

## **Simm-posium provocation – SIMM – Social Impact of Music Making**

presentation @ SIMM-posium 2, Guildhall School, London, 08.07.17

by Shelly Coyne, Edinburgh University, UK

shellycoyne@googlemail.com

7 years ago, I began a job setting up a community music charity in the Gorbals in Glasgow, an area historically associated with gang violence, poverty and sectarianism and my job was to create new choirs and community singing groups in response to local issues around social isolation, poor health and poverty. One of those choirs that I set up was the Lodging House Mission choir - based in a homeless day centre in the city.

The feedback from staff and singers seemed significant; there was the hard stuff that funders love

- being in this choir has led to me getting a job
- or I wouldn't have this flat if it wasn't for the choir

to the more discreet yet equally powerful gains

- this is the first group I've ever joined
- I've never felt I belonged to anything before
- And travelling back from a concert finding out that this was the first time someone had ever left the city.

So, it was something of a natural progression to begin a PhD, looking at choirs and community singing groups set up for people who have experienced homelessness.

The reason for giving you this background is to consider that transition when practitioners become researchers and study their own field through an academic lens; on one hand the inevitable challenges raised by the influence and bias they bring to their research but also the passion that comes from their own lived experience of their work and their familiarity with the area. My focus for this research is firstly that the voices of singers who have experienced homelessness are heard and shine through and secondly that the study might narrow the gap between research and practise and have a positive impact on the ground as well as policy around arts and homelessness.



My main study was in in UK, spending time with singers and staff at Streetwise Opera, Choir with no Name and other independent groups, but it's my pilot study in Rio that I'd like to discuss with you today and *explore the experience of singing in choirs in Rio, for singers who have experienced homelessness, understanding the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of those singers and the role the choir plays in their lives.*

So to Rio - it's July 2016, The International Arts and Homelessness Movement, With One Voice, led by Matt Peacock, brought an international delegation to Rio as part of the cultural Olympiad. They had supported the development of new choirs in Rio for people experiencing homelessness and there were now 11 who were all involved in a city wide arts 'occupation' of the streets,

performing across the city. I was lucky enough to have many opportunities to see them in action at both rehearsals and performances and during the month I got to share some songs from my choirs in Scotland!

My data collection involved taking field notes and conducting semi-structured interviews with 5 singers - aided by a Brazilian translator.

So, my 5 interviewees were:- Carlos, Nery, Elizabete, Paulo and Joao;

4 singers were living on the streets and 1 was staying in a hostel. The longest an interviewee had experienced homeless was for 20 years. All gave their consent for their real name to be used as well as their images and they agreed for interviews to be stored in a community archive in the UK, in fact they were passionate about it, they hoped their stories would continue to be heard in the UK and that homelessness in Brazil would not be ignored but shared internationally!

- So here begins the first provocation – how do we protect vulnerable participants and make sure there is no negative impact when they take part in the research whilst honouring their ownership of their own life narratives and experiences and affording them agency to make their own informed choices about how they are credited and named in the research.
- The other issue is that these interviews were conducted with a Brazilian translator so the words and phrases I use throughout my research and this talk are not the actual words of the participants which were in Brazilian; so an element of interpretation has already happened before translation.
- The final provocation relates to this issue of authenticity and certainty about the interviews with my participants – and the idea of entrenched narratives; there's a sense that some interviewees have told their life narratives over and over, in both a professional/benefits capacity but to the media or funders in relation their singing group. Their answers give a sense of being a prepared narrative, telling me what they think I want to hear.



### **The experience of homelessness in Rio**

My interviewees equated homeless with 'social rupture' and 'social isolation', they talked about being 'isolated and alone'. Paulo said 'you think you can count on your friends but you can't'. They also talked of feelings of 'invisibility' and being 'unnoticed', and there was a sense of being excluded and detached from society - Nery said 'I am no longer part of reality any more' and 'I no longer exist'. It's a harsh social landscape in Rio, where there is no social support for the homeless, lack of basic resources, high levels of alcohol and drug addictions and risk of police and public brutality, with many unprosecuted deaths. But into this harsh environment comes the 11 choirs and their weekly rehearsals and regular performances. I'm focusing on just one area that has emerged from the interviews and that's *the social impact of participating* focusing on 4 particular themes;

1. The choir creates a safe space for singers to come together with other homeless people, a place to be sociable, resulting in a deeper acceptance of others
  - Joao talked about feeling more sociable, more chatty
  - There was talk about feeling less introvert and the choir as a place to learn other people's stories
  - Paulo said 'if you learn someone's story you respect them'
2. The second is participation enables wider social engagement

- All the interviewees talked about how the choir had led to contact with different people who are not in the same social situation, having an opportunity to engage with the wider community, including meeting the international delegation
  - Nery commented that you're invited to go to places you wouldn't normally be invited, 'and that opens doors'
3. The choir fosters a sense of belonging – both in the choir and more widely in society  
Interviewees said
- Being in the choir equates to 'being part of something'
  - 'This is where I belong'
  - 'I am part of society'



Before I discuss the 4<sup>th</sup> sub-theme, I'd like to introduce an idea, borrowing from Tia DeNora *and it's to begin to consider the homeless choir is a music asylum* - imagining the rehearsal space as a sanctuary, a safe place of other and a space to flourish, a place to grow, to create, somewhere to explore new ways of being and feeling.

My argument is that the choir create a safe space which is somehow siloed off from the wider experience of homelessness, and the singers through the social interactions and the music, are afforded an opportunity within a safe and supported environment to explore who they are and renegotiate who they want to be. They can shake off the socially constructed 'spoiled identity' (Goffman) of homelessness (feelings of detachment, isolation, being invisible) and reconstruct a new sense of self (MacDonald) adopting an 'able identity'.

This leads me onto my 4<sup>th</sup> theme which particularly supports this idea;

4. The choir experience helps singers who have experienced homelessness accept who they are, develop stronger self-awareness and enable a shift in self-perception

In relation to acceptance and self-awareness

- Elizabete said the 'choir has helped me accept my situation, you see yourself from the inside'
- Nery, 'I'm more aware of who I am'
- Paulo, 'Choir gives you an opportunity to see yourself'

In terms of shifting self-perception and reconstructing an 'able identity'

- Carlos said 'You see yourself as someone who can speak to people,
- Elizabete said 'you see yourself as someone who can pursue a job, a home' and 'have more responsibility'

I'd like to finish with my 2 favourite quotes from Rio, that support this idea of the choir as a safe space for singers to shift their sense of self towards a more able identity

- Nery, ‘So you think, hang on maybe I am part of society’
- Elizabete, ‘I am someone, I am not invisible’

### **Expression of Interest – Shelly Coyne**

*Shelly Coyne, Institute for Music in Human and Social Development, Reid School of Music, Edinburgh University*

[shellycoyne@gmail.com](mailto:shellycoyne@gmail.com) / [Shelly.Coyne@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Shelly.Coyne@ed.ac.uk)

- AHRC funded PhD Student based at Edinburgh University
- A 3-month secondment with the International Arts and Homelessness Movement, *With One Voice* under the direction of Streetwise Opera, conducting a national arts and homeless review across Scotland
- Community Musician leading choirs with singers who have experienced homelessness and social isolation
- Professional trainer of choir leaders

I have worked as a choir leader and community singing leader for the past 18 years across the UK, working for Sing Up, with many Community Music organisations and as a freelance Community Musician. I set up the charity Givin’ it Laldie in Glasgow in 2010, addressing issues associated with poverty, social isolation, poor health, Sectarianism and homelessness through the creation of community choirs and singing groups.

My doctoral research has emerged from the very real and tangible positive outcomes I have observed in my work with disadvantaged singers and particularly those who have experienced homelessness and its inevitable social isolation. I am exploring the growing world of choirs and community singing groups set up for people affected by homelessness, focusing on the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of participating and the role group plays in the life of the singer in Rio de Janeiro and across the UK. Both the PhD and secondment with the new International Arts and Homelessness Movement reflect my desire to impact policy in UK and for a more integrated arts and homeless sector to be realised.

The restricted numbers attending this unique symposium will enable a very real sharing of knowledge as well as a diverse mixture of voices to be involved in the debate and subsequent conversations, in which I very much hope to contribute. Also, I am certain that best practise emerges when the gap between music-making practice and music-making research is bridged, which a symposium of this kind initiates and enhances.