

MUSIC EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION



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Project Overview

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Department: Music

Organization: Fundación Batuta and Tocar y Luchar

Locations: Manizales and Bogota, Colombia.

Mentor: Dr. Lisa Lorenzino

Fellowship Duration: July 13th - August 31st



About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this Fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the Fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the Fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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MUSIC EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN COLOMBIA

Project Overview

As a current McGill doctoral student in cello performance and as a McBurney Fellow, my activities in Colombia were oriented and structured around two main areas: music pedagogy and music performance. My time in Colombia was divided into two separate residencies. The first one was held over a period of a month in the mountain town of Manizales at the *Batuta Caldas Foundation*, a government/private funded program whose primary purpose is to improve social conditions of marginalized children through an after school music education program. The second residency was in Bogota where I worked with *Tocar y Luchar*, a relatively new organization modeled after Venezuela's El Sistema which provides intensive orchestral training to marginalized children of various ages. While in Bogota, I also collaborated with the *Conservatorio de Musica de la Facultad de Artes*, a government funded institution with limited resources that provides musical training to children up to college students.

Background

Colombia is a country that has been historically characterized by social conflict, economic disparity and vulnerability. Divided by two social classes, the wealthy and the poor, the poverty gap is more evident in the rural areas of the country where levels of violence and poverty are extreme. In addition to the harsh economic situation, Colombia is still facing deep social problems as a consequence of the violent confrontations of armed groups with the government over the last 20 years. Most of Colombia's growth in the last century is connected to the expansion of the coffee industry, which has benefited much of the population, though progress has been uneven.

Within this socio-economic context, Colombia has, nevertheless, a very rich cultural heritage of traditional dances, folkloric music, literature and food due to the multiculturalism of the many ethno-racial groups across the country. In Colombia, music has always played a fundamental role in the culture and history of its people; however, due to the lack of infrastructure, governmental funding, and vision, music has never been used as a primary agent for social change until very recently.

Created in the early 1990s, Batuta Foundation emerged with the aim to provide music education as an agent for social inclusion. Modeled after Venezuela's El-Sistema, Batuta Foundation offers intensive musical training to at-risk youth as a way for both community and self-empowerment. Since its beginnings, Batuta in the regional department of Caldas has offered musical training to more than six thousand students, providing extra attention to the more

marginalized areas of the province. Currently, Batuta Caldas runs eight musical centers providing free music education to more than 1700 students of whom 80% come from a challenging socio-economic background.

Context: Why Does this Issue Matter?

The Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano, whom I have always admired, once wrote:

Utopia after all is like the horizon. You can never reach the horizon. You walk towards it and it keeps going away. But then I tell myself, that's the purpose Utopia serves. To make us keep walking. To make us keep walking towards it. Just like the horizon.

I have come to realize that human beings who endure great suffering from economic despair and social conflict still show an indomitable fervor to follow their dreams. In this respect, I have witnessed firsthand that music has the power to transform people's lives and as Galeano metaphorically illustrates, music is the day-by-day engagement to move forward, to progress, to make things possible, to effect change.

Performing music as a member of an ensemble, a chamber music group, or a large symphony orchestra allows us to listen, express, and exchange opinions, and is a vital process of social integration and positive change. This beautiful idea has supported my artistic aspirations, strengthened my professional skills, and more importantly, it has drawn me irresistibly to initiate positive change through music outreach.



Activities

The activities for this Fellowship were in many ways determined by the specific needs of each institution as described below. However, the following objectives remained central for developing my activities over the course of the Fellowship:

Pedagogical

- Provide teacher training in string pedagogy
- Run teacher workshops on Improvisation, Chamber Music and Contemporary Music
- Facilitate open master classes with cello students
- Provide daily private music instructions
- Observe teachers in situ

Performance

- Conduct orchestral rehearsals and sectional coaching
- Organize informal performances with students
- Facilitate interactive workshops
- Perform chamber music recitals
- Participate in professional concerts with faculty and local orchestras/ensembles

Fundación Batuta Caldas, Manizales

Over a period of a month, I worked daily at the main center of the Foundation located in downtown Manizales. In addition to those activities, I also went twice a week to centers located in the impoverished areas of San Jose and La Fuente to work with string orchestras and cello students. In the first three days, I was programmed to conduct workshops for the string teachers. There, we discussed the string curricula of the Foundation as well as the different methodologies employed by the teachers. At first, it was very important to hear teachers' specific needs in order to have a clear understanding of how the Foundation works and how I would be able to assist them in the given time.

Among the topics presented and discussed in those three days were:

- Stretching and breathing exercises
- Effective practicing
- Stage fright
- Free improvisation for classical trained musicians
- The importance of chamber music
- Creativity in music education

I also worked directly with students through practical music instruction and orchestral sectional coaching. I worked twice a week with the most advance orchestra of the Foundation, Orquesta Marco Tulio, leading the string sectionals. There, we discussed essential aspects of music-making such as rhythm, harmony, and articulation as well as the principles of ensemble-playing (gestures, breathing, visual communication, etc.). I also met once a week with the younger orchestra, Orquesta Vivaldi, comprised mainly of beginner students. With them, the dialogue was less fluid,

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so I concentrated on doing more practical and technical work such as performing open strings, simple scales and different bow control exercises to create awareness of intonation and instrumental control.

During my stay in Manizales, I also worked twice with a reduced chamber orchestra formed by the most advance members of the Marco Tulio Orchestra. This experience was definitely a highlight of my work in Manizales, since the students were eager to learn and play music, making the whole experience very enjoyable. With them, I performed as a member of the cello section and we were able to advance into more complex areas of music-making such as style, tempos, and music-history.

A similar approach was used with the music students of the communities of San Jose and La Fuente, two highly vulnerable areas of Manizales. Despite their harsh social backgrounds, we were able to make musical progress and to talk in depth about the power of music.

In a joint effort with the cello faculty of the Foundation, I held daily private cello lessons with students not only from the main center, but also from other districts of the province. This was, without a doubt, a major contribution since music students are not offered private music instruction. I immediately noticed that their musical level was obstructed by fundamental technical issues which we carefully addressed over the weeks. I mainly concentrated on the basic aspects of cello technique; bow control, tension release and sound production. Cello students were very receptive and always had a very positive attitude towards trying out new ideas. I also organized a cello ensemble class to address specific cello-related problems and to play ensemble cello music and scales. Batuta organized an open cello master class with college-level students of the University of Caldas which was attended by most of the cello students of the Foundation. This event was a unique opportunity for the younger cello students to see and hear other cellist perform.

In addition, I participated in two interactive chamber music workshops joined by pianist Redi Llupa and percussionist Krystina Marcoux, both guest teachers at the Foundation. With them, I talked about the importance of chamber music, contemporary music, and multidisciplinary artistic collaboration while demonstrating with examples from different musical pieces.

In the performance arena, I was invited by the Batuta Foundation to perform a cello recital at the Fine Arts Auditorium of the University of Caldas. For this event, I was joined by Albanian pianist Redi Llupa to perform a wide range of works by De Falla, Granados, Webern, Piazzolla, Boccherini and Harapi for an enthusiastic full-house audience.



Bogota

For a period of a week, I collaborated as a guest string teacher with the organization *Tocar y Luchar*. This rather small organization with very limited resources uses the facilities of public schools for sectional and orchestral rehearsals. They operate in four different centers in which two are exclusively for choral music and the remaining ones are left for symphonic music. I worked with an orchestra at the center of Bellavista located in a low-income neighborhood known as Patio Bonito, an hour away from Bogota. Even if most of the students had not played their instruments for a long time, the level of ability was considerably higher than the orchestras I worked with in Manizales. With these students, I did a session on stretching and breathing exercises which was definitely something new to them. I also conducted a class on intonation, having them perform different scales, arpeggios and open strings together. Lastly, we spent some time on the repertoire in preparation for their upcoming symphonic concert, discussing in detail issues of articulation and interpretation.

While in Bogota, I was invited to present an open workshop and a formal concert at the National Conservatory of Music. There, I worked with six college-level students on different pieces of the standard cello literature, discussing a wide range of issues such as compositional language, musical style, and historical implications. The following night, I performed a chamber music recital as a guest cellist at the Olav Roots hall of the same institution.

Challenges and Successes

Over the course of my Fellowship, I encountered minor challenges. That was in part because I am a Spanish speaker and come from a Latin American country, Argentina. Even if I found many cultural differences, I was able to communicate fluently with students and faculty members, creating a pleasant working atmosphere. In addition, I found Colombians to be genuinely polite and positive people, always very happy and with a great sense of humor which was a wonderful addition to my pedagogical working experience.

It is difficult to talk about success when embarking on a short-term project based on education, as I believe that there is no end point in such a field. However, I could state that over the course of my work, students and faculty members were highly motivated and receptive towards trying out new ideas. More importantly, they were from the very beginning eager to learn, listen and share music. To me, such a positive response is a step towards progress, towards rethinking what we do as students, as teachers, as musicians in our daily search for artistic perfection.



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What Did I Learn? A Personal Reflection

The exposure of teaching in a different social environment provided me with a unique learning experience which helped me strengthen my skills as teacher, leader and observer.

As a McBurney Fellow, having the opportunity to work in Colombia was very meaningful in many different ways. As previously stated, I gained tremendously from the teaching and performing experiences, but more importantly, by realizing that the process of teaching requires passion, dedication, and commitment. In addition, the countless human relationships developed during my stay are invaluable. Colombia's unfair worldwide reputation as a violent and dangerous place was completely changed for me by the depth and kindness of Fellow colleagues and friends. This experience has motivated me to continue to commit my best efforts to fostering dialogue, cooperation, and the dissemination of beauty and excellence through the powerful medium of music.



Community Implication and Further Work

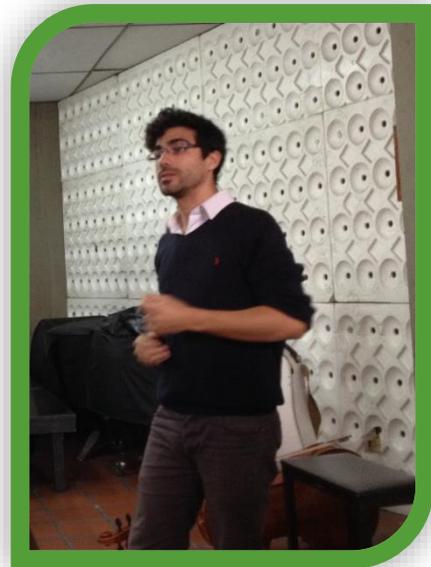
Both Batuta Foundation and Tocar y Luchar understand the value of youth orchestra as a tool in community development. With limited financial resources and infrastructure, it is truly impressive to witness the commitment presented by teachers and staff members that work daily in these institutions to provide better educational and social opportunities to children across Colombia. Music education and performance is such a powerful medium that encompasses all learning domains, offering a platform to develop physical and social-emotional skills from an early age.

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My small contribution over the course of my Fellowship was to reinforce such concepts by developing a creative learning project through interactive music instruction for youth from very impoverished areas of Colombia. My role as a pedagogue and performer was to provide students and teachers with a fresh perspective on music-making. I introduced a wide range of topics that were rare to most of them, which to my surprise, were quickly understood and adopted. Most of students adapted immediately to my teaching method and many constructive ideas started flowing over the course of my work.

I strongly believe that the performance component of my Fellowship played a crucial role in making a short-term impact. Students in Manizales are used to having their teachers show up to their classes and lessons but they do not often experience hearing them as solo players. I felt that after my recital at the Fine Arts Auditorium, students were highly motivated and eager to learn and discover the cello as an instrument with endless musical possibilities.

By the end of my work in Manizales, I was invited to a final meeting with all of the string teachers, the music director and members of the Foundation's administration. There, I had the opportunity to provide them with constructive feedback based on my working experience. To me, this was a positive sign that the institution is open and receptive towards trying out new ideas and approaches in order to improve the quality of education in the string area program. I was happy to find out that most of the teachers were already aware of some internal issues and more importantly, seemed supportive to changing their existing string curricula. I think that this is a major step to translate my work into policy action.



Program Evaluation

The relationship with Batuta Foundation was established in 2014 when McBurney Fellow, Eugene Negrii, travelled to Manizales to introduce the Orff method.

Because of my strong interest in social orchestral and musical programs, having previously worked in Brazil, Armenia and Belize, I was invited to join Prof. Lisa Lorenzino and colleague Eugene Negrii in what has been a continuation of the worked started in 2014. In this respect, I appreciate the McBurney Program's vision to invest in a long-term project, helping us develop strong links with several music organizations in Colombia.

My working experience in Colombia has been a highlight in my musical career in recent years. The exposure to teaching in a different social environment, to performing with wonderful musicians in different circumstances, and to exploring a culturally multifaceted country have had a positive impact on me as a human, musician, and cellist.

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Above all, I really value the McBurney Program's mission which facilitates innovative service-based projects in remote corners of Latin America. I also appreciate that we have the freedom to build and develop our own projects, and that McBurney's administration is willing to support such ideas by providing advice and financial support.

If I have any advice towards improving the program, it would be around travel limitations. Because students cannot travel to regions with a travel warning in place, unfortunately there are regions that are and will be left unassisted. Coming from a Latin American country, I find this principle a bit contradictory since people who are in more need live in isolated geographical locations and as McBurney Fellows, we cannot access those regions. Even if I understand the reasons for which the access to such places is banned, I firmly believe that this aspect of the Fellowship should be further discussed in order to explore different options in which to engage with the aims of the McBurney Program, and contribute to the growth of social and cultural prosperity in forgotten areas of Latin American.