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Non-Caucasian Adult Band Musicians’ Perceptions on Band Participation

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Research on ethnicity in music has documented the lack of balanced enrollment of racial subgroups in school music programs (Campbell, 1993; Carter, 1993; Costa-Giomi & Chappell, 2007; Lind, 1999; Watts, Doane, & Fekete, 1992). Solutions to the small numbers of minorities in music have been proposed through articles documenting the potential value of ethnically-matched role models (Hamann & Cutietta, 1997; Hamann & Walker, 1993; Walker & Hamann, 1993), the addition of more ethnically-appropriate music to the curriculum (Campbell, 1993; Chinn, 1997), and solutions to scheduling and access conflicts (Carter, 1993).

There is, however, little research on ethnicity in music in the adult population. And yet, there is a thriving adult music population, characterized by a push for adult music participation from national ensemble organizations such as the International New Horizons Organization ([http://www.newhorizonsmusic.org](http://www.newhorizonsmusic.org)) and a continuing body of research being conducted at an international level, spearheaded by the Adult and Community Music Education Special Research Interest Group ([http://www.acmesrig.org/](http://www.acmesrig.org/)). The research being conducted, however, is almost devoid of the discussion of ethnicity. While one study (Williams, 1980) documented retired African Americans’ love of listening to music in their leisure time, and another study (Rohwer, 2007) documented the small number of minorities in adult bands, more needs to be known about ethnicity and music for adults. Clearly, the challenges and solutions may be different for school-age minority musicians than for elderly minority musicians.

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of minority musicians concerning music participation so that the issues related to adult music learning can be handled in an appropriate way by instructors of adult music organizations.

**Method**

The complete population of non-Caucasians (N=3) from two adult bands in a southwest state in the United States participated in this study. The participants were 1 Chinese American female flutist, 1 African American male euphonium player, and 1 Indian American male tenor saxophonist. The three participants were each interviewed in order to obtain information on their background, and their thoughts on ethnicity and music. The interviews were done individually, recorded, and then transcribed. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy by the participants.
Results

Ann

Ann’s story is one of cultural assimilation. She is a 47-year old Chinese American realtor who was born in San Francisco and raised by a mother born in Chinatown in San Francisco and a father from mainland China who came to the United States as a teenager. She remembers being “aware” of race issues as a child. Because of the race laws that determined where you could live, she remembers feeling different than the Caucasians in her school.

While both of her parents spoke Chinese, Chinese was never spoken in the house, and Ann commented how embarrassed she was that she could not speak a word of Chinese. Ann said that her parents were very focused on blending into the culture. While Americanism was the goal, her parents still held fast to the Asian cultural belief in persistence, a strong work ethic, and an admiration for the arts.

Ann played piano “a little” and began playing the flute in the 6th grade in her predominantly Caucasian middle school. She remembered that there were about 5 Asians in her school. When speaking about her school-age Chinese friends, Ann stated that many of them played violin or piano; band was considered by the Chinese as “low rent” and more football-related, but her parents didn’t seem too concerned about this issue.

In 8th grade, Ann decided that she did not want to play the flute anymore because she felt that she “just wasn’t good enough”, and she “didn’t like practicing” and felt that this was one way that she could “rebel a little, by quitting”. When questioned about ethnicity in relation to her time in band, Ann noted that she didn’t join band because other Chinese were in the group, and she didn’t quit band because there weren’t enough Chinese in the group. “Music was what first drew me in, and being a teenager kind of drew me out.” She also didn’t remember any of her friends quitting music because of ethnicity issues.

Now, as an adult who has joined a senior citizen band, Ann commented that the music brought her back. She also enjoys the people in the group, even though there are no other non-Caucasians. “I wasn’t attracted to the band for the Chinese people. I love the musical culture and I love the culture of the senior citizens. These are the cultural issues of interest to me in the band.” A variety of music styles was also important to Ann. She commented, “the more varied, the better. The more diverse the music is, the more we can all have something we like.” She also said that “while she enjoyed band, if the goal were to attract more Asians, having more adult orchestras might do it.”

Al

Al’s story is one of cultural adjustment. He is a 31-year old African American maintenance worker who was born and raised in south Texas. Neither of his parents had any musical background. “My older brother played trombone for 3 weeks. That’s the only other music that came out of our house other than Motown on the radio.” The town where he was raised had a mostly Hispanic population base, and Al remembered only three other African Americans in the music program when he went to school. “I got used to being the only one,” he said. “I got used to adjusting to others. My white girlfriend’s parents had to adjust to having me around, too (laugh).”

Al started playing the euphonium when he was in 6th grade and played all the way through high school. “The trips were what attracted me to the band program when I started, but then I started making first chair over and over and I was hooked.” He started taking lessons in
preparation for a degree in music performance, but changed his degree to kinesiology when he found that the other musicians in the studio “were more dedicated and passionate about it” than he was. “I still regret my move from music. I really don’t want people to see me as a quitter. I know a lot of African Americans don’t make it through music programs.”

When questioned about ethnicity in relation to his time in band, Al said “it wasn’t a big deal in band. It was strange when we went on trips, though, and some of the school audiences would look at me because I was different looking.” Al did not remember any music students quitting band because of ethnicity. “I think most of the African American kids that quit, quit because of conflicts with athletics. I think African Americans don’t join band very much because sports are really pushed, and there sometimes isn’t enough money to pay for team sports and also an instrument. Most choose sports because that is what they see on TV, and what their friends are doing. I did both: basketball and band. Even with all of the scheduling conflicts, I loved them both.”

Al now plays with a local community band. He says that he loves “all of the music that we play in band….especially when I have the melody.” When asked whether there would be a better type of ensemble so as to attract a greater diversity of people, Al said “I love band. I can’t think of any other ensemble that would be better.”

Rod

Rod’s is a story of cultural distancing. He is a 55-year old Indian American engineer who was born and raised in India and moved to California when he was 25 years old. Rod was raised in the Anglican church, where, he said, the music had a profound impact on him. The public schools, on the other hand, had no music education whatsoever. “Education”, he said, “was for making you an engineer or a doctor so that you could make money. That is what it is like to be raised in a third world country. The arts were not important in my family. No one else in my family played music.”

When Rod arrived in the United States, the decision was an easy one of whether to affiliate himself with Indians who ate Indian food and made Indian music and watched Indian TV stations, or affiliate himself with American traditions. “I did not find the Indian functions or their narrow interests to be fulfilling. I didn’t fit in. I don’t see those people as opening up to the opportunities here. Many of them are only here for mercenary reasons. I do, however, feel that I fit in with the American ways. We watch American TV, my children both married Caucasian spouses, and the music is what I was raised with.”

When asked about potential ways to get greater diversity into music education for adults, Rod said, “I think it would be great to transcribe some old Indian film songs for band. That would get people from India in the door. People from India are not familiar and most likely won’t like the jazz charts or the marches. That music is crass to them. They need a comfortable place to start. I think they would find band to be fun if they would just get out of their box.” When discussing how it feels to be one of only two non-Caucasians in his community band, Rod said, “I feel like an oddball at times, but everyone is very nice to me. No one has given me any troubles. It doesn’t seem to bother them.”

Conclusions

It should be noted that the results of the current study are generalizable only to the three participants in this study. While no generalizations can be made from the current study’s
findings, trends across the participants can be looked at as preliminary information that can lead to more generalizable studies to be completed in the future.

Across the three participants in this study, the stories highlight a consistent Americanization trend. While one of the participants told a story of her family’s desire to assimilate to the American culture, and one of the participants told a story of adjusting to a Caucasian culture, and another participant told a story of his desire to distance himself from his native culture, the base story is the same: These participants were full-fledged Americans, with little link to their cultural ancestry. While this was the story of these three participants, the question arises as to whether Americanization is a necessity for survival as a non-Caucasian adult musician. Further research would be beneficial on a larger scale to see if the Americanization noted in these three participants is a larger trend, or an anomalous situation endemic only to these three people.

Clearly, if forsaking your cultural heritage is the way to survive as a non-Caucasian in a band program, then the current state of instrumental music education for non-Caucasian adults is in need of drastic reshaping. While none of the current study participants acknowledged the need for more variety of ensemble types to meet cultural-based needs, more research on non-participant, non-Caucasians is needed to see whether interest in ensembles other than band would be a valuable addition to music education for adults. It may be that the idea of retirement for some minority sub-groups is so family-based, as Williams (1980) found, that music participation would be seen as a selfish, hedonistic activity by non-Caucasians. Indeed, definitionally,(McGuire, Boyd, & Tedrick, 2004) leisure activities allude to this idea of doing for the self by stating “that gratification of present needs, wants, desires or objectives is given precedence over practical preparation for later gratification” (p. 149). If this conflict exists between the basic concept of leisure as a means of personal gratification, versus the more selfless desire to serve family, it may be that organizing intergenerational music experiences may be a more appropriate music education task than senior-based music experiences.

The current study’s participants did note that diversity of music repertoire is an important variable for all music education, but specifically, to meet ethnic minority interest needs. This finding confirms prior research stating that it is important to add more diverse music to the curriculum (Campbell, 1993; Chinn, 1997). While the issue of music was confirmed in the research, other past research findings on the topic of ethnicity in music, such as scheduling and access (Carter, 1993) or role models (Hamann & Cutietta, 1997; Hamann & Walker, 1993; Walker & Hamann, 1993), were not found to be as pertinent with the adult band setting as they may be with children in the public schools.

From this study’s findings it is clear that further research is needed on retention and attrition of non-Caucasian musicians. It is difficult to tell whether these three participants are still active in instrumental music education because they are passionate about music, persistent, or oblivious to cultural issues. Further research with a larger pool of subjects may be able to sort through these issues.
References


