

The Violet Experience: Social Interaction through Eclectic Music Learning Practices

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VIOLET'S BACKGROUND

Violet is a non-profit youth string orchestra program serving communities in the Belgian municipalities of Leuven, Heverlee, and Oud-Heverlee. The program is comprised of 126 members situated in four orchestras by age and musical ability. Members meet weekly to perform a varied repertoire of folk music and other traditional works in non-traditional ways.

Launched in 2002, Violet realizes two objectives:

- 1) To provide an ensemble space for string players who are too young to engage in Belgium's formal music education system.
- 2) To encourage community building, social awareness, and community service among their students. The ensemble is viewed as a natural means of providing services to the community, such as fundraising for less fortunate music groups or attending to other general social needs.

To be a member, individuals must take one year of theory and instrumental lessons at the local music academy or one year of private instruction with Violet's directors. The founders prioritize work ethic and responsibility over ability level. Thus, engaged students with less ability have a better chance at obtaining membership than those with more ability but less engaged. No other formal entry audition or examination is required.

In 2006, the founders assembled a board comprised of community members, select parents, and ex-orchestra members. The board oversees Violet's logistical matters, parental communication, public relations, informal social gatherings, and the organization of performances. Each member works as unpaid volunteers.

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative case study, we used participant observation and semi-structured interviews to examine Violet, a Flemish string youth orchestra. In doing so, we identified the qualities that constitute an 'eclectic' ensemble space, herein defined as a musical environment that blends informal and formal learning practices. Moreover, we emphasized how members benefit musically, socially, and personally from such spaces. Findings suggest that eclectic practices create an environment that promotes social engagement, social interaction, and peer learning among members. Additionally, eclectic music spaces allow for personal development and nurture self-appreciation. An eclectic ensemble space thus provides a rich alternative to more traditional formats of music ensemble instruction.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to examine the environment in which the Violet Youth Orchestra promotes a blend of informal and formal learning practices. Research questions were as follows:

1. What characteristics constitute an eclectic music ensemble space?
2. How do members benefit from participating in such spaces?

CONCLUSIONS

Findings suggest that the Violet experience constitutes the following spaces and benefits to members.

1. A music space that allows for continuous interaction between formal and informal teaching methods and repertoire throughout each orchestra's curriculum.
2. A personal space that nurtures members' sense of self-respect.
3. A social space that promotes social interaction and group identity between members.
4. A socio-music space that cultivates peer-learning.
5. A social space that demonstrates music's capacity for community engagement.



METHOD

Qualitative case-study design with two ethnographic exposures and semi-structured interviews:

- 6 months (2012): Ethnographic field notes; provided an in-depth ethnographic understanding of Violet's structure, the group's role within members' lives, and its impact on the broader community.
- 2 weeks (2015): Confirm Violet's longevity and organizational consistency; captured additional ethnographic field notes. Also conducted semi-structured interviews with the four directors and 20 of the 74 youth members (ages 12-18 years) to capture members' first-person experiences and perceptions.

RESULTS

Themes	Categories
The Violet Blended Learning Experience	Varied Repertoire centred around Folk Music; Aural Learning and Note-Reading, Memorization; Practice; Peer-learning
Musical Benefits	Develop as Musicians, Performance Style (formal vs. informal)
Social Benefits	Family & Friends; Sense of Security; Mutual Respect; Community Service
Personal Benefits	Work Ethic, Public Acclaim; Big Part of Life, Appreciation of Self

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