EFFECTIVE USE OF STAFF NOTATION AS PANACEA FOR SIGHT-READING PHOBIA AMONG YOUTH BASED CHOIRS IN ABAKALIKI

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Abstract

There are two most popular systems of notation in music, namely Tonic Solfa notation and Staff Notation. Most Nigerian church choirs and secular choral groups adopt Tonic Solfa in learning songs. This they believe is relatively easier than Staff Notation. However, some choral groups encourage their members to learn Sight-reading of Staff while some find this acceptable method of learning songs difficult. Most disturbing is the fact that many choral groups that face this difficulty are made up of young people. Majority of them passed through Basic schools where they offered music. It becomes a problem when young people who are expected to invest their youthful strength, inquisitive attitude, and adventurous character in exploring the benefits and time saving advantages of Sight-singing detest it. This study is aimed at investigating how effective music teachers use Staff Notation in teaching songs in secondary schools. And its attendant effect among choral/singing groups made up of young people. The researcher employed the survey method of research in this study. Instruments used for data collection for this research was questionnaire and observation. The questionnaire was distributed to music teachers, secondary school students that offer music and some choristers of youth based choirs. The study shows that despite the fact that many music teachers are familiar and good with Staff Notation as a method of teaching and learning songs, they seldom use it. The

teachers believe that using Sight-singing method to teach songs consumes time. However, whenever it is used, it is introduced to the students in a wrong manner which denies the students the pleasure of learning songs with it. The study recognizes the need to decondition the mind of young choristers from the belief that Staff Notation should be for classical music only. The study concludes by advocating the gradual introduction of Sight-singing in teaching students. Starting from familiar songs like folk songs and rhymes.

Keywords: Staff Notation, Tonic Solfa, Music Education, Phobia

Introduction

Singing/song rendition is a vital aspect of worship in religions all over the world. The Christian religion has so many denominations, each denomination with their own preferred type of music. While some preferred pure classical music and Negro spirituals, others prefer 20th century compositions of popular gospel musicians. In all these denominations, the choir is in charge of leading the church in song renditions be it Hymn, Anthems or special presentations at all services. However, the choirmaster/music director is the focal man in choosing, teaching/preparing and conducting the choir. The choirmaster discharges his/her duties based on his abilities and experiences.

The emergence of the choirmaster is dependent on the structure of the church. Some churches are lucky to have trained musicologist as their choirmaster. In some churches, choirmaster/music director emerge based on the trainings received in the church over the years while some appoint anyone who has vast knowledge of different Christian songs and ability to pass the song across to others by way of teaching. To buttress the above, Olorunsogo (n.d), quoting Okafor (2001), Omibiyi (1975), Vidal (1977), identified four types of musicians in Nigeria:

> *(a) the traditional master musician who trains his own people mainly by apprenticeship, (b) the trained musician in the Western education system who knows all the rudiments and the rules and who has certain objectives he wishes to attain, (c) the untrained talented musician and (d) contemporary musicians that learn through video and compact disc and television programmes.(pg. 18-19)*

The different categories of training the choirmasters/music directors had, presented different ways and methods of teaching songs.

For those trained in the western form of music, they find it easier to adopt and encourage reading of staff as a viable method for teaching songs while the untrained find succor in solfeggio as a method of teaching songs. However, empirical evidences show that many choirmasters who jettison the use of staff reading in their song teaching had at one time in their basic schools passed through trainings on sight singing/reading.

Education acquired is not only for the present. Knowledge is transferable. When we are faced with a situation whereby a supposedly acquired knowledge is detested by the learner, then there is a problem. It could be said that learning did not take place. The ultimate aim of teaching is for the learners to learn. To achieve this, there must be a technique/methodology to get the attention and interest of the learners, and make them learn. (Esimone, 2015:164). To buttress this, Ugwu and Ekezie (2016), submits that:

> *an age long battle engaged by educators have been how to teach well for the learners to learn hence curriculum planners involving every discipline representative are working round the clock to enhance teaching*

methodology so as to achieve the sole aim of teaching (p. 119).

Why the Study?

This study is carried out to:

a) Assess the extent at which Staff Notation is used in teaching songs in Secondary Schools.

b) Investigate the reason why young singers develop a phobia for Staff Notation.

c) Suggest pedagogical approach(es) to overcome Sight-singing phobia among young singers.

Concept of Staff Notation

Staff notation is one of the systems of music notation developed for the purpose of documenting songs and musical compositions, while the other is Tonic Solfa notation. Staff notation was developed by Guido d'Arezzo. The invention of the staff is traditionally ascribed to Guido d'Arezzo in about the year 1000, although there are earlier manuscripts in which neumes (signs from which musical notes evolved) are arranged around one or two lines in order to orient the singer. Guido used three or four lines of different colours. A four-line staff is still used to notate plainchant (www.britannica.com/art/staff).

Presently, staff is made up of 5 horizontal lines and four spaces on which musical symbols called Notes are written to represent the pitch and duration of sounds.

Concept of Music Education

Encyclopedia Americana (1980), describes education as "any process by which an individual gains knowledge or insight or develops attitudes" (p. 642). Stemming from the description above, Music

Education can then be described as any process by which an individual gains musical knowledge or insights or develops musical attitudes. Note that, this process may be formal or informal. In addition, Adeogun (2006) opines that:

> Music education either formal or informal refers to the sum total of all skills, knowledge, principle and strategies which a music practitioner needs to acquire in order to be effective and efficient. Therefore music education encompasses the totality of learning experiences meant for the all-round development of an individual or group of individuals (p. 105).

Furthermore, speaking on education, Nnamani and Odunuga (2005) asserts that:

> the function of education is both social and individualistic and its social function is to help each individual become a more effective member of the society by passing along to him the collective experience of the past and the present. Its individual function is to enable him to lead a more satisfying and productive life by preparing him to handle new experiences successfully (p. 13)

Music is a well-established medium of instruction which over the years has contributed to the growth and development of the child. Music develops man's emotion, intellect and moral principles. Music as part of general education transmits the cultural heritage of the people. It aims at developing musical intelligence, aptitudes and skills. Esimone, (2015) believes that:

> music is very important; its importance in the day to day living of man is unquantifiable. It is a gift from God through which we strive to express our joy for the

things that are real to us and our longings for the things that might be (p. 169).

Music is a part of the world around us, a part of man's physical and emotional growth. Man's struggle for existence throughout the centuries has always been accompanied, communicated and extended by music. From the most early, to the most sophisticated cultures, music has been a focal point in rituals and significant events in man's personal life (Bergethon, 1977, p. 3).

The development of music in the history of mankind in general and specifically in the African context provides for centuries of recorded information of man's striving toward a better and richer life. Therefore, as an important feature in man's life, music serves as a social and historical tool preserving the culture of the past, and enlightening the future course of music in a contemporary world. Ajibulu (1999) submits that "the school, in the modern day setting, has become a place where pupils can learn of the past and present, and become a vessel for future development in music" (p. 221).

Music in the school curriculum provides learning experiences that will promote growth and development in music skills, competencies and attitudes; build positive self-concepts; establish high standards and quality of music literacy; and develop aesthetic sensitivity to the expressive element of music. (Ekwueme, 1982; Omibiyi; 1972).

Concept of Phobia

Phobia is a type of anxiety disorder that causes an individual to experience an extreme irrational and often unreasonable fear or aversion for object, situation, concept or person. The word 'phobia' came from the Greek word *phobos* which means fear (www.healthline.com/health/list-of-phobias). In other word, phobia is a persistent, excessive and unrealistic fear or aversion for an object

or situation. The development of phobia is attributed to a stressful situation or a frightening experience. In education, phobias occur as a consequence of learning experience. Phobias develop when fear responses are reinforced. Lisa Frtscher (2020) in her article titled 'Theories on How People Develop Phobias' submits that factors that promotes the development of phobias can be classified into three categories, namely Biological, Learning-based and Psychoanalytic (www.verywellmond.com/theories-on-the-development-of-phobias-2671514). Phobias are classified into three different categories which are:

   i.   Social Phobia – Extreme worry about social situation
   ii. Agoraphobia – Fear of large crowd
   iii. Specific Phobia – Fear of a specified situation.

This study is categorized under specific phobia. It is important to state that any object or concept can become an object of aversion to anyone at any point in time. This means that the list of types of specific phobia can be unexhausted. The names are most times formed with the fear object as prefix and the word phobia as suffix. In some cases, it could be the Greek word of the fear object that will be used as prefix and the word phobia as suffix.

Concept of Choir
A choir is a group of singers prepared to render singing functions at events of worship services. In the western musical tradition, choirs are basically of mixed voices in which the music is divided into four parts of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass (S. A. T. B). However, there are still some other choirs namely: Children Choirs, female voices, Male voices. (Ekwueme, 1993: 4).

Significance of the Study
This study is significant such that it:

- ➢ Will redirect secondary school teacher's usage of Staff Notation in song teaching.
- ➢ It will diffuse young people's biased mind on the concept of Sight-reading and encourages them to effectively use it in song learning and teaching.

Research Questions

1. How effective is the use of Staff Notation in teaching songs among secondary schools in Abakaliki?
2. To what extent are students interested and motivated in learning songs using Staff Notation?
3. To what extent is Staff Notation used in learning songs among youth based choir groups in Abakaliki?

Population of the Study

The population of this study is as follows:
   i. Music teachers in secondary schools in Abakaliki.
   ii. Secondary school students in Abakaliki where music is offered and
   iii. Youth based choir groups within Abakaliki town.

The total sample used for this study stood at one hundred and sixty (160) randomly selected respondents – 10 Music Teachers, 100 Students and 50 young choristers.

The table below shows the list of secondary schools and choir groups used for the study:

S/N	Name Of School	No Of Respondents	Name Of Choir	No Of Respondents
1	Fountain of Knowledge International School, Abakaliki	2 Teachers 20 Students	Living Faith Church Choir, Abakaliki	10 Choristers
2	Blessed Martins	2 Teachers	Redeemed	10 Choristers

	International School, Abakaliki	20 Students	Christian Church Choir, Abakaliki	
3	CSMT, Abakaliki	2 Teachers 20 Students	Bethel City Choir, Abakaliki	10 Choristers
4	Hope High British International School, Abakaliki	2 Teachers 20 Students	All Saints Youth Church Choir, Abakaliki	10 Choristers
5	Redeemers International School, Abakaliki	2 Teachers 20 Students	Christ Embassy Choir, Abakaliki	10 Choristers

Table 1: List of Schools and Choirs used as sample in the study

Validation of the instrument

The instruments for data collection was presented to two music lecturers for content and face validity.

Methodology

The study was essentially a survey which sought to find out the extent at which Sight-singing as a system of song learning and teaching is effectively used in secondary schools in Abakaliki. And also its attendant effect on youth based choral groups within Abakaliki town.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used for this study was questionnaire. Three (3) questionnaires were prepared, targeting the three categories of the respondents; i.e Music Teachers, Secondary School Students and Choristers. Data were also collected through direct observation and participation.

Method of Data Collection

The questionnaires for teachers and students were physically distributed and collected while the questionnaires for choristers were electronically administered through Google forms.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were organized in tables and analyzed using Mean Deviation of the 4 point scale on Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SA) and Disagree (D) with the points in descending order of 4, 3, 2, 1.

Decision Scale: 1-2.49 Disagree, and above Agree.

Research Question 1

How effective is the use of Staff Notation in teaching songs in secondary schools in Abakaliki?

Table 2: Effective use of Staff Notation in teaching

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	MEAN	DECISION
1	I always employ sight-reading when teaching students new songs	1	2	1	6	1.67	DISAGREED
2	Students learn new songs faster through sight-singing	1	1	7	1	2.22	DISAGREED
3	Sight-singing arouses the interest of the students during learning	2	5	1	2	2.7	AGREED
4	Sight-singing is time consuming	7	2	1	0	3.6	AGREED
5	Sight-singing is stressful for students	8	1	1	0	3.7	AGREED
Grand Mean						2.77	AGREED

Table 2, as presented above shows the responses of respondents on the effective use of staff notation in the classroom. Also, on the table is the mean rating of the responses and the decisions taken. The table clearly shows that despite the teachers accepting the fact that sight-reading arouses the interest of the students, they seldom use it when teaching songs. Their reason is that, it is time consuming.
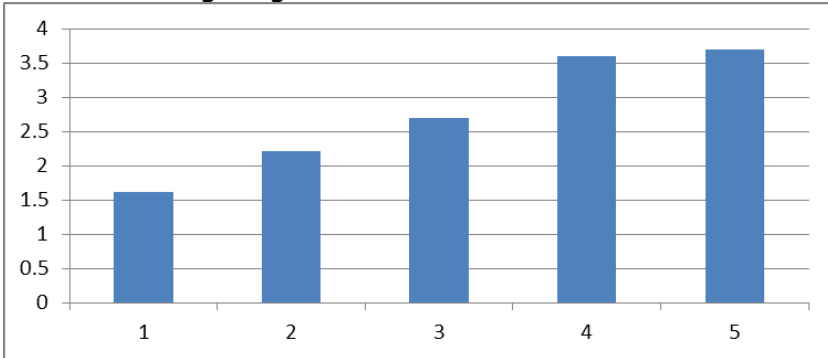

Fig. 1: Mean Deviation of responses on effective use of Staff Notation

Research Question 2
To what extent are students interested and motivated in learning songs using Staff Notation?

Table 3: Level of students' interest in using Staff Notation

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	MEAN	DECISION
1	We always learn songs with staff notation in my school.	15	18	58	9	2.39	DISAGREED
2	Sight-singing is very interesting	21	28	44	7	2.63	AGREED
3	Learning songs with Staff Notation helps me to learn faster than other methods	5	6	76	13	2.03	DISAGREED
4	I prefer sight-singing method to rote learning	6	5	83	6	2.11	DISAGREED

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	MEAN	DECISION
	while learning songs						
5	With the knowledge of sight-singing, I can learn other songs on my own	4	2	88	6	2.04	DISAGREED
	Grand Mean					2.24	DISAGREED

Table 3 above presents the responses of students on how interested they are in the use of staff notation in learning songs. The table shows that the students find sight-singing very interesting, but they have little knowledge of it. They disagreed on having it as a method of learning songs.
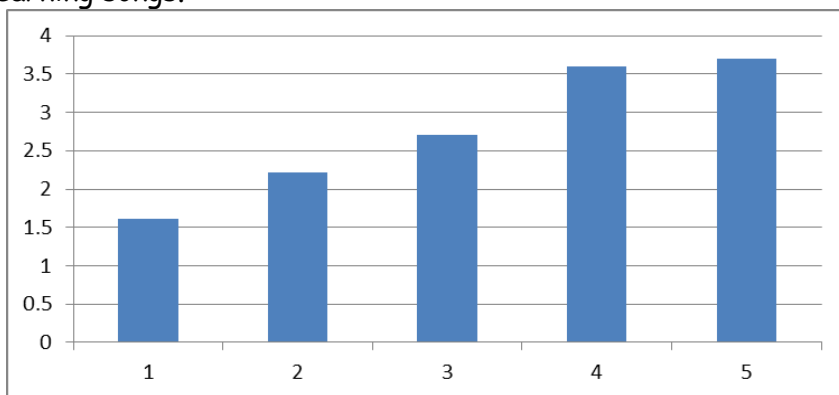

Fig 2: Mean Deviation of responses on level of students' interest on the use of staff notation

Research Question 3

To what extent is staff notation used in learning songs among youth based choir groups in Abakaliki?

Table 4: Use of Tonic Solfa among youth based choirs

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	MEAN	DECISION
1	I have been in the choir for over five years	43	4	3	0	3.82	AGREED
2	I am very much aware of staff notation	37	7	3	3	3.56	AGREED

3	I have learnt songs with staff notation in time past	6	8	17	19	2.02	DISAGREED
4	We always learn songs with staff notation in my choir	3	8	26	13	2.02	DISAGREED
5	Learning song with staff notation is a very easy method of learning songs	7	4	33	6	2.24	DISAGREED
6	Learning songs with staff notation should be limited to classical music alone	41	5	3	1	3.76	AGREED
7	Older choristers have interest in sight-singing more than the young choristers	39	7	2	2	3.60	AGREED
8	I prefer learning songs with staff notation	4	1	43	2	2.14	DISAGREED
9	I will accept sight-singing as the only method of teaching songs in my choir	3	2	41	4	2.08	DISAGREED
Grand Mean						2.81	AGREED

Table 4 above shows the extent at which sight-singing is used among youth based choir. From the responses, it can be deduced that the choristers have no interest in sight-singing. Although many of them have spent over five (5) years in the choir, they believe the use of sight-singing should be limited to classical music.

Discussion of Findings

Empirical evidences presented in this study and observations by the researcher show that the teachers believe that sight-singing is time consuming. And based on that notion, they jettison the usage. They would rather use Rote Learning method. This is the genesis of the phobia that is exhibited towards sight-singing by young choristers. The researcher observed that, it is not that the teachers do not use sight-singing at all. Due to the type of educational organization they work (private school), sometimes they are constrained to use the Rote Learning method because of time. This happens during the

preparation for end of session party, Christmas party or any special occasion.

However, the experience is not palatable for the students at all. The reason for this is that the students are not used to solfeggio, their sight-reading ability is very slow and the teacher has a task to teach them songs within a limited time frame. This makes the process cumbersome and the learning experience boring. The students go away with the impression that learning songs with staff notation is a tedious process. They become aversed to sight-singing/reading thereby developing a phobia towards method. The responses from the respondents show that they all agreed that sight-singing is a very interesting method on one hand. On the other hand they all rejected the use of it in song teaching and learning. The question is: how do you hate what you like? It only shows that the problem is not staff notation, but the individuals' impression about sight-singing.

Classical Conditioning Theory as Panacea
Knowledge is transferable. Knowledge gained during a learning process is not limited to the classroom. It rubs off on the individuals' future endeavors. When the learning process is made interesting the students learn and the concept learnt is retained and probably advanced. Contiguity is very vital in teaching and learning process. From the foregoing, it is evidence that contiguity process has been hampered. To correct this, is the application of Ivan Pavlov's Classical Conditioning theory; an associative learning theory. In his words, Ugwu (2005) says '(Ivan) Pavlov, a Russian Psychologist, interested in how organs of the body functions, and the reaction of organisms to environmental stimuli, propounded the theory of classical conditioning in 1909'(p. 9). Reflex (an unconscious action performed as a response to a stimulus) is the fulcrum of Pavlov's theory. He categorized reflexes into two viz: physiological (unconditioned) and psychic (conditioned). Physiological being an innate reaction and psychic which

is as a result of acquired behavior or accumulated experiences (Ugwu, 2005:10). Pavlov conducted an experiment using a dog, a bell and meat powder. All these were placed in a soundproof room to avoid distraction. The experiment was in stages with the aim of observing different reflex actions:

Stage I: Meat powder was presented to the dog which made the dog to salivate. This shows a natural reflex action because it is natural for a hungry animal to show its need for food.

    Unconditioned Stimulus (UCS)   ➡   Unconditioned Response (UCR)
          (Meat powder)   (Salivation)

Stage II: A bell was sounded and the meat powder was presented simultaneously. This elicits salivation from the dog. The sound of the bell (Conditioned Stimulus) has now been paired with the meat powder (Unconditioned Stimulus), but the result is still as of stage I. This is the stage of conditioning.

Conditioned Stimulus (CS) + Unconditioned Stimulus (UCS) ➡ Unconditioned Response (UCR)
    (Bell)   +   (Meat powder)   (Salivation)
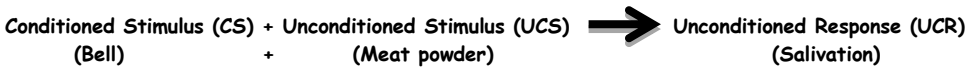
The process in this stage was repeated over and over again.

Stage III: In order to verify if the dog will salivate without the presentation of meat powder, Pavlov sounded the bell without the meat powder. The dog salivated. This shows that the dog has been conditioned to the sound of the bell.

Conditioned Stimulus (CS)   ➡   Conditioned Response (CR)
     (Bell)   (Salivation)

This process was repeated a number of time. The dog salivates less at every repeated process until it stops. This is called the level of extinction.

This theory can be used to extinguish phobia in the use of staff notation in learning songs by young choristers. This can be achieved by adopting the maxim of teaching from:

known to unknown

simple to complex and

concrete to abstract

Denis (2007) notes that 'extinction of a fear or phobia can sometimes be accomplished by pairing the conditioned stimulus with a pleasurable stimulus'(p. 127). The perception of many music teachers is that sight-singing should be for 'big' or western songs. Music teachers must be dissuaded from this perception. The usage of staff notation should be to learn songs that the students are familiar with. Not necessarily western compositions or songs written in foreign languages. Folk songs or popular music which they are very well familiar with can be notated and taught using the staff notation. The will sing it and see that sight-singing can be done with any song. The familiarity of songs in this case will bring pleasure in the learning process. It will diffuse the mind of the young choristers, and they will be exposed to the great benefits inherent in the use of staff notation. A singer who is capable of sight-singing pieces of music is more universal in performances. The first entry requirement by most choral groups that participates in international musical competitions is a flawless sight-reading ability. These are opportunities that our youths are expected to explore. However, they must be equipped to be qualified for such exposure.

Conclusion

Learning, both formal and informal is progressive. Every learner's wish is to attain the peak of the learning process. However, when there is a disconnection along the line, achieving greatness becomes a mirage. Frustration sets in and this leads to irritation. Everyone derives pleasure in singing. Religious rites are not complete without songs. In a nation like Nigeria where there is proliferation of

churches, the need for choristers cannot be overemphasized. These choristers are expected to perform different genres of music at different religious worship occasion and gathering; which means, they must be ready to learn a great number of repertoires. For a fact, it is not all the songs that can be learnt through Rote Learning method. Any group of singers that have bias towards other methods of learning songs will only have their repertoires on a genre of music. Having understood the fact that this problem originates from the classroom learning process of the supposed young choristers, there is need to relearn the method in order to maximize the benefits therein. Correcting the exhibited phobia towards sight-reading is not by running away; rather, it is by constant usage of the method in a controlled setting. The aim is to decondition the mindset of the young singers towards staff notation.

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