



Voices: An Inclusive Choir in Dortmund, Germany

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Abstract

The article describes the concept and work with an inclusive choir, in which students of the Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences at TU Dortmund University sing together with adult mentally challenged people. The choir 'Voices' was founded in 2010, as a part of the project Dortmunder Modell: Musik (DOMO: Musik). The choir and project are committed to realising the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly in developing models of cultural participation, relevant both for people with and without disabilities. After describing the DOMO: Musik project and its principles, newly developed ideas for inclusive choir work are presented, together with imminent difficulties and positive results. Special attention is drawn to the selection of the pieces under the aspect of artistic variety. Five pieces of the artistic interdisciplinary repertoire are presented. Finally, the student choir members reflect on their experiences in the inclusive choir and make clear the importance of joint activities leading to an inclusive society.

Keywords: music, culture, inclusion, people with disabilities, inclusive choir, repertoire, methods

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Introduction: About inclusion

The *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* of the United Nations (2006) defines and supports the rights of people with disabilities. The Convention requires a new look at people with disabilities and a change of every society in the direction of inclusion.

Inclusion in the field of education means that "persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability" (UN General Assembly 2006: Art.24, 2a) This has as a consequence that children learn to deal with diversity from an early age in a non-separating school system.

Inclusion in the context of work and employment means that:

"[the state's parties] recognise the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities" (UN General Assembly 2006: Art. 27,1)

The Convention aims to assist people with disabilities to get out of the role of a care receiver and to lead life as self-determined as possible.

Inclusion in the cultural field is defined as "participation in all aspects of cultural life" as

outlined in article 30 of the Convention (United Nations 2006):

Article 30: Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities:

(a) Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats; (b) Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats; (c) Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

2. States Parties shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society.

To enable all of the above to happen, a new way of delivering systematic education and training in the arts is needed. Artistic processes are to be developed and worked out jointly from the beginning, i.e., in schools, academies and in cultural life by current and future artists together with persons with and without disabilities. Inclusive projects are to be a natural part of cultural life.

In Germany, the UN Convention was ratified in 2009 and has been shown to be a relatively powerful instrument. Parents of children with disabilities can claim their children's right to inclusive education. Gifted persons with disabilities can claim their right to be trained and work as painters, dancers or musicians. However, few teachers have experience in supporting students with disabilities in their artistic development. Therefore, the state's parties are asked to support projects that promote experiences in inclusive processes on all artistic levels.

The *Dortmunder Modell: Musik* (abbreviated as *DOMO: Musik*) is an example of a publicly financed project that enables adult persons with disabilities to develop their musical potential with the help of experienced teachers.

The project: 'Dortmunder Modell: Musik'

North Rhine-Westfalia is one of the sixteen federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany. Its Ministry for Labour, Integration and Social Affairs,

responsible for supporting inclusive processes within this federal state, is currently financing the project *DOMO: Musik*. This project is committed to the aims of the UN Convention. It is a three-year pilot project (from April 2010 to March 2013) run by the Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences at TU Dortmund University (www.fk-reha.musik.tu-dortmund.de).

The project aims to gain experience concerning educational models, musical-artistic models, organisational models and models for working together with professional musicians. Finding out more about mechanisms that hinder inclusion is as important as providing examples of good or best practice. The project team consists of twelve members: three music teachers, three professional musicians, three graduate assistants, two research assistants and the project managers. My role within *DOMO: Musik* is both project manager and choirmaster. All the project team members are musicians and experienced in working with persons with disabilities.

The people to whom the project team offers musical education are adults aged 22 to 60, who work in one of the three Dortmund sheltered workshops for persons with disabilities. The project works on three levels: i) general education; ii) talent development; and iii) semi-professionalisation.

i) General education means that everybody who is interested in the musical activity may participate. There is no entrance examination, just the necessary ability to react properly to a rhythmical pattern and to be able to react to the teacher/conductor. General education refers mainly to the choir *Voices*, which is the focus of this article.

ii) Talent development means that a person is able and willing to learn an instrument (i.e., coming to the lessons regularly, showing progress, no matter how small or slow).

iii) The level of semi-professionalisation is more demanding. People with disabilities are expected to make good progress in playing their instrument or singing, be able and willing to play or sing in groups with others and to develop their own ideas in improvisation. The aim of semi-professionalisation is to enable persons with disabilities to be part of a professional group, to perform publicly with the professional musicians and by the end of the project to earn at least a small part of their living expenses by making music.

The main objectives of *DOMO: Musik* refer to the three aspects of the project (i.e., education, participation, and work) and aim to:

- empower people with disabilities concerning their musical competences, their autonomy and participation in cultural life;

- empower people with disabilities to sing or play an instrument as a part of their vocational training and work life;
- train students, music teachers and professional musicians to work with people with disabilities;
- establish inclusive musical ensembles as a part of the regional and supra-regional public musical life;
- contribute to public discussions on how to build an inclusive society;
- establish an (hopefully international) Academy or at least an inclusive Master's level training course at TU Dortmund, including people with and without disabilities in professional artistic training and projects.

The *Voices* choir

The *Voices* choir is a subproject of *DOMO: Musik*. The choir is, as mentioned above, provided for everybody working in one of the three Dortmund sheltered workshops as general musical education as well as for the students of the Faculty Rehabilitation Sciences at TU Dortmund. The choir has been running since October 2010, and takes place during the fifteen weeks of each winter and summer semester. Apart from people with disabilities, there is an open invitation for their parents, friends and relatives, other students with disabilities at TU Dortmund from different faculties and students from the degree programme for senior citizens to also participate.

As a result, a heterogeneous, multi-cultural and mixed-age group has come together. During the one and a half years of its existence, the size of the choir has levelled off to approximately twenty-five persons with disabilities and about fifty students and other interested members. The choir rehearses once a week, regularly on Tuesday afternoons, for ninety minutes, including a fifteen-minute break. Each semester ends with a public performance.

The concept of *Voices* is described below under six criteria, which are relevant for most of the modern non-professional choirs, regardless of whether they have people with disabilities. These criteria are: 1) choral sound, 2) vocal and rhythmical training, 3) body percussion, 4) movement, 5) sheet music, and last but not least 6) the repertoire.

1) Choral sound

Anyone who has experience in singing with people with disabilities is aware that some, but not all, can sing the right pitch. Today, the modern choral pedagogy - a pedagogy that strives to gain rather than to select singers - is open to children as well as to adults who have difficulties in singing at the

right pitch. In Germany several choirs work especially with singers singing out of tune (e.g., the BRUMMER Chor Bochum: www.hustifex-brummer.de). The choir pedagogy has understood how important it is to regain tone-deaf people for the choir in case they want to sing (Bütefisch 2009).

Within *Voices* it is not realistic to follow the idea of creating a traditional choral sound, even if a lot of voice training during the rehearsals is offered. The question is not *how* to create a traditional choral sound. The question is *what kind of music* can be produced with the singers given the condition of having from twelve to fourteen rehearsals plus one performance per semester. The music has to follow the singers – not vice versa. The singer (and not the music) is at the centre of attention, which is different from the common ideal of traditional choir music.

It is the choirmaster's duty to develop musical ideas according to the singers' abilities. In *Voices*' case, since so many choir members cannot sing at the right pitch, two directions are followed. The choir partly sings old and new canons, traditional and new melodies, and partly it borrows from modern music, using for example, the so called clusters.

By using a language which can be easily understood by all members of the choir, I (being the choirmaster) avoid using technical terms like 'cluster'. Instead I try to find poetic terms, leading to inner pictures. So, for instance, I name a cluster 'clouds of sound'.

In order to produce a 'cloud of sound' everybody is asked to imagine an individual tone inwardly and then to hum this tone. At first quietly, then swelling up and going down according to the choirmaster's gestures. The sounds that arise are reminiscent of some passages of Ligeti's composition *Lux Aeterna*.

The speaking voice is part of the choir sound as well. An artistic example that uses the speaking voice is the composition *Fuge aus der Geographie* by Ernst Toch, 1930. Apart from composition, improvised sounds in the form of vowels, consonants and syllables are used. In addition, the singer's voices are used quite normally, i.e. singing melodies, sometimes in two or three part harmonies.

2) Vocal and rhythmical training

Although tonal singing is not always in the foreground, voice training takes place in every rehearsal. Choir members are supported to improve the quality of their singing both by listening to, and performing exercises. Each person with disability is allocated to a 'crew' of three to four students for

these exercises. When the choir starts the training, these groups are built quickly, standing in small circles. The members of a group sing the right pitch to each other, giving the tone from ear to ear. The voice training exercises are always associated with small stories or scenes. At times the whole choir become members of a (happy) family of bears with Father Bear, Mother Bear and Child Bear, singing a major chord. When exercising rhythm patterns, the choir turn into ghosts, clapping rhythms and 'frightening' others; sometimes everyone turns into children, asking for chocolate while clapping and stomping.

Presently, after three semesters of vocal and rhythmical training, singing the correct pitch has not improved significantly. This is particularly the case when emotional expression moves into the foreground and singing and the correct pitch slip into the background. When singing quietly, the focus on the sound is more intense, so the song 'succeeds' far better. In contrast to correct pitch however, the rhythmic competences have noticeably improved. Everybody is able to repeat rhythms by singing syllables or clapping, while all are able to remain focused on this exercise for at least twenty minutes and to keep their concentration for a performance of about forty-five minutes. During the period of the choir's existence, the rhythmic skills of its members have significantly improved.

3) *Body percussion*

Body percussion means using one's own body as a musical instrument. By clapping, tapping, snapping, slapping, and stomping, the 'percussionists' produce and experience different kinds of sounds. The choir members use syllables in combination with body movement to produce new musical pieces. With "*sik*" the hands are snapping above the head, with "*sek*" tapping at the height of the larynx, with "*tak*" clapping at heart level, with "*tok*" slapping on the thighs and with "*bum*" stomping. This combination of voice and movement has been shown to be methodologically helpful in terms of extending the duration of concentration.

Body percussion is set to become a new acoustic body-art. The First International Body Music Festival in San Francisco in December 2008 gave an important boost to this very special kind of music that does not require any instrument but the body. Keith Terry is both the artistic head of this movement and the founder of the festival¹. An increasing number of choirs include body

percussion in their repertoire. For example, the Turkish group *KeKeÇa*² is an ensemble of hearing impaired students performing body percussion. The two music teachers who founded *KeKeÇa* visited Dortmund to work with our choir in 2012.

In the *Voices* choir we use and train body percussion in every rehearsal, building up sequences of four bars which we perform later as a round. We also perform body percussion in all of our concerts.

4) *Movement*

The choir rehearsals take place in a room of approximately one hundred eighty square meters. The chairs stand aligned along the walls leaving a large open space in the middle. Generally, the rehearsals are held in standing position, but it is possible to sit down at any time for a break.

Each rehearsal begins with a phase of body awareness exercises. Stretching and breathing techniques are taught playfully. This first phase is followed by a phase of body percussion. The rhythmic body percussion training is also linked to movement in space: the choir members walk around the room clapping, tapping, snapping, and looking at each other. They are always encouraged to 'flirt' a bit since flirting brings a kind of mutual awareness.

Different styles of movement are tried out: "walk proudly like a king", "sneak like a tiger", "trample like an elephant", "jump like a monkey", and so on.

The choir does not stand in the same place all the time; members change positions continually. Sometimes the choir works in four groups at the four corners of the room, sometimes in one group near the stage, sometimes choir members walk in pairs, sometimes they walk alone within the space of the room. The movement provides an experience of the space, resulting in an improvement of the body tension. Movement also serves to increase the perception of the immediate environment, the perception of the other participants and supports the contacts between the choir members.

Although movement can be tiring, people rarely sit down during the rehearsals. However, after forty-five minutes there is a fifteen-minute break with coffee, fruit, and biscuits.

5) *Sheet music*

All the pieces are rehearsed without music scores. Since many of the people with disabilities in the choir cannot read, sheet music would not make any sense. Nevertheless, there are some choir members

¹ See: www.crosspulse.com/aboutkt.html

² See: <http://kekeca.net>

who wish to have something written to follow. Therefore, once a semester all the choir members receive a folder with all the songs and texts. However, the sheets of paper are not used during the rehearsals.

Singing without sheets strengthens the connection between choirmaster and all the members by constant eye contact. It also demands and supports the memory. The challenge of singing by memory gives some satisfaction to choir members: at the beginning of a rehearsal some people say proudly and happily, “*I still remember!*”

6) Repertoire

In their written reflections regarding the repertoire, students occasionally raise the question: “*Why does the choir not sing pop songs known by the disabled participants?*” In my opinion, this choir is meant to provide new musical experiences for everybody, and not to repeat well known pieces.

The repertoire is a decision made by the choirmaster: *Voices* is based on the sounds of classical music, contemporary music, jazz, body music and traditional dance-songs. The repertoire is meant to widen the musical experiences of all participants.

There are no choir pieces or scores for choirs with such heterogeneous voices so we have to adapt pieces and develop new ideas. Below are some examples of the repertoire that represent the different styles and demonstrate a part of the artistic way of dealing with the pieces.

The guiding principle of *Voices* is that the arts are meant to serve people. Consequently we change the pieces, add movement or instruments or perform them in an ‘unheard’ way. The examples chosen for this article are examples of dealing with movement and elegance; melody; singing and dancing; and artistic interdisciplinarity.

Example 1 : Dealing with movement and elegance: Belle qui tiens ma vie

In 1589 Arbeau Thoinot published *Orchésographie*, a book on the dances of the time. Connected to the song *Belle qui tiens ma vie*, the courtly Pavane is described. In the choir, we talk about how the noble in former times may have walked and danced. Then we try walking through the room as a noble couple, entering a royal festivity. All members of the choir walk upright and put one hand on the back, with the other hand touching the partner’s hand, holding them at chest height so that the ‘noble’ walk around the hall, singing slowly and gracefully in a circle.

The melody can be learned easily, even in two-part harmony³. We do not sing the original French lyrics, but just sing the melody imitating the courtly flute by singing “*nü nü nü*”. During a public performance the choir was accompanied by two oboes and two oboe d’amore – deepening the “noble” atmosphere.

Example 2: Dealing with melody (Robert Schumann)

Some melodies in classical piano pieces make people sing their melody spontaneously – for which the pianist Glenn Gould was famous⁴. One such piece with a gentle uplifting melody that the choir can sing is Robert Schumann’s, *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen. Kinderszenen op.15, No. 1*. The melody is a melodic arc, starting with a minor sixth upward and in its immediate turn downward the interval is filled with the notes of the scale G-Major. This arc is repeated three times. The second part begins with melodic steps downward, and finally the melody is repeated from the beginning. In the rehearsals we visualise the structure of the melody with our hands and arms, raising our hands when the melody goes up, showing the steps downwards with our hands too.

As the original is in G-Major, which is too high to sing for our choir, the piano piece was transposed down a fifth – so that the melody was easily accessible for everybody.

This small piano piece would have come to the ears of only a few of the participants, if it had not been part of the repertoire of our choir. When singing, all the members were smiling while following the melody’s gentle energy.

Example 3: Dealing with singing and dancing (Skip to my Lou)

Skip to my Lou is a square-dance that is easy to learn in text, melody, and dance movement:

Lost my partner, skip to my Lou [repeat 3 times]
skip to my Lou, my darling
Hey hey, skip to my Lou... [refrain]

The verse and refrain, both repeat the melody. The dance begins with two rows facing each other, going four steps forward, welcoming the opposite partner and then walking four steps back. Each of the figures is danced in eight steps. In the second figure, couples walk behind each other in a circle. In the first eight steps they move forward, then

³ See: www.free-scores.com/partitions_telecharger.php?partition=430

⁴ See: www.good-music-guide.com/articles/glenn Gould.htm

members turn around quickly and go all the eight steps back to the starting point. Gradually, the following dancing figures become a bit more difficult. Everybody can sing while dancing. Looking at the dancers/singers during the performance one can see everybody smiling. Even the more corpulent members of the choir do not stop singing and moving for the entire duration of the song. As a 'by-product' the choir members learn a bit about the background of square-dance and square-dancers, while they experience being accompanied by instruments.

One choir member with Down's syndrome accompanies our dance on the violin; another choir member plays the accordion. Together with a wash board we get a sound at least reminiscent of the traditional American square dance.

Example 4: Dealing with artistic interdisciplinarity (August Macke, Grosser Zoologischer Garten)

During the winter term in 2011/2012 we ran an interdisciplinary project with the *Museum Ostwall im Dortmunder U*. The *Museum Ostwall* in Dortmund is known for its collection of both classic modern art and works from the Fluxus movement. In 2010 the museum changed into the centre *Dortmunder U*, the new international centre for artworks from the 20th and 21st centuries. This centre opened in 2010 as part of the project of the European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010⁵.

The *Museum Ostwall im Dortmunder U* displays the famous triptych by August Macke *Grosser Zoologischer Garten*, which was painted in 1913. The painting from the era of expressionism is one of the most popular samples in the museum.

With the permission of the museum's director, we were able to develop our pieces directly in front of the artworks. The aim was both to have a closer look at the painting and to transform our respective perception into words and rhythm. Following the painting's structure the choir was divided into three sub-groups. Group 1 gave its attention to the left part of the triptych, group 2 to the middle part and group 3 to the right.

Standing in front of the painting (see Picture 1), the choir members started describing what they could see. The guidelines were that the description starts from the top of the painting and goes down to the bottom. Later, all the descriptive words were collected and brought into an order. Each word was repeated as often as the object was seen in the picture (see Figure 1).



Picture 1: Zoological Garden by August Macke⁶

sky	sky	sky
tree tree	tree tree	tree tree
leaves leaves	leaves leaves leaves	leaves leaves
leaves leaves	leaves	leaves leaves
leaves leaves	leaves leaves leaves	leaves leaves
leaves leaves	leaves	leaves leaves
house house	house house house	house house
house house	man hat man hat	house
man hat man	man hat	man hat child
hat	elephant	ostrich
bush	man hat man hat	man hat
crane crane	cockatoo	fence fence
crane	fence fence fence	fence fence
meadow	fence	fence fence
pond	fence fence fence	fence fence
	fence	doe
	antelope	bush
	fallow deer	meadow
	meadow	
	fence fence fence	
	fence	
	fence fence fence	
	fence	
	deer	
	child child	
	woman	
	meadow	
	path	

Figure 1: Choir members' descriptive words

After the creation of the 'score', group 1 read aloud the left column, group 2 the middle column and group 3 the right one. The description of the painting in words was complemented by three short melodies. These three lines were again assigned to the three groups, creating a score with nine lines

We called the project *Singing Viewing* or, perhaps better, *Soundtrack of a Painting*. After the performance in the museum, the educational

⁶ August Macke, Großer Zoologischer Garten, 1913. Copyright: Museum Ostwall im Dortmunder U, Dortmund. Photograph: Jürgen Spieler.

⁵ See: www.essen-fuer-das-ruhrgebiet.ruhr2010.de

director of the museum told us that due to the acoustic interpretation even she herself has seen Macke's painting in a new way.

Results and reflections

The choir members with disabilities come back voluntarily each semester whilst the students change each semester. For the members with disabilities it is an important experience to meet new people each term. In addition, it is interesting for them to sing in a way they never did before. Meanwhile, they learn different styles of music – classical music, new music, jazz and body percussion. They visit places they might never have gone to, such as the university, the *Ostwall Museum*, and the *Dortmunder U*.

The directors of the Dortmund sheltered workshops noticed an interesting development: an increasing number of people wanted to come to the University independently, even though the taxi is free and more comfortable. One of the choir members started travelling by bus and from then on it has been 'cool' for the others to travel by public transportation too. This shows that one of the objectives of *DOMO: Musik* has been reached, that is, increasing independence in every-day life – something that reflects a further step towards participation and inclusion.

At the end of each term, the participating students are asked to write reflections on their personal experience in the inclusive choir *Voices*. Their comments teach us a lot about the feelings of the so-called non-disabled towards disabled people as well as themselves. Feelings and thoughts such as the following must be taken into consideration when inclusion projects are planned.

The following quotes are from the portfolio of a student in February 2012:

"I was somewhat surprised that a disabled person drinks coffee. Why, I can't explain. Somehow I had the feeling that the coffee negatively affects the disability".

"I wonder what kind of disability A. could have. Can I probably ask him? On the one hand, I would like him not to be conscious of his disability. Maybe it hurts him when he is asked about it. Perhaps he is unaware of his disability, or he denies it. On the other hand, it may be that he is conscious about his disability and that he also knows exactly what and how it is (and how it is pronounced). But maybe it makes him angry when you ask about it? Anyway, I wonder myself continually what the handicapped persons think about the not handicapped persons".

"So far, I think A.'s development is amazing. Maybe it's only my perception. At first A.

seemed to be reluctant, overwhelmed and very shy. My impression was that he was afraid of doing something obviously wrong. Now he seems to me inwardly free, social, and very happy".

The same student concludes by commenting:

"At the beginning of the choir I was afraid of dealing with people with disabilities. I had no experience and thus did not know how I should behave towards them. I was afraid to say or do something wrong. I was afraid to be confronted with my own weaknesses. I thought they were 'exhausting' and 'less gifted'. I am ashamed and weep as I write this down".

These four short quotes represent an unusual and commendable mixture of reflection and emotion. This student began her studies at our Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences, because she wanted to contribute to an inclusive society by supporting persons with disabilities. While participating in the choir, she noticed that her thinking was full of prejudices and uncertainties. She was *willing* to question herself, to question her thinking and her emotions. She deserves our respect.

When a student, who is already open to people with disabilities, shows so many uncertainties and prejudices – what should we expect from people without any contact with persons with disabilities?

The student's comments show how important it is to provide contacts between people with different abilities and competences. Inclusion will never work without contact. Only contacts between people can provide the chance to change and renew our ways of thinking and feeling.

InTakt

Very often artistic activities with children and adults with disabilities are located 'automatically' into the field of therapy. No doubt, music therapy plays a key role in restoring the person's sense of health and wellbeing. If we look at disability not as a disease but as one of many possible ways of life, we can think this life to be – under its conditions – intact. The meaning of the word 'intact' is whole, stable, unhurt, unbroken, complete... When we look at a person with disabilities under the aspect of being 'intact', we will become more creative in dealing with the intactness and in showing *this* intactness to the inexperienced ones.

'InTakt' is our 'brand mark' in Dortmund. Under the heading 'InTakt' our team in Dortmund wants to strengthen people with and without disabilities through music. We train students, we organise inclusive workshops in which everyone works together on a musical theme; we organise *Concerts in Special Places*, as well as the above

mentioned project *Europa InTakt.2010* within the RUHR.2010 - Cultural Capital of Europe (see Kessler-Kakoulidi 2011). As a documentary of this project, fourteen short films have emerged, showcasing projects from France and Italy, Hungary, Lithuania, Denmark, Germany and Turkey, published on YouTube under: www.europaintakt.de. Each of these films shows a way towards an intact and inclusive society. The *Voices* choir, which is a part of our activities within the *DOMO: Musik*, aims to contribute to an intact and inclusive society.

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