

## EXPERIENCE OF GENTRIFICATION IN THE MUSIC LEARNING OF THE PUPILS OF GEORGE HANDEL MUSIC ACADEMY ONITSHA

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### Abstract

This study investigates the historical circumstances surrounding the emergence of George Handel Music Academy, Odoakpu Onitsha (GEHMA), the socio-cognitive foundation and implications of the musical thrust of GEHMA, as well as other factors - like travels/excursions, elegant concert costumes, camaraderie of genuine friendship - that has contributed to and enhanced the success of GEHMA. Following up the results of the inquiry, based on the ethnographic approach of participant observation, the author - by way of critical and reflective analysis of the musical attitudes, aesthetics and performances of the students of GEHMA - came to the discovery of what can be defined as "gentrification" of the children of the academy, a concept that can be related to the notion of self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-worth and self-competence. These are positive subjective self-concepts that arise from the practice of music and which educators in Nigeria would do well to harness.

**Key Words:** music performance, gentrification, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-worth, self-competence

### Introduction

The theory of Mozart effect has resulted in much debate as to whether it is real at all and if so, what it really signifies. The theory - in summary - argues that listening to classical music, especially

Mozart's sonata for two pianos in D major, K 488, can have positive impact on students' performance of spatio-temporal tasks like folding of papers (Rauscher *et al.* 1993, p. 1; Rauscher *et al.* 1995, pp. 45-47; Hetland 2000, p. 136). More broadly, scholars who have sympathy for the wider implication of the theory argue that exposure to early music training has overall positive influence on the academic growth of young children (Gromko 2005, p. 199; Rauscher 2006, p. 234; Schellenberg 2006, p. 464). Besides, many scientific researches and articles have been put forward to prove the claims of Mozart effect (Hetland 2000; Ivanov & Geake 2003, Jaušovec & Haben (2003). But some scholars have equally argued to disprove that such claims are simply spurious and untenable (Steele *et al.* 1999; Schellenberg 2001; Bangertter & Heath 2004).

Nevertheless, the theory of Mozart effect has been stretched - rather unduly - and promoted in some less rigorously scientific circles as implying or insinuating that mere listening to or dealing with music can make someone smart (Nantais & Schellenberg 1999 p. 370). Of course, this is a simplistic approach to the issue. It is not the intention of the present study to enter into the fray of debates and counter debates about the veracity of Mozart effect in this article but to delve into a related issue of heightening of self-esteem and sense of dignity in children and young people of George Handel Music Academy through study and practice of western music. This is what is defined in this essay as "gentrification," understood as bearing a reference to making someone or something "very or excessively refined or elegant" ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). The analysis in this article is based on the author's participant-observation of the attitudes and activities of the pupils of George Handel Music Academy (GEHMA) Odoakpu.

## **Ethnographic Point of Departure**

As already mentioned, the theme of this essay came from some observations made while working with the children of the above-mentioned practice-based music academy which was founded in 2016 and based at St. Joseph Parish Odoakpu Onitsha. The author started to notice the attitude of the pupils of the academy vis-a-vis another music reality that was taking shape around the same time in the same parish where the author was resident. A group of girls in the parish (known as the Mary League Girls Association) were learning a cultural performance named "Eucharistic dance." Some of these girls were also members of the music academy. However, it was observed by the author that some of these girls started to develop cold feet towards attending the cultural dance rehearsal. Their preference was the music academy. On the other hand, although the girl pupils of the music academy were invited to join their peers in the Mary League Association to rehearse the new dance, they gently declined and focused on their daily and devoted learning of musical instruments like violins, keyboards and even some wind instruments. Naturally, the musical practice of the academy included choral and chamber orchestral rehearsals and the girls were more interested in all these.

Later, a woman whose son was a member of the academy informed the author that her son, who is a member of the academy, was flaunting his prowess as a flautist to a senior brother, a dorm student of a government secondary school. He was one of those who chose to learn the orchestral flute in the music academy and made much of it to his siblings, such that in the end, his brother also opted to become a member of the academy. His younger brother eventually decided to go for something apparently more serious and challenging than flute, namely, learning to play the euphonium, one of the largest of the brass family of orchestral instruments. The first piece he accompanied in the music academy was "The Holy City," whose lyrics was written by Frederic Weatherly and set to music by Michael

Maybrick. He was only eight years old then. But one could immediately perceive the little boy's ambition and extraordinary determination manifest in his audacious musical leap.

A pivotal day in the life of the music academy was the day of the first music festival organized by the pupils of GEHMA. That was on Sunday, 3rd of September 2017. The pupils of the academy were in their best uniform outfit of black trousers/skirts and white top with three different colours of neck ties worn at various points of the numerous musical presentations. No one among the spectators was left in doubt about the fact that the young children simply felt genuinely proud of themselves and what they could present as soloists, choral singers, violinists, trumpeters, saxophonists, keyboardists, conductors, etc. They took plethora of pictures to commemorate the event. When it was suggested they should have a week holidays, they felt mortified, rather longing to come back as quickly as possible to their daily music rehearsal.

### **Understanding the Scenario**

At this point, the author was thinking about how to understand the children's appreciation of western music and their attachment to their musical training, which they were pursuing with an uncommon zeal. An expert in child education indicated to the writer that the children felt "gentrified" by their pursuit of classical music. By this definition, one can understand that the children's advertence to music opened up the door to their feeling of greater self-confidence and self-esteem. This zealous attitude of the children in the pursuit of practical music learning serves to raise the question of self-esteem as a factor in fostering the motivation of young children for the study and practice of music. Self-esteem in this context should be understood in the sense in which it was used by Coopersmith (1967, pp. 4-5 quoted in VanderArk 1989, p. 105) as "the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to

himself." As such, self-esteem "expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, worthy" (VanderArk 1989, p. 105).

In the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it can be seen that children often have the "need to feel good about themselves," an attitude which has to do with "the need for self-esteem" (Omrod 2008, p. 459). They also desire "that others also feel positively about them," which can be described as "the need for esteem from others" (Omrod 2008, p. 459). To cultivate such self-esteem, children would strive to achieve a mastery of their environment, in the case of GEHMA pupils, concretized in their practical acquisition of some musical skills. It can therefore be argued that GEHMA pupils are actually in eager pursuit of self-esteem through their effort to master musical skills. The pupils have the conviction that mastering western musical instruments would win them recognition, appreciation, and prestige, in this way gaining for them the esteem and respect of others (Omrod 2008, p. 459). But the attitude of GEHMA pupils should not be seen as a mere belief but a reality that has valid scientific justification inasmuch as "music is believed to affect one's well-being, feelings of security, tender emotions, and feelings of self—self-confidence, self-worth, and self-esteem" (VanderArk 1989, p. 108). Indeed, scholars of psychology of music have asserted "that music is unique as a self-esteem builder, and [this] is based on the idea that music is the only non-verbal, aural form of communication of the human organism" (VanderArk 1989, p. 108; cf. Abeles, Hoffer & Klotman, 1984; Bessom, Tatarunis, & Forcucci, 1974; Radocy & Boyle, 1979; Gaston, 1968).

Similarly, by interaction with the young people, observation of their music preferences and reflective analysis of these preferences, the author also discovered that the onset of the music academy created in them a disdain for other native cultural and popular musical forms.

They exhibited an attitude and sense of having superior cultural adhesion, and this, to classical or western music. Theirs was a quest for - what they believe to be - higher aesthetics and taste. In fact, they seemed (and still seem) to have the belief that they have an edge over their age mates who remain only at the level of appreciation of cultural dance and pop-music. Therefore, the quest for self-esteem in the pupils ultimately led to what can be defined as sense of self-worth. Indeed, the author suggested to the GEHMA pupils to perform a cultural dance as an entertainment variation during one of their music festivals, but eventually discovered that the suggestion was like the biblical seed that fell on a rocky soil. Probably the pupils felt that the advice to perform a cultural dance stand below their high level of musical taste, talent and creativity. In this case, their sense of self-worth serves to protect their "sense of competence" (Omrod 2008, p. 461). The young people did not ever say "no" to the suggestion. But the suggestion remained just what it was, a mere idea that never had a practical realization.

Overall, what the author observed in the attitude of GEHMA pupils is a strong verification of what Vispoel, a socio-cognitive theorist, designated as music self-concept. Vispoel's research demonstrated that there exist some correlations between one's music self-concept and other facets of one's self-concept. His investigative inquiry pointed to the fact that "music self-concept is more strongly correlated with artistic self-concept facets, verbal-academic self-concept facets and self-esteem than with other non-artistic self-concept facets" (Vispoel 1994, p. 48). For students of GEHMA, having such a high self-concept will imply growing in what psychologists define as self-efficacy, a concept that has to do with "a person's belief in his or her ability to produce intended outcomes associated with a task" (Asmus 1994, p. 11; cf. Bandura 1982). As far as GEHMA pupils are concerned, the stakes are high and the expected outcome is and ought to be always and sufficiently ambitious. What then would

be the sense and essence of "lowering" their self-concept by asking them to perform Atilogwu dance instead of giving them the time and encouragement to perform Joseph Haydn's *Trumpet Concerto*? At this juncture, it would be germane examining other aspects of the gentrification project.

### **Travels and Outings**

Frequent outings and exposure are factors entailed in one's membership of GEHMA. Such outings are opportunities for new experiences and veritable way of enlarging one's worldview and vision. The young pupils of GEHMA are given to frequent outings and this is not only within or around Onitsha metropolis but even far afield outside Anambra State. Two types of outings characterize the yearly cycle of experience of GEHMA pupils, namely, excursions and concert performance.

With regard to excursion, this is an annual ritual for the pupils of GEHMA and usually comes up after Easter before the primary and secondary schools resume for third term. An appropriate site of excursion is selected each year. Letters and communications are exchanged between the academy and possible host-establishments and the pupils are usually invited to visit the site. So far, the students of GEHMA have only had two major excursions. The first was to Enugu, in 2018, during which GEHMA students visited the Akanu Ibiam International Airport, Godfrey Okoye University and the Shoprite Mall, all in Enugu. The second excursion came up in 2019 and involved a trip to Akwa Ibom with GEHMA students being hosted by St. Columbanus's Secondary School Ikwen (SCOSSE). From their camp at the host school, GEHMA pupils were able to visit several sites in Akwa Ibom like St. Anne's Cathedral Ifuho, Ikot Ekpene, Ibom Golf and Hotel Resort Uyo and the Unity Park, also in Uyo.

The trips to Enugu and Akwa Ibom were also study oriented. It was meant to be a way of increasing the social and scientific knowledge base of GEHMA pupils. So, the visits featured some form of informal lectures given to the students by the people who have charge over the places and institutions they visited. For example, at Enugu, some of GEHMA students were taken to the airport control tower and given some lessons on the mechanism of flight control and landing of aircrafts. It was a source of pride to the young people. Similarly, the visit to St. Columbanus's involved cultural exchanges between the students of George Handel Academy and the Scossians (students of St. Columbanus's). It was positively reinforcing for the students of both institutions engaging in football encounter, forging bonds of friendship, having a cultural and music fiesta and partying together. The positive experiences from previous excursions made the students of GEHMA eager for another round of trip to Lagos in April 2020, but the excursion had to be postponed because of the global coronavirus pandemic.

Next, GEHMA pupils are often invited for external music performance and this gives rise to another form of outing. The performance may be in the context of liturgical service or involve a musical presentation in the concert hall setting. The travels that are involved in these outings give students of GEHMA opportunities to get to know new geographical locations while the actual performances serve to "grease the elbows" of the young people and leads to greater self-efficacy and sense of self-worth. Besides, the reception usually accorded to the children serves as a kind of "positive feedback," giving the pupils the message that they are "performing well or making significant progress" (Omrod 2008, p. 57), and further leading them to develop greater self-esteem or self-importance by which they no longer see themselves as "any other boy or girl" wandering in the street. Perhaps, GEHMA pupils see their being received and treated honourably as fulfilling the Igbo adage: *nwatakwochaa aka,*



*osoro ogaranya rie nri* (when a child washes his hands, he can dine with the rich). The author is personally aware that the seemingly VIP entertainment given to the children during their outings make strong positive impact on their young minds.

### **Elegant Costumes for Music Concert**

An indication on concert dress by the Royal College of Music London reads thus, "Part of being a good performer is looking like a good performer so please make sure you dress carefully and appropriately for concerts, taking care to look neat, tidy and professional before you step onto the stage" ([www.rcm.ac.uk](http://www.rcm.ac.uk)). According to Caruthers (2007), the quest for dress codes in any music organizations like an orchestra or choir has much to do with the "striving for a certain 'look'" inasmuch as the musicians may not want "to look under-dressed... or unprofessional." Managements of music organizations would therefore "want their musicians to present a uniform appearance to the audience," with the phrase—uniform appearance—understood to signify "full formal dress" (Caruthers 2007).

For GEHMA pupils, beautifully sewn and designed concert costumes constitute an irresistible charm and strong motivation for belonging to the academy. Striving for a certain classy look, the young people would always go for elegant "uniform" outfit for their concerts, even when this involves some relatively costly expenditure. The author's observation is that such move for more than merely decent performance attire is probably an avenue, in and through which, GEHMA pupils constantly and consistently give out a coded message about their strong rejection of mental poverty. They might come from poor families - they appear to reason - but this is not and can never be excuse for shabby or miserly-looking concert costume.

Critically speaking, the author noticed that as far as the project of making costume for their annual music festival concert is concerned,

GEHMA pupils and their parents are - more often than not - in benign mental disconnect. GEHMA pupils would love to appear as elegant as possible no matter what it would cost while the parents could be cold or rather anxious about the high cost of the fashionable costume aesthetics of their children. In some cases, the children have their way of getting around or circumventing such anxiety without being disrespectful or hurtful to their parents. As already mentioned above, the first music festival of the academy featured the pupils' adoption of black trousers/skirts and white top with a variation of three colours of neck ties displayed at various points of the many musical performances. This elegant choice was made after the parents had previously decided with the academy management that the pupils could wear any specific attire they could afford since the planned common costume could not easily be financially affordable to all. This became an instance of genuine self-determination, whereby GEHMA pupils "not only want[ed] to feel competent, but also... want[ed] to have some sense of autonomy regarding the things they do" (Omrod 2008, p. 463).

### **Genuine Friendship and Frequent Conviviality**

One of the enduring aspects of GEHMA culture which contribute immensely to the gentrification of GEHMA pupils is the joy of genuine friendship. Commenting on the value of friendship for young people, Futterman (2016) noted that "close friends are vital to school-age children's healthy development." The yearning to enter into a circle that affords one opportunity for friendship is defined by psychologists as the "need for affiliation" (Omrod 2008, p. 469). One of the abiding values of GEHMA as an institution is that pupils should take each other not just as mere friends, superficially understood, but literally as brothers and sisters. Boy versus girl friendship is ruled out on principle as far as membership in GEHMA is concerned. This is not about mere rigid moralization or promotion of dry ethical standards. The issue is that in GEHMA, it is believed that there is no

time available for frivolities because it is not just only music that is concerned. There is also a humongous academic challenge to face since one of the principles of GEHMA is that a pupil cannot be lethargic about studies and academics and still retain his or her membership. Therefore, the cultivation of boy versus girl friendship—especially given that it can lead to dissipative romantic engagements—is deemed by GEHMA as a definitely distracting venture.

On the other hand, the adoption of each other as brothers and sisters give the young people an opportunity to - in fact - experience "affectionate [friendly] relationships with others" (Omrod 2008, p. 459) in a rather deeper and juicy sense of the word. The fact that boys and girls are involved help the children to experience the natural complementarity between their maleness and femaleness in an atmosphere of fraternal love and concern, while the strong emphasis on self-control leads them to affective maturity. The author had a first-hand experience of this of how strong this fraternal relationship was in GEHMA when the academy admitted three twin sisters. The information out there is that their father died in their infancy and so they had not brother. One could sense their sudden feeling of "here now, we're having the brothers we were lacking." They became so zealous and committed to the academy that even in less than one year, they were able to migrate from the academy's propaedeutic class to form part of the academy choir and thus participated in the academy's choral performances at its music festival in September, 2019.

Allied to the spirit of camaraderie that is piquantly functional in the academy, the frequent occasions for conviviality within the academy seems also to be an irresistible attraction. Most of the pupils, for example, would prefer to celebrate their birthdays with the academy in a rather palpable style, featuring presentation of choice edibles

including cakes. The author had a personal experience of this when he visited the academy on the birthday of one of the pupils. The child in question did what probably amounted to issuing a benign ultimatum to the mother, that his tenth birthday celebration at the music academy would be—the author intuitively supposed, not a question of eating cookies but rather—celebrated formally with a large baked cake. And he had his way, perhaps because of being the child of a proud mother and a cherished member of the academy, having started to play the tuba at the age of eight. Apart from individual celebrations, communal celebration like the annual festival always involves a conspicuous convivium at the end, something always hoped for and anticipated with joy by the pupils of GEHMA. It could therefore be appositely argued that the joy of genuine comradeship and frequent convivialities constitute a strong aspect of the gentrification of GEHMA pupils.

### **Conclusion**

The exposition above demonstrates how the study and practice of music can be correlated to the acquisition and development of self-esteem in children and young people. Fact is that a number of factors conglomerate in the making and constitution of an establishment such as a music academy, all of which, in the final analysis, coalesce and contribute to heightening the sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-worth in young people. Findings from developmental psychology demonstrate that these ingredients bordering on personal and interpersonal subjectivity are factors that can no longer be neglected or swept under the carpet by teachers and all those engaged in the formation of children and young adults.

In the Nigerian culture, the exigency of zeroing in on the development of these beneficial positive subjective outlooks becomes even more urgent inasmuch as educators and formators in the Nigerian environment are usually given to nit-picking of negatives in

the behaviour of young people. These negatives are usually matched with negative reinforcements and even excessive punishments. Public administrators as well as all those engaged in the education of young people in Nigeria would do well to know that there are also various forms of positive reinforcement and a number of subjective factors which teachers and formators would do well to promote positively in their formation of young people in order to reap maximum benefit of bringing up affectively mature and mentally balanced young people.

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