Rehearsals take place twice a week, although younger children may attend only once.

During rehearsals the children sit in different formations usually beside the piano, in front of the conductor. The children in the choir are divided into two groups. One consists of children of preschool age 4 to 7; this group rehearses for shorter periods of time – while the other group, school children from 8 to 15 years of age, have longer rehearsals. All children are welcome to become members regardless of their ability or experience. Once they have joined the choir they will be auditioned. The conductor, Emilija Milin stated “through auditions, the children’s voice type and/or part each child will sing are allocated, but this, of course, changes as the children’s voices develop and they mature” (Milin interview, 2014).

### **The voice of the conductor**

The children’s conductor, Emilija Milin, is a music teacher with degrees in Composition and Conducting. She has been a member of the PBPD. She has been conducting the children’s choir for several years and is the second conductor since the choir was revived in 2001. Milin is the choir’s musical director choosing repertoire and arranging the music to be performed. She has a spiritual relationship with the church and approaches her interpretations of the liturgy, which the children sing, as art expressed in a myriad of ways. She sees the physical space, the aesthetics of the icons, the architecture and the poetry of the prayers as working in synergy.

### **The repertoire and the philosophy of the choir**

Milin believes that all children can sing and that she wants them to feel both calm and enthused by the beautiful music.

*Of course, this can be challenging at times, especially when we sing in harmonies but with a positive attitude and patience we can achieve good results.*

She enjoys having a multi-aged, multi-skilled group of singers as stronger singers support others. The older children guide the younger ones – often through explaining and unpacking the complex form of choral singing the choir is engaged in – especially their liturgical singing.

*I also want children to develop and nurture a love for music. This makes me very content and fulfilled as I believe music has a lot to offer to human beings and the community.*

Of the repertoire Milin says:

*Diverse repertoire, which goes beyond orthodox sacred music, allows us to participate in different art and music events. In this way, the broader public is highly appreciative of us...Through engagement with different musical genres our young singers’ musical learning and understanding deepens [and] it is broadened and enhanced. Not all families are active church-goers or believers, yet their children are very interested in this form of church-singing.*

From these quotes from the conductor’s interview it can be surmised that the music itself is the strongest expression of the philosophy the conductor is describing. She has an all-encompassing approach to her music and her teaching embodies music as an inclusive experience for the children. She discusses the purpose of singing as a spiritual experience, in the act of singing she feels the children might be able to come close to God, she emphasises the meanings of the text as expressions of the prayers that are inseparable from the music but feels children often internalise meanings by responding to the beauty of the music.

*Otherwise how would the children understand all the stories about the saints, which are so abstract at times, without the music?*

## The music and methods

The conductor Milin discussed her teaching:

*My method is obviously grounded in singing, so I do use Kodály with elements of Orff's rhythm explorations as we often need to use natural speech patterns, chant, clap, that we then sing or I play them on the piano (or both). Some children have a strong oral musicality, others can already sight read; some have it all – the voice, the hearing, sight-reading, memory, even understanding of the lyrics. Sometimes we split into groups and those that are very strong and experienced singers teach others melodic lines that are assigned to their parts.*

The music of the liturgy that the children's choir sings often takes a call and response form, or sometimes resembles that of Byzantine chant. The purpose of the children's choir, the philosophy of the conductor Milin, the methods she describes in relation to using more competent children to assist others, and the repertoire as a physical and spiritual experience is akin to the idea of 'enculturative' learning as described by Campbell (2008).

*the psychic structure of a societal group is passed from one generation to the next through a cultural immersion process, so that the child can develop an implicit understanding of the values of a musical piece or full repertoire by his or her membership and participation in that society. (p. 42)*

A major expression of the musical notion to be transmitted within this choir community is the use of the liturgy as a dominant source of musical material. The liturgy belongs to the wider society in relation to the status of the religious ideas, the history of Serbia and the physical and artistic reminders of the history being shared in a special cultural place, both physical and metaphysical. The liturgy itself is created to be shared. The Serbian and Russian orthodox liturgy tends to be a meditative, and a main element is that it bears many characteristics of folk melodies. Resanović (2005) says the correct name is "Serbian Folk Church Chants" (*Srpsko Narodno Crkveno Pojanje*)

and these songs have been referred to as an emotional link to the past. He also notes that the present is important saying that Serbian Orthodox hymnography should also be seen as "hymned theology" and "as such, not an element of the past, but always an active tool in the everyday life of the Church" (n.p). Milin agrees with these comments and likes to extend the children's musical experiences into the associated folk spiritual music. In this paper the example of children's participation in the choir is discussed in relation to two sisters (Petra and Kasja). The first observation is their response to the 'Hymn to St Sava'. St Sava is an important religious and political figure in the history of Serbia. He was the founder of the Serbian nation state and also the first Archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian church. As a saint he is a protector of Serbian schools and children.

## The children's experience

### Petra

This year Petra started primary school (in Serbia, children go to school at the age of 7). Prior to this, she was attending preschool and was going to ballet classes. Last year she decided to have a break from ballet, as the exercises started to cause her discomfort. She now wants to learn the piano, and has been having lessons with a music teacher who was once a soloist of the PBPD choir. The piano teacher makes singing an important part of music appreciation which Petra really relishes. She is often observed sitting at the piano trying to play her favourite tunes by ear, one of them being 'Oce nas', (The Lord's Prayer), from the PBPD children's choir repertoire. When asked what music does for her, Petra said "I feel freed and just want to dance, as if some rope was pulling me to move".

Petra's primary school teacher says that she is a very eloquent and pedantic child who clearly loves music. Petra spends a lot of time designing fashion items. Her drawings often feature motifs from songs and favourite stories. Petra's favourite music varies from flamenco, traditional to classical and spiritual.

Her parents are worried that she is also terribly interested in computer games and they closely monitor and limit the time and type of games she plays.

### **Kasja**

Five year old Kasja is a physically gifted child, whose interests at the moment are roller-blading, swimming and drawing. She enjoys music and has been observed and filmed dancing in a ballet-like style during classical music concerts. She says "I feel nice when I listen to music; music creates love. I like playing the guitar ('Air guitar!')". Her parents believe that she has learnt the dance-vocabulary from her older sister and concerts she has been taken to. Kasja has an excellent memory for music and sings most of the melodies Petra knows. She is good at making up words to fit any song she likes. Kasja,

however, does not attempt to play the piano; she would rather spend time in the local park where she can test out her gymnastic skills.

### **Observation (recorded by Petra and Kasja's mother) – an example from the repertoire (Ode to St Sava)**

Context - January, 2013. My mother lives half an hour away but we try to visit her at least once a week. She is an active community member and sings in the church choir. This morning, she took Kasja and Petra to the service, as she often does. They had to get up before 7am, but were keen to go.

*Kasja and Petra participated by singing some parts of the service along with the choir and the priests. On Sundays, the service lasts for almost two hours, yet the girls seemed quite happy to be part of a*

St Sava by Petra.



St Sava by Kasja.



special celebration of St Sava. There were many children. Grandma reported that Petra usually appears to enjoy the service but was especially pleased that little Kasja looked captivated. Perhaps the girls enjoyed the company of other children. Needless to say that grandma was very proud. They arrived home very tired and hungry, so I served them lunch. The girls talked about flowers and shiny sparkly materials they saw in the church. Grandma praised the girls for being so good and singing so beautifully. After lunch, we all sang Hymn to St Sava. Petra knew most of the words, Kasja made up a few. We cleared the table and I told the girls that they could pick an activity they wanted to do.

They both chose to watch TV. The TV programme did not seem to interest them much, so Petra changed her mind and asked for drawing utensils. She took her materials over to the kitchen and sat at the small kitchen table. Soon after, Kasja joined her. They were in a mood to please grandma, so they both did a portrait of St Sava. Grandmother was indeed most impressed and proudly framed the drawings.

## Comment

The children had been to a special service for St Sava. The song they sang so well for their grandmother was a special example of a Christian plainchant and one extremely important in Serbia. Musical characteristics of the chant consist of generally one syllable per note with some melisma on longer syllables. The intervals are usually stepwise, adding to its melodic character, and leaps are distanced from each other. The range is restricted to one octave. With one exception the chant is diatonic, adding to ease of singing. The words of the song are both religious and nationalistic and commonly performed in schools on St Sava's day on the 27 January.

*Let us sing our love  
To Saint Sava  
Protector of Serbian church and schools  
Our Sainly Father.*

*There the goodness, there the glory  
In His, the Good Shepherd, St Sava's omnipresence.*

*Let us praise Him, O Serbs  
Let us sing thrice His hymn!*

*That all Serbian hearts  
With You unite  
Sun of peace and love  
Shine on us at once:*

*That we all live in harmony  
Help us, O Holy Father Sava!*

*Let us praise Him, O Serbs  
Let us sing thrice His hymn!*

Both children were familiar with the hymn they engaged with in the church with their grandmother. The singing was re-enacted at home so this musical, cultural artefact was shared in the public and private domain. The children's drawings indicate familiarity with the images of St Sava that abound, both containing the crosses on St Sava's clothing that is characteristic of the depictions of him and the halo of hair inside a halo. The older child, however, had added a dimension not frequently seen, St Sava standing in the sun with houses in the background, a setting removed from the usual church background. In terms of Vygotsky's notion of *perezhavanie* the combination of the culture of church and home in these experiences could have an enormous impact on the children. The music is strong, the words adult-themed and there is a connection between music and emotion (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001). Music is often used to enhance memory and learning (Gardiner, 2000) and the social context of home, church and, for Petra, school (Garfias, 2004) being in such accord would have a powerful influence. Indeed when discussing music Garfias comments that:

*Music is the most complete, complex and fully articulated means by which humans communicate with their fellows. It expresses the inner states of one individual to another, or that of a group to another group. (pp. 11-12)*

## Observation (recorded by Petra's mother). Sharing repertoire

Context – September 2014. Petra has come back from a choir rehearsal feeling a little tired but still asked if she could play the piano for a while.

*"I want to learn 'Bogorodice Djevo,'" she demands. I tell her that I do not know how to play this piece but that I will ask Miss Daca (her piano teacher) to include it in their repertoire. "Good idea!" says Petra who starts playing around. After a few minutes, I begin to recognise the tune – it actually is sounding like 'Bogorodice Djevo'. She manages to find the notes for the first 5 bars, then stops and concludes "I can only do right hand. Ufff, it's tricky. Mum, can you do a recording, please?" I clarify if she wants a recording of the song or recording of her playing. "Of the song, silly, we need to play it for Miss Daca!"*

## Comment

Petra has come home from choir attracted by a popular sacred song. She is enthusiastic about her piano playing and singing and competent enough to be able to pick out the beginning of the melody line of the song she has enjoyed. Such an activity of a child of seven bears witness to her interest, musical education and natural aptitude.

This piece of music, 'Bogorodice Djevo', (Ave Maria) is an example of plainchant. Its tonality is very heavily centred on D; the beginning of each line almost always starts on D, and similarly the end of each line concludes on D. The text setting is one note per syllable, but some syllables are melismatic. The range is short – only a sixth, and there are very few leaps in the music. Here Petra displayed an ability to mentally hear sound and was able to recognise rhythm, pitch and reproduce a melody.

## Discussion

In this paper we have given examples of enculturative learning where adults and children have been culturally and socially immersed in the music of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Implicit

understandings of the church itself, its teachings, history and role in people's lives have been gained by Petra and Kasja. Three generations of one family were observed, the conductor of the choir and the age range of the children in the choir all reinforce the idea of cultural immersion from one generation to the next. If we consider the emotional response of Petra and Kasja to their membership of a group that is not exclusive, all are welcome, but is elite in terms of resources and ability, then belonging to this choir could be seen as experience that will be a mediator to the development of consciousness of place, space and tradition for these participants.

In terms of musical consciousness and education the experience of the choir is a potent one. The liturgical music the children learn has been designed for a higher purpose. Garfias (2004) suggests that what was traditionally designed for the "intoning of the holy scriptures" has changed to a ritual that can be uplifting or make people feel welcome and bring them into the fold. The conductor considered the act of singing might lead to religious experience and she emphasised the meanings of the text as expressions of the prayers that are inseparable from the music. The artefacts, the history and the context are all part of a close-knit community expressing itself and providing these young children with powerful experiences for them to internalise and reinvent. Even the very beauty of the music might be an internalising factor according to the conductor. Music is the medium that holds the project together and is important on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Both children display an understanding of the musicality around them and it cannot be separated from their membership of their family culture or the culture of the choir. From such community membership will come a sense of self and identity all the more powerful because it is forged through bonds that include an affective element for each child to individually respond.

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