

Teaching Reflection: Rote Song “Got the Keys to the Kingdom”

I taught a gospel arrangement of the spiritual, “I’ve Got the Keys” by rote using call-and-response because it is the culturally appropriate method to learn this music, and would provide a young choir the opportunity to practice active listening, and explore musical story telling from an oral tradition. I discovered a transcription of this piece on the Kodaly Center’s American Folk Song Collection, one of many songs passed down orally and then “collected” by white ethnomusicologist John A. Lomax in his pursuit of “authentic performance” of black American music, now critically reexamined as, in part, a fetishization of “othered” music. A recording of the song, sung by Lillie Knox, a Gullah Geechee woman who I learned was “one of Lomax’s favorite performers,”¹ is available on the Kodaly Center’s American Folk Collection library.² Based on Ms. Knox’s performance, the transcriber, Gail Needleman, wrote the sheet music in 2/4 time, which I felt did not lend itself to choral performance or ease of learning for a larger group. I chose to create my own gospel arrangement, with swung rhythms rather than attempting to teach the song in Knox’s free, solo performance style. For the purposes of this assignment, I wrote the arrangement of the chorus out in 4/4 time, although in rehearsal, I would be unlikely to show students any visual representation of this music in Western notation, as I do not feel it would be necessary

¹ Crawford, E. (2019, November 19). *The Knoxes of Murrells Inlet*. Oxford American: A Magazine of the South. Retrieved March 6, 2022, from <https://main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1853-the-knoxes-of-murrells-inlet>

² Knox, L., & Lomax, J. A. (n.d.). *Got The Keys to the Kingdom*. (G. Needleman, Trans.). Oakland. Retrieved March 6, 2022, from <https://kodaly.hnu.edu/song.cfm?id=1201>.

or appropriate, respecting the musical traditions from which the music stems. Instead, I would teach this arrangement entirely orally, even later scaffolding in gospel style harmonies for the chorus. I could also later give students the opportunity to learn and perform the “calls” (the verses), while the choir performs the “responses” (the chorus). In order to achieve this, I would likely give longer space for *audiation* in between my modeling and their singing. This piece could be appropriate for a number of different types of choral groups, from larger ensembles, to smaller chamber groups.

For this first introduction to the song, I decided I would teach only the chorus or “response.” Before singing the chorus, I greeted the students by singing “hello everyone,” pitched on a B. I noticed many of them responded rather automatically by singing, “hello” on “*mi la*.” I then gave the choir tonal context in b-minor, and intentionally also gave them rhythmic context by singing the tonal sequence in swung rhythm. Then, I asked them (still singing) to stand up, then “step and snap as I sing this song.” To teach this song by rote, I used the whole-part-whole approach, singing the entire chorus, then breaking it down into four phrases. The first time I sang through the entire chorus, I accidentally inverted the notes on the words “I got the” in phrase 3, singing “*re mi re*,” instead of “*mi re mi*.” This was an unfortunate mistake on my part, since this was a phrase I already knew would challenge the choir, who would likely sing it on “*la do re*,” which are the notes for the same words in the first phrase.

However, I was able to fix this issue when I broke the chorus down into four phrases. On phrase three, I used solfege hand signs while singing the phrase, then when

the choir still sang back the third phrase on “*la do re*,” I pointed to my third finger again and indicated with a gesture for them to listen again. I gave a measure of rest, then sang the phrase again, using solfege hand signs to assist with demonstrating “*mi re mi*.” Simply repeating and gesturing was also effective when the choir sang “*do la sol la*” on “do me no harm” instead of “*do do la-sol la*” on “do me no-o harm.” It would probably have been even more effective to cut out the snapping and stepping and slow down the pitches with the solfege hand signs for these two phrases. I could also potentially keep them snapping and stepping, and take these pitches at half time. Since I had a collegiate level group, this was not absolutely necessary, as they did eventually master the correct pitches, but if I were to teach the same song to a group of middle- or high school students, I would probably slow those pitches down, then bring them to tempo. However, I would likely introduce the piece with some tonal patterns before teaching the entire piece, perhaps rendering the entire process of slowing it down less necessary, depending on the level of experience of the group.

After breaking the chorus down into four phrases, I put together the first and second phrase, and the third and fourth phrases. At this point, most of the pitch errors were no longer present, and rather than nitpick at any continued errors, I chose to maintain the pace for fluency and to allow the students the opportunity to self-correct. I sang for them to “listen carefully” as I modeled the whole chorus one more time, and, as anticipated, the students were more or less able to correct all pitch errors by the time they sang the entire chorus by themselves. Thus, rather than relying solely upon my own error detection, I provided the students’ the opportunity to participate in detecting their

own errors, indicating with a gesture that students were listening for an error correction before giving nearly an entire measure of rest and singing the phrase to correct. This measure of rest gave the students rhythmic context and got them listening more intently, ready to *audiate*. In my experience, tactics like these help strengthen students' musicianship skills and encourage higher order thinking skills in Bloom's Taxonomy. Zaretta Hammond, author of Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain, considers this engagement with "productive struggle" an important step in assisting dependent learners to become independent thinkers.³

My choices to incorporate stepping, snapping, and hand gestures engaged the students in multiple learning modalities, auditory, kinesthetic, and visual. Furthermore, these tactics also aided the fluency of transitions and maintained the pace. In general, my teaching procedure was very clear and easy to follow for the students, taking no time at all from the singing to speak and explain to the students. Rather, I kept the students actively listening, *audiating*, and singing throughout the entire lesson. Rather than using words, I used a combination of singing and gesture to give directions. I also sang students in on pitch and in rhythm pretty effectively, especially given that every phrase starts on a pick-up rather than a downbeat, which can definitely pose a challenge. I did make the mistake in one instance of singing the choir in on the pitch for the downbeat for phrase two, rather than singing them in on the pitch for the pick-up. This definitely did not create a stumbling block for my collegiate level group of musicians, and probably wouldn't cause any difficulty for younger singers either, but singing students in on their

³ Hammond, Z., & Jackson, Y. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.

starting pitch (even when the starting pitch is a pick-up note) is ideal for accurate *audiation*. For example, when I accurately and consistently sang the students in on *mi* for the third phrase, this likely contributed to their success in *audiating* the difference between the first phrase, starting on *la* and third phrase starting on *mi*.

Finally, I sang one verse or “call” (intentionally choosing a verse with more blatant themes of emancipation and abolitionism), then led them into the chorus by singing, “I’ve got the,” and gesturing to my ear to indicate it was their turn to sing. I chose to give the lesson a musical ending by repeating the last phrase a few times, and conducting a *ritardando* into a fermata. I could have achieved an even more musical ending had I provided clearer conducting cues for both the tempo change and the fermata. Overall, I was very pleased with the choir’s growth, musicality, self-correction, and problem solving. I indicated that they should be proud of themselves with my applause, a gesture toward them, and a pat on the back. Were I to work with a group of high school or middle school students, I would likely have asked them specific questions afterwards about which phrases they corrected, what they noticed stylistically, and what they understood about the text’s meaning, so that the students themselves would be able to provide their own specific and constructive feedback.