Bridging the Cultural Divide: Comments on Schwantes, Wigram, McKinney, Lipscomb, and Richards’ article.

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As I began to read through the pages of this article, images of the 1993 French film *Latcho Drom* (translated as “the safe road”) (Gatlif, 1993) began to emerge in my memory and imagination. *Latcho Drom* is a docudrama on the power of music for migratory peoples. It follows two Romany children as they travel in a roaming Diaspora from India to Egypt, to Turkey, to Romania, to Hungary, to Slovakia, to France, and finally to Spain. As they travel, they embody the overall cultures and specifically the musical cultures of the places they inhabit. They also serve to transmit music and culture across time and space. Music is the glue that holds them together. To view clips from this stunning film that is a powerful testimonial to the influence of migratory peoples and the power of music to connect people and culture, begin here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SbnIO4fcCI.

The Mexican corrido and its use in a music therapy bereavement group also speaks to the power of music to contain and behold life’s dilemmas, in this case, death and loss, in addition to the Diasporas of the migrant worker experience.

As a Southern Californian, I also remember my experiences in the mid 1980s while working as the Director of Education and Volunteers at Hospice of Santa Barbara. In this role, I participated in many vigils honoring the end-of-life processes and eventual death of loved ones in our Mexican community. Sometimes, twenty or thirty relatives and friends crowded into one small room to pray and sing their loved one into his or her final days and beyond.

Schwantes, Wigram, McKinney, Lipscomb, and Richards carefully walk us through this qualitative study with respect and great detail about the process of music therapy in the context of loss and grief in the Mexican community. The use of corrido offers an example of how community music therapy can serve. The participants in this music therapy process were the initiators, requesting a music therapist to help them with their grieving process. They instructed the music therapist about exactly which song form they wanted to employ, knowing full well the rich history of how the corrido has been used for many years to tell the stories of the Mexican people as well as heal the wounds of emotional trauma. Some music therapists make a big mistake when they falsely conclude that a particular “cultural” music is better for clients than the standard “You are My Sunshine” or “Waltzing Matilda” repertoire. However, in my research, I learned to be very careful in making
such assumptions. When interviewing a Haida Elder in 1999, about the role of the arts in the revitalization of Haida culture, I only asked about “Haida” songs. The Elder got a big smile on his face and said: “Oh, those songs are boring. I have always preferred playing my trombone in a jazz band” (Kenny, 1999). In the current article, we see that self-selection and self-direction are key to culturally grounded practice and are surely indicators of best practices in Community Music Therapy.

The composition used in the corrido article seems to follow, in general, the standard format for corrido: 1) a salutation from the singer and prologue to the story; 2) the story itself; 3) a moral and farewell from the singer. Yet, the music therapist helped participants to modify the song to be especially relevant for the purposes of the group.

The corrido has a long history of use in a variety of situations (The Mexican Corrido, 2008) and was prevalent in the Mexican revolution for freedom. So this article leads me to ask the question: How does its use in music therapy relate to traditional uses of the corrido? Is it, for example, a case of freedom from suffering in this music therapy context? I also yearned to read more about the positionality of the four researchers. I can see that two of the authors are associated with Appalachia and the music therapist in this study had extensive experience working with Latino/as in oncology, school, and home settings. This provided me with greater possibilities for understanding how these positions may have influenced interpretations of the study.

This article gives us a wonderful example of music therapy in action. Working across cultures, we often forget that “practices” are land-based, even though we are finally willing to understand them as culturally based, especially in any Indigenous culture. And, we certainly know that in Mexico, Indigenous roots influence all forms. So this article honors the “practice” of corrido. But what can we learn from the conceptual or theoretical aspects of Mexican arts expression (Kenny, 2006)? This depth of exploration will truly help us to understand beliefs, principles, feelings, and worldviews of the so-called “others.”

As we have seen in the recent United Nations Compendium Music as a natural resource: Solutions for social and economic issues (2010) and the many articles in Voices: A World Forum for Music (www.voices.no), music is a particularly valuable resource in the face of all kinds of traumas around the world. The use of the corrido is a lovely example of a rather intimate music therapy collaboration in a case of immediate and sudden loss and grief that adds one more example of how music can heal in the presence of trauma and loss.
References


