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ELIKYA CHOIR:
ENHANCED IDENTITIES BY COMPENSATION

ABSTRACT

I cori interculturali a scopo inclusivo sono progetti di musica multi-parte, dal rilevante impatto politico. Un caso di studio interessante è il coro Elikya, fondato a Milano nel 2010 e diretto dal direttore congolese Raymond Bahati, con musicisti provenienti da Burundi, Camerun, Congo e Italia. È un coro di ispirazione cristiana, ma non liturgico, aperto a tutti e Faustin Ntsama, suonatore di balafon e marimba, ne definisce lo scopo originario come una «inversione di rotta» rispetto ai processi di acculturazione eurocentrica tipici delle missioni cattoliche. Ho esaminato i livelli musicali, ossia le stratificazioni di intervento dei musicisti africani e italiani nella loro «combinatoria» (Aarom – Martin 2003) finale, per comprendere quella che il direttore Bahati definisce «identità arricchita». I musicisti intervistati parlano spesso di «adattamenti», una sorta di «negoziazioni» (Macchiarella 2017) o «compensazioni» (Vygotski 1993) in cui performance, composizione e relazione sono inscindibili.

PAROLE CHIAVE interculturalità, inclusione, compensazioni, postcolonialismo, community music

SUMMARY

Intercultural choirs for inclusion purposes are projects of multi-part music, with a relevant political impact. A fascinating case study is the Elikya choir, born in Milan in 2010 and directed by Congolese director Raymond Bahati, with musicians from Burundi, Cameroon, Congo and Italy. Although it is Christian-inspired, it is not a liturgical choir, it is open to all and Faustin Ntsama, balafon and marimba player, explained the original purpose of the project was «to reverse course a bit» against the euro-centric acculturation processes typical of Catholic missions. I have examined the musical layers, namely the layers of intervention of African and Italian musicians in the final «combinatorics» (Aarom – Martin 2003), to understand what director Bahati defines «enhanced identity». The musicians interviewed often speak about «adaptations», a kind of «negotiations» (Macchiarella 2017), «compensations» (Vygotski 1993) in which performance, composition and relationship are inseparable.

KEYWORDS interculturality, inclusion, compensation, postcolonialism, community music



1. Introduction

ELIKYA choir is an intercultural project born in Milan in 2010, whose repertoire consists of Christian religious and secular songs, arranged by the choir director and the musicians who make up the ensemble. The name means *hope* in Lingala, one of the languages of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the home country of the conductor, Raymond Bahati. The original group was composed of about ten members, while today, after fourteen years, it has a much higher number, «a very rich mosaic of elements: fifty members (singers and musicians) of different nationalities - from China to Cameroon, from Ecuador to Brazil - including some refugees from sub-Saharan African countries».¹ I met the members and the director of the choir, starting from December 2020, through remote conference platforms, until the summer of the following year, when I spent four days with them in Lazio and Abruzzo. We trekked together in the Terre Mutate (Changed Lands), the natural and urban landscapes of the Apennines and around the areas destroyed by the 2016 earthquake, where they also performed in concert. Three years later, I attended one of their concerts at the Theater of the Pime Centre (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) in Milan (figure 1). As Elisa Caporali, a choir member and secretary, explained to me, collective participation in non-musical holidays or events is essential to the team spirit that characterises this project, and the walk in the Terre Mutate was a clear example of this: «As a choir, we value this a lot and always try to create opportunities for sharing, not just singing and then when everyone goes their separate ways, we go on holiday together».²

Elikya is a sort of laboratory for the «experimentation of creativity»,³ starting from the musical traditions of its members, giving life to «new sound frescoes generated by the intertwining of rhythmic and melodic combinations».⁴ Musicians play instruments from the classical European orchestra such as the violin, cello, flute, trumpet, guitar, and also keyboards, African percussion, marimba, depending on the musicians present. In Italy, there are several religious choirs that bring together diasporic minorities⁵ and a certain number of ethnic groups, but these are liturgical Christian choirs.⁶ At first glance, the

1. Cf. the choir's presentation on the website homepage: <https://www.elikya.it/web/coro-elikya/>.
2. Interview with Elisa Caporali conducted by Luciana Manca, on the online platform Zoom, on 30th December 2020.
3. Cf. biography of the director at the link: <https://www.chiesadimilano.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/83/2018/06/Il-direttore-Raymond-Bahati.pdf>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. COSENTINO, *Esengo*; RIZZUTO, *Coptic Orthodox*; FACCI, *La gioia del cantare*; FACCI, *Galoba*; FACCI – COSENTINO, *Problems of Method in a Fieldwork*.
6. I indicate by way of non-exhaustive examples, that during this ethnographic research, I had the opportunity to listen to religious functions and choirs of an Orthodox church in the industrial area of Mestre, which brings together Romanian, Moldovan, and Russian people, or choirs of Pentecostal churches in the industrial area of Pordenone, where Ghanaian, Ivorian, Nigerian communities meet and some Italians are also present. Alberto Annarilli talks about the intercultural choir of the Methodist church in the Castro Pretorio district, in ANNARILLI *et al.*, *Music and Migrations*.



Figure 1. Elikya choir at the Pime Theater (Milan, 28 th April 2023, photo by Luciana Manca)

idea of an intercultural choir would lead to imagining projects without any religious interference, precisely out of respect for cultural differences. However, despite not being a liturgical choir, Elikya's peculiar repertoires are partly inspired by Christianity but it is open to everyone, including believers of other religions, or atheists, while the social background of its members is also diverse, as they have various professions (Figure 1).

Similar forms of musical and social aggregation have been quite widespread in Italy since the 2000s and have a strong political impact, as the principles of sharing and welcoming have become increasingly misaligned with government actions and European and national legislation over the decades. In fact, a series of laws and decrees have increasingly hindered the entry, stay and inclusion of migrants, leading to the criminalisation of migration and even solidarity towards immigrants, as can be seen from a brief overview of the main Italian laws on migrants. In 2002, the residence permit in Italy was for the first time made conditional on a work contract,⁷ while in 2009 the crime of illegal immigration was introduced.⁸ The first riots of African labourers broke out, marking the history of gangmaster system, in Rosarno (RC) in 2010 and Nardò (LE) in 2011.⁹ In 2017, even rescue operations at sea were banned¹⁰ and a year later humanitarian protection was abolished¹¹ for those who were not entitled to international protection, thus exacerbating the

7. Law No. 189 of 30th July 2002, known as the 'Bossi-Fini Law'.

8. Law No. 94 of 15th July 2009, known as the Security Package.

9. Regarding Rosarno revolt, cf. DEVITT, *The Rosarno Revolt*; MONTAGNA, *Labor, Citizenship and Subjectivity*; CPERROTTA, *Rosarno, la rivolta e dopo* and about the Nardò revolt cf. SAGNET, *Ama il tuo sogno*.

10. Decree-Law No. 13 of 17th February 2017, known as the 'Minniti-Orlando Decree'.

11. Decree-Law No.113 of 4th October 2018, known as the 'Salvini Decree'.

discrimination between economic migrants and political refugees. Finally, in 2023, even applications for international protection underwent enormous restrictions, effectively creating a fortified country,¹² while Europe delegated the responsibility for pushbacks to foreign countries such as Turkey and Libya.¹³

In a similar political context, founding or participating in an intercultural choir has therefore represented a reactive practice of civil society, to express disagreement and contribute to making an alternative voice heard to those who were progressively deprived of the right to live, work, be there, and therefore exist in this country.¹⁴ A piece of Italian history composed of an active part of the population expresses its creative dissent by overturning the traditional multipart hierarchy. I mean in these choral projects, precisely those who transmit the song in another language have a leadership role, whereas they often suffer discrimination in the social fabric.¹⁵ This is the deep political and inclusive meaning of such choral activities, in which the individual's input is creatively reworked by the welcoming group. During my doctoral research, I tried to connect these realities that have created a national network, through online and in-person meetings, and in October 2023 they organised the first National Festival of Intercultural Choirs in Naples, named Babelebab.¹⁶

2. Original Idea

The founder of the choir, Raymond Bahati, is originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo and was born in Kinshasa. However, his paternal grandparents were of Sudanese origin and his maternal grandparents were Rwandan. In his home country, he was already a choir director and percussionist at the Saint Joseph College in Kinshasa. He arrived in Italy in 2002, where he later graduated in Psychology and worked as a trainer for intercultural operators at the Educational Orientation Center (COE), an essential institution for the

12. Decree-Law 133 of 5th October 2023.

13. Cf. *Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and fuel smuggling and on reinforcing the security of borders between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic* (2017): https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MEMORANDUM_translation_finalversion.doc.pdf and *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18th March 2016: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>.

14. Italian intercultural choirs were the subject of my doctoral thesis, currently being published, entitled *Cori-mondo: social activism and intercultural in choral music*. Key research on the subject includes: PARNCUTT-DORFER, *The Role of Music*; SCHUFF, *A Place Where I Can Contribute*; BURNETT, *Ethnic & Multicultural Perspectives*; BERGONZI – CARTER – GARRETT, *Establishing Identity*; DE QUADROS, *Focus: Choral Music in Global Perspective*.

15. MACCHIARELLA, *Theorizing On Multipart Music*, p. 13.

16. All decisions, the division of tasks among members, the date, the location of the Babelebab festival, etc., were democratically voted on through statistical forms on *Google Form* and created various committees for logistics, communication, etc., obtaining public funding, organising a crowdfunding campaign, and managing to bring about four hundred people to Naples, including choir members, conductors, and accompanists.

Elikya choir's history. In addition to Choir Master Raymond Bahati, there are other musicians active in the ensemble, with whom I have had conversations: Donat Munzila, a Congolese guitarist, bassist, singer, and arranger, Faustin Ntsama, a Cameroonian balafon player, two Italian musicians, a violinist and arranger Federico Bonoldi and guitarist Francesca Faramondi. I have also met and interviewed Jackson Bizimana, a multi-instrumentalist and piano player, who has performed with Elikya for two concerts in Amatrice during the trek in the Terre Mutate (Changed Lands).

Elikya was born from the evolution of an original idea of multicultural entertainment during masses, dating back to the 1990s and implemented within the COE, Educational Orientation Centre Association, a «non-profit Christian-inspired association»,¹⁷ founded in 1959 by Don Francesco Pedretti, a priest and professor of Latin and Greek from Albairate (MI). COE organised and still organises activities for «global citizenship»,¹⁸ national and international volunteering, social housing to promote the reception and integration of migrants, the African, Asian and Latin American Film Festival, etc. Despite Pedretti being a missionary priest, he reversed the perspective of colonial acculturation into an intercultural approach.¹⁹

Volunteering is not a prerogative of so-called developed or wealthy peoples, but it is a new vitality that blossoms in all peoples, and perhaps it will find new energy and creativity, capacity for change, and new models of society precisely in those that are poorer or less developed.²⁰

In order to frame these concepts in detail, it is useful to refer to Berry's psychological model of acculturation for minority groups, introduced in 1997, which identifies four strategies.²¹ Firstly, when individuals from a minority group adopt the majority culture while renouncing their own, there is a process of «assimilation»; conversely, when individuals maintain their original culture without adopting the majority one, it is called «separation». If both cultures come into contact – that is, when one retains their own culture while also adopting the majority culture – this leads to «integration» or «biculturalism». Meanwhile, alienation from both cultures results in a «marginalization» strategy. All of these cultural strategies, from assimilation to marginalization, have been activated in social groups, initially during colonial processes and later within contemporary migration.²² In particular, African colonialism, which Agawu defines as the «usurpation of Africa's political sovereignty and

17. Cf. <https://www.coeweb.org/chi-siamo/vision-mission/>.

18. <https://www.coeweb.org/chi-siamo/storia/>.

19. Cf. GUILBAULT, *Globalization and Localism*, p. 145, regarding hybrid music, the term «acculturation» takes on a Eurocentric connotation, «describing cultural contacts as a one-way exchange from a higher culture to a lower one».

20. Cf. about Francesco Pedretti on COE website: <https://www.coeweb.org/don-francesco/#diari>.

21. BERRY, *Acculturation and Psychological Adaptation*.

22. For an overview and a list of case studies related to this topic, cf. BERRY *et. al.*, *Psicologia transculturale* and SAM – BERRY, *The Cambridge Handbook*.

independence»,²³ from the time of the first Portuguese invasions in the 1400s, through the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, and up to the post-colonial outcomes of the post-World War II period, has indelibly marked the cultural dynamics of various African states.²⁴ A fundamental role was also played by the historical connections between colonialism and Catholic missions, which were constant and extensively documented in Africa. Missionaries often acted as intermediaries between the indigenous population and the colonial administration.²⁵ In the post-colonial phase, when former colonizing countries became destinations for migration, there was a shift by the Church from missionary evangelization to the welcoming of migrants.²⁶ This phenomenon is particularly evident in Italy, where religious organizations largely support migrant reception.²⁷ Indeed, the most detailed statistical reports on contemporary migration to Italy are published annually by Caritas and Migrantes, pastoral bodies of the CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference).²⁸

In this social context, Don Pedretti's initiative with the foundation of COE has clear postcolonial traits,²⁹ as it is based on what Elikya has concretely achieved: enabling an African community to transmit its culture and music in Italy, by teaching and practicing it within a multicultural setting. Postcolonial thought essentially proposes an inversion, originally literary-philosophical and later extended to the social sciences, in which the history of colonizing countries cannot be understood without the perspective of the colonized countries. Even after decolonization, through migratory phenomena resulting from the socio-political, environmental, and economic instability caused by centuries of plunder and abuse, these countries continue to experience the effects of those oppressions. Even white anti-racism is often characterized by paternalistic traits; this is why Miguel Mellino speaks primarily of the decolonization of thought.³⁰ Don Pedretti's thought is very far away from that «white» trap, because young migrants are for him the engine of a cultural awakening in Europe:

It is the new Africa, the people of God, that goes beyond the problems of inculturation and launches itself into the new intercultural society and offers

23. AGAWU, *Representing African music*, p. 49.

24. Cf. LICARI, *Gli effetti del colonialismo sui processi di acculturazione* and MARKOWITZ, *The Missions and Political Development in the Congo*.

25. Cf. PRUDHOMME, *Missioni cristiane e colonialismo* and CALPINI, *Colonialismo missionario*.

26. Cf. PIZZORUSSO, SANFILIPPO, *Dagli indiani agli emigranti*.

27. Cf. DE LAUSO – NANNI, cur., *Tutto da perdere*, «Of the total 8,594 beneficiaries followed by the operators of the Diocesan Caritas centers involved [...] since its inception, almost everyone have a foreign nationality. They consist primarily of single men, increasingly younger, who arrived in Italy through migrant routes» (author's translation).

28. For instance cf. *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2022*, Roma, Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS e Centro studi Confronti Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V.

29. Among the fundamental texts at the origin of post-colonial thought, FANON, *I dannati della terra*; SPIVAK, *Critica della ragione postcoloniale*; GILROY, *The Black Atlantic*; ROBINSON, *Black Marxism*.

30. MELLINO, *La critica postcoloniale*.

in its children the evangelical charity, universal brotherhood as a sign of the times».³¹

Referring to the musical field, as Henry Weman stated in 1960, «Western civilisation entered Africa like a conqueror. The missions taught Africans to think, speak, and sing like Westerners».³² He then listed specific aspects of this pedagogical process, such as replacing African melodies, adding harmonisations (even in four voices), and imposing major and minor tonalities or harmonies based on tonic, dominant, and subdominant chords.³³ These operations were diametrically opposed to what Don Francesco Pedretti, despite being a missionary, aspired to. In fact, Faustin Ntsama, a balafon player in the Elikya Choir, speaks about his *insight* and his desire *to reverse course a bit*:

The founder of this organism (COE) the priest Francesco Pedretti had just had this insight, that of *reversing the course a bit*. Up until sixty years ago, fifty years ago, it was common for people from the West to go to Africa to evangelise, help, educate, and train [...]. However, there was a whole culture there [...] that was very rich and alive, and so Francesco Pedretti started saying: «It is also important that from Africa, there are young people, emerging artists who, while we help them study [...], come to the old West to testify how faith has changed them, how science has changed them».³⁴

So, in Barzio near Lecco, where the COE headquarters is still located, every summer since the 1990s, with a project from the European Union, Pedretti invited girls and boys from Africa, Latin America and Asia. They had the opportunity to study at an Italian university and they also had the chance to exchange music and dances. They were thus involved in the animation of the masses, bringing songs from their own country of origin, as a contribution, so gradually the figure of the intercultural animator was born, increasingly supported by the COE, as well as a new communal way of experiencing liturgy through the music of various people. Donat Munzila captures the moment before the birth of the Elikya Choir, with the transition from these «casual formations»³⁵ that he recalls upon his arrival in Italy in 1995, to the creation of the Elikya Choir in 2010.

The period coincided with the legislative changes mentioned above and in particular with the turning point of 2009 with the so-called Security Package, which from that moment on, prevented the possibility of carrying out activities such as the summer meetings of the COE, as there was a risk that someone would decide to stay irregularly in Italy: immigration has been de-

31. PEDRETTI, *Diari*, p. 1219 (Wednesday, 21st February 1996 – Douala).

32. WEMAN, *African music and the church in Africa*, cited in STAPLETON – MAY, *Musica africana*, p. 25.

33. STAPLETON – MAY, *Musica africana*, p. 26.

34. Interview with Faustin Ntsama conducted by Luciana Manca, on the online platform Zoom, on 29th December 2020.

35. Interview with Donat Munzila, conducted by Luciana Manca, on the online platform Zoom, on 27th December 2021.

finitively declared illegal, because being undocumented immigrant became an aggravating factor in criminal offenses. Following that turning point, the birth of Elikya is historically situated. As Donat stated, «for the COE it had become a bit more problematic»³⁶ to create those summer groups, but the desire to continue meeting with that spontaneous and multicultural musical approach had already been sown in the «entertainer» residing in Milan. Therefore, Raymond Bahati had the idea of expanding the experience to Italians, representing a unique example, within the network of intercultural choirs, of inclusion not aimed at migrants, but born from them and aimed at the native population.

In this genesis lies the profound meaning of that «change of course» in missions, as mentioned by Faustin Ntsama regarding Pedretti. This shift brings new ideas and new music to the «old West», being proactive and engaging in intercultural projects, where African musicians involve Italians. The theme of a round trip journey of religious and musical content, first from Europe to Africa with colonisation and missions, and then from Africa to Europe with migratory flows, has represented a form of redemption deeply felt by today's migrants. This is affirmed by a Congolese musician in Cosentino's study on a Congolese choir in Rome,³⁷ which also mentions the Sacrosanctum Concilium of 1963, for the possibility granted to the Catholic Church to use traditional instruments in liturgical music. The evolution of the thoughts and actions of Don Francesco Pedretti has undoubtedly been influenced by that fundamental conciliar constitution.³⁸ Faustin Ntsama himself specifies that it was thanks to the Second Vatican Council and the opening of liturgies to traditional instruments that he started playing in a Catholic balafon orchestra in Cameroon and then brought his music and instrument to Italy.

The diachronic stratification is therefore palpable in the arrangements of the songs of the Elikya Choir, as noted by Federico Bonoldi, born in 1991, arranger, and graduated in violin and composition at the conservatory of Novara:

Some Christmas songs are actually very European, in how they are structured, because there is a bit of waltz [...] and because, as Raymond often tells in concerts, [...] the arrival of missionaries from African countries has also been very influential, [...] [they] have still brought European musical tradition

36. Interview cited with Donat Munzila.

37. COSENTINO, *Finger-Style Guitar in Malawi*, p. 105: «Christianity has not only been brought from Europe to Africa, but now it returns from Africa to Europe through music and the Gospel, and for us, it is an immense joy».

38. In point 37 of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it is stated: «Everything in the customs of the people that is not inseparably linked to superstitions or errors, the Church considers it with benevolence and, if possible, preserves it unchanged, and sometimes even admits it into the liturgy, as long as it can harmonise with the true and authentic liturgical spirit» Furthermore, in point 119: «In some regions, especially in missions, there are people with their own musical tradition, which has great importance in their religious and social life» This music should be given due recognition and a proper place both in the education of the religious sense of those people and in adapting worship to their nature.

to Africa. So, let's say that [...] some songs [...] are a bit of a mix of their own indigenous traditions, but at the same time mixed with what the missionaries or Western colonisers brought later. From this point of view, there is a lot of fusion between different musical elements.³⁹

In the following paragraphs, these stratifications and the interventions of each musician in the final «combinatory»⁴⁰ of the songs will be analysed, in what Maestro Bahati defines as «enriched identity».

3. *Enhanced identities* and Musical Blasphemies

Regarding the arrangement of a song, *The Rhythm of Faith*, Maestro Raymond Bahati recounts having contacted his Italian friend, Stefano Zucchelli,⁴¹ asking him to contribute his musical sensitivity: «this is music of contamination, it contaminates with its culture, whether he wants it or not, he is the product of his musical culture and [...] that's exactly what I'm looking for».⁴² The song is in six eighth notes, a time signature that Raymond defines as «very natural» for African musicians; so while Zucchelli arranged the instrumental part of the orchestra, he took care of the rhythmic aspects, following a rather predictable and stereotyped distribution of work between people from these cultures: harmony to Europeans and rhythm to Africans. In Raymond's words about their compositional procedures, there is a reflection on the history of some of the most famous musical contaminations of the 20th century, Afro-American music and the blues and jazz genres. He uses rather simplistic and stereotypical oppositional definitions, he speaks of «Westerners» as a noun for Europeans and a generic «African» for Congo and Cameroon according to a practice that has become widespread, despite the fact that the definition of «Westerners» has already been widely debunked since Said's *Orientalism*⁴³ and many African scholars, such as J. H. Kwabena Nketia have warned against the indiscriminate use of the term African to refer to the continent's particular and many cultures.⁴⁴

When the Western instrument plays, it finds itself in the instruments, the African finds itself in the rhythmic part, and together they create a very, very

39. Interview with Federico Bonoldi conducted by Luciana Manca, on the online platform Zoom, on 29th December 2021.

40. AROM – DENIS-CONSTANT, *Commercio, esotismo e creazione nella «World Music»*, p. 293. Within the heterogeneity that characterises «world music», the authors compile a list of compositional procedures that can overlap in a «combinatory manner» just as it happens in the arrangements of the Elikya choir.

41. See at link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1RHjkPpgyY>.

42. Interview with Raymond Bahati, conducted by Luciana Manca and Serena Facci, on the online platform Zoom, on 14th January 2021.

43. SAID, *Orientalism*.

44. NKETIA, *La musica dell'Africa*.

unique mix. This is also the result of research, because I really wanted to assign to each instrument something that they usually don't play in the conservatory in terms of rhythm. So, the violin does things to you as if it were a drum, in fact, for us, all the guitarists on African ground when they play, they don't play by pressing like the Italians, they play as if it were a drum, the sound is percussive. The same thing that African Americans brought with blues and jazz, by not having their traditional instruments as slaves, they saw that the colonisers had the piano [...] and they used those same instruments. In fact, they were almost dismissed as if to say: «You are blaspheming with the piano, you don't play like that» and that's how a new musical form was created, because it was the result of contamination. It is the same process that I try to do.⁴⁵

The process that took place in the American continent has counterparts, although not in sync in Africa and in Europe itself. In fact, the arrival of music from Africa to Europe through immigration is one of the many pieces that overlap with the evolution of urban music genres, such as highlife, soukous and Congolese rumba. These genres were born from adaptations of traditional music and performance techniques transferred from traditional instruments to guitars or brass instruments, which came from Europe and the Americas.⁴⁶ Therefore, new approaches were invented that, before consolidating themselves, from a certain point of view, went through a phase where they appeared as the «blasphemies» that Raymond talks about. The reworking of what is available is always crucial, but another relevant aspect is the subjectivity of those who collaborate in the composition of a piece («I'm looking for exactly that»).

For some songs, when I see that I want to dirty them, in quotes, [...] I say “Federico (the violinist) arrange this but [...] don't worry, arrange it as it comes to you, don't try to imitate me, you really don't have to imitate me, be yourself [...]. You add your touch to enrich it”. That's what I call enriched identity, which is valuable not only on a human level but also on a musical and artistic level.⁴⁷

The same can be said for the intervention of Faustin Ntsama on a piece like the Magnificat composed for Elikya by conductor Roberto Bacchini.⁴⁸ In this piece, Faustin, who often has the role of keeping the rhythmic patterns, has a different role, improvising completely from beginning to end, with a free rhythm, representing what he calls «a sprinkle of pepper, occasionally a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese»,⁴⁹ which creates a strange effect and greatly enriches the melody and mood of the piece.

45. Interview cited with Raymond Bahati.

46. Cf. STAPLETON – MAY, *Musica africana*, p. 23, and KUBIK, *L'Africa e il blues*. Furthermore cf. IMPEY, *Popular music in Africa*, p. 415 and following.

47. Interview cited with Raymond Bahati.

48. See at link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1XtZArk7aM>.

49. Interview cited with Faustin Ntsama.

I will therefore present some of these examples of «enrichment», which is nothing more than a constant dynamic of dialogue or «collective negotiation», or «amalgamation» as Macchiarella⁵⁰ defines it. In the case of the Elikya Choir, I would rather define it as «compensation», according to what can be inferred from the interviews with the musicians, who often use the key word «adapt», «adaptation». Thus, they shape their style with the aim of fostering human relationships, in a constant dialogue that sometimes requires waivers, other times excesses, in a «musicking»⁵¹ that seeks to continuously balance contradictions.

Donat Munzila states: «Many times I adapt, I adjust a little, I have to understand [...] the sensitivity with which it is interpreted, where that music is felt and who plays, is important to me»,⁵² while the meaning of Elikya's compositions is very detailed in the words of the balafon player Faustin Ntsama:

Effectively, in addition to the violin, cello and percussion, we also adapt the xylophone and other traditional instruments. Our intention is precisely to overcome limits or limitations that our cultures have simply imposed on us... By defining beforehand for what is right, what is beautiful, we also overturn this concept of beauty, showing the other side of the moon, the one that is not seen. The cello is next to the Senegalese drum. In the middle there is the xylophone that is played not as we would expect in a La Scala orchestra, but with a method and modality that is typically Cameroonian, in this case because I am from Cameroon; so, all this is constructed and arranged by Federico Bonoldi who plays the violin in the choir.⁵³

4. Musical Compensations

I chose to use the key concept of «compensation» to describe the musical interaction among the musicians of Elikya for two reasons. Firstly, compensation is essential in inclusive practices of special pedagogy,⁵⁴ and the Elikya choir is based on the principle of including everyone without entrance selection. Secondly, the theme of compensation and compromise was recurrent in interviews with the musicians involved in the research, who spoke about their strategies for adapting to new musical contexts. The origins of the key concept of «compensation» lie in Vygotsky's study of defectology,⁵⁵ a discipline whose terminology may now seem outdated or inappropriate, as it appears to focus on deficits rather than the individual's potential. On the contrary, Vygotsky's

50. MACCHIARELLA, *It Is a Matter of Amalgam*, p. 121.

51. SMALL, *Musicking*.

52. Interview cited from Donat Munzila.

53. Interview cited with Faustin Ntsama.

54. PINNELLI, *La pedagogia speciale per la scuola inclusiva*; CANEVARO – IANES, *Buone prassi di integrazione scolastica..*

55. VYGOTSKI, *The Collected Works*.

aim was precisely to emphasise the importance of the social consequences of a defect, rather than the defect itself,⁵⁶ thereby providing essential insights for contemporary theories on social inclusion,⁵⁷ where the concept of compensation is fundamental, as also reflected in current disability legislation.⁵⁸ Vygotsky specifically referred, on the one hand, to the compensatory actions an individual undertakes to balance their daily performance, and, on the other, to the practices of social inclusion implemented by social groups.

I would describe the former type of compensation as «internal», exemplified by the spatial orientation skills that a blind person enhances individually, and the latter as «external», such as the Braille system, which facilitates reading for the visually impaired. Thus, on one side, the psyche develops compensatory functions to address its deficiencies, while simultaneously the surrounding social environment becomes enriched with inclusive best practices. The relationships with the environment and with others are thereby enhanced, following a process which, beyond the context of disability, as pedagogist Luca De Giorgi suggests, is essentially akin to creative processes.⁵⁹ Transferring, then, to the musical sphere of the Elikya choir, I have identified three forms of compensation enacted by the musicians, one internal and the other two external. The first pertains to the way individual musicians play, specifically their personal instrumental technique acquired in their country of origin and subsequently enriched in Italy. The latter two are partially overlapping in Elikya's style and concern their interaction with one another on both a performative and compositional level.

4.1. *Internal/Executive Compensations: «The Sound You Have in Your Head»*

A common element among the African musicians in the ensemble is that, unlike their Italian colleagues, they have learnt as self-taught musicians, observing other musicians and playing in church groups in Africa, without a formalised study path. I therefore define these compensations as «executive» as I am referring to the manner of playing, the individual practice with one's instrument, distinguishing it from the subsequent «performative – compositional» compensation, which occurs in the interaction between musicians. Raymond even learnt to read music as a self-taught musician in Italy, in order to be able to conduct any type of musician,⁶⁰ and the same goes for Faustin,

56. *Ibid.*, p. 55: «The entire psychological life of an individual consists of a succession of combative objects, directed at the resolution of a single task: to secure a definite position with respect to the immanent logic of human society, or the demands of the social environment. In the last analysis, the fate of personality is decided not by the existence of a defect in itself but by its social consequences, by its socio-psychological realization».

57. GIEST, *Vygotsky's Defectology*.

58. Law No. 170, of 8th October 2010, on specific learning disorders, refers to «compensatory tools», meaning paper or digital tools useful for achieving educational objectives

59. DE GIORGI, *Creatività e compensazione in Vygotskij*.

60. From the aforementioned interview with Raymond Bahati: «I have never even received formal training at a music conservatory in Italy, so my reading of sheet music [...] is self-

Donat, and Jackson. In particular, Donat, initially a bassist, explains that he started playing the guitar in the church group because the official guitarist was often absent and he would replace him; so he took the guitar in his hands trying to «produce the sounds needed for the group»,⁶¹ because «in the rush to produce, you immediately start interpreting sounds».⁶² Upon arriving in Italy, he continued with the same cognitive style, trying to study the electric guitar with a teacher, but he was dissatisfied with it:

He immediately wanted to change my setting. It wasn't what I was looking for, so I quit after two lessons. [...] I wanted to work on the sound, how to achieve it and how to play on a specific thing. [...] We had to work on analysing the pieces and improvisations, then of course, in order to produce a sound, you have to develop a technique; I work on that technique, if I have to do something, the important thing is to feel that I am producing it without looking at whether the pick has to go down, it has to go up on the second stroke (ecc)... That's how I ended up doing it myself.⁶³

In Donat Munzila's guitar technique, his roots and his passion for Congolese Rumba blend with other genres, from jazz to rock to bossa nova, which he learnt in Italy, where he continued to study theory, harmony, and improvisation as a self-taught musician. While with his left hand he may appear as a jazz guitarist, with his right hand he often uses the thumb-index technique of Rumba,⁶⁴ occasionally also using a pick with the electric guitar. As in the tradition of guitarists from Congo-Zaire, Donat Munzila has preserved the two-finger technique, that is, thumb-index, while the middle and ring fingers are resting on the guitar,⁶⁵ as evident in Figure 2. The accentuating effect and dynamic play of this «finger style» is completely different from the European fingerpicking style,⁶⁶ which involves all fingers on the guitar strings, so preserving this «intangible cultural heritage»⁶⁷ allows Munzila to develop a highly personal hybrid style. His «bi-musicality»⁶⁸ is manifested through the integration of the use of both hands, with the right hand preserving the culture of origin, with its rhythmic and «motor» aspects, while the left hand also

taught because no one studies music in our country. [...] However, I made the choice to be self-taught, so I have self-educated myself [...] because later on, I also realised while managing all the instrumentalists who have attended music conservatories [...] that the language to maintain artistic balance is sheet music, so I must know how to read sheet music».

61. Interview cited with Donat Munzila.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

64. STEWART, *Rumba on the River*.

65. KUBIK, *Emica del ritmo musicale africano*, p. 70 and following.

66. Cf. COSENTINO, *Finger-Style Guitar in Malawi*, p. 47, where he explains the different use of finger style and finger picking, and how in finger style the thumb plays the three lowest strings and the index finger plays the three highest strings.

67. Cf. the Unesco website, at the link: <https://www.unesco.it/it/news/ecco-i-nuovi-elementi-iscritti-nelle-liste-del-patrimonio-culturale-immateriale-dellunesco-dicembre-2021/>.

68. HOOD, *The Challenge of «Bi-Musicality»*.



Figure 2. Donat Munzila plays with the thumb-index technique (Amatrice (RI), 22th August 2021, photo by Luciana Manca)

incorporates the cultures known in the host country, with genres such as jazz, bossa nova, rock, etc. Obviously, the execution dynamics relate the two hands in correlated patterns,⁶⁹ but it is certain that he has never abandoned the first technique he learnt, nor has he ever thought of transforming it with a teacher, remaining free in his choices of timbre, rhythm, etc.

The reproduction of a sought-after effect that «comes to head» also characterises Faustin's style, who, in order to play with tempered instruments, replaced his balafon with a xylophone, but remained attached to the sound of his traditional instrument:

You see that the sticks I use are not the original ones, they are built by me. [...] So this is a bit the ancestor of the xylophone, the marimba, the vibraphone, this is the ancestor, so I start from there, so I need to reproduce the sound that I have in my head. So, the sticks that come with the instrument, the xylophone, from Holland or wherever, don't give me that, so I make them myself.

In both cases, there is an internal negotiation between the desire to reproduce the «sound in one's head» that recalls the music of the country of origin, and the desire to play in a group, «a combination between maintaining individual distinctiveness and mutual merging».⁷⁰ As mentioned above, these individual inventions and strategies on one's instrument are also typical of the evolution of urban genres in Central-West Africa and blues and jazz in America. In the current social context they become pragmatic effects of the desire to interact, while still carrying one's cultural background.

69. KUBIK, *Emica del ritmo musicale africano*.

70. MACCHIARELLA, *It Is a Matter of Amalgam*, p. 121



Figure 3. Chopsticks of Faustin Ntsama (picture sent to me from Faustin Ntsama on 4 th September 2023)

4.2. *External-Performative Compensations: Fluid Arrangements*

Other executive-collective stratagems during performances occur within the interaction between musicians, through the possibility of exchanging roles in the arrangements, essential to one of the aspects that characterise the «inclusive» music, that is, discontinuity. Compensation enhances a difficulty, i.e. the musical parts can be interchangeable and played by the musicians who are present at rehearsals or public performances, creating added value for the creativity of the whole group. The need to replace absent musicians depends on the «fluidity» of their presence,⁷¹ and even though in the Elikya choir the instrumentalists are usually the same, there are times when they have work commitments or when the choir performs in other cities, so they are not always all present. Federico Bonoldi explains the need for «fluid» arrangements, also with budget issues, as sometimes professional musicians are invited.

Depending on the event, based on the availability of musicians, and perhaps even the availability of budget for the choir, a certain number of instrumentalists can play [...]. And therefore, another part [...] of our work is to adapt each piece to the situation's ensemble.⁷²

71. Further affinity with the Congolese choir in Rome, in COSENTINO, *Finger-Style Guitar in Malawi*, where he talks about «liturgical jam sessions» played and sung by whoever is present at the time, p. 48.

72. Interview cited with Federico Bonoldi.

4.2.1. *Esila*

Esila is a significant piece both for observing the compensations implemented to overcome the absence of musicians and for the inherent possibilities in the piece to play rhythmic and harmonic variations. It was composed by Lokua Kanza, a living composer, guitarist and singer, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, born in Bukavu and who later moved to Kinshasa, the same city as Raymond Bahati and Donat Munzila, to study at the conservatory. Since his teenage years, he has been playing guitar in Zairean rumba orchestras, and in 1984 he went to Paris to study jazz guitar and began accompanying various musicians, including Ray Lema and Papa Wemba. He held his first major Parisian concert in 1992, that same year he also released his first album. In 1994, he won the Best African Album award at the African Music Awards and signed with BMG, starting to collaborate with musicians such as Youssou N'Dour and Peter Gabriel and embarking on international tours.

Donat Munzila arranged this piece orally, as is his custom, and he explained to me that his compositional and transmission technique to other musicians is done through the guitar, that is, he plays for them what he wants them to do with their instruments:

Donat: [Esila] is what I was saying, I rearranged it, I also gave the parts to Faustin and it's all oral. I'm not saying to improvise, I play what I have in my head because I compose everything in my head and I have to hear what I have thought. Then the flutist, when I play with the guitar, writes [...] and the violinist also writes quickly. To Francesca I say, «You have to play this, don't add anything!» because she's afraid of creating gaps. In churches, in oratories, people are used to playing [...] filling in, but in *Esila* I don't want that.

Luciana: Do you want it more minimal?

Donat: Yes, minimal, because they know that I am strict about these things. I interrupt, let's not continue.⁷³

I had the opportunity to witness the typical forms of exchange that occur in *Elikya* during a concert in Amatrice, which I will talk about later. The musicians were few because it was a trip. Sister Cinzia, a former choir member who had moved to Abruzzo, contacted a local musician, Jackson Izimana, a young multi-instrumentalist from Burundi. He immediately managed to fit in with the keyboard in the repertoire songs, and it was interesting to note how the original rhythmic pattern, originally intended for Faustin Ntsama on the xylophone, was played on the guitar, while the keyboard had space for improvisation. Jackson Bizimana was also on the same wavelength as Donat Munzila regarding the use of silence in the arrangements:

My solo was entirely based on the minor blues scale, rhythmically speaking [...] I always followed the beat. I started a bit low and then went up [...] I start from below, so I give you the feel first, a bit, I don't fully unleash it, and then when I see that I've given you enough, I go up. [...] I started little by little [...]

73. Interview cited with Donat Munzila.

the sung line, but without doing it all, you understand? Just give a little to understand what's happening [...] I only bring it out to understand where we are, but without giving you everything at the same time, you know? Because, remembering that it has to be sung, I don't give it all to you because if you then take it, when you sing it, it's already boring. Even pauses are very important.⁷⁴

The three chapters of [Video 1](#) correspond to three different versions of *Esila*, a song by Lokua Kanza. The first one is in Amatrice (RI), on 22th August 2021 and allow us to appreciate Jackson Bizimana solo, while the prevailing rhythmic-melodic pattern is played by the guitar of Donat Munzila. In the second chapter this pattern is shifted to the marimba, played by Faustin Ntsama, during a concert in Milan, on 28th April 2023, while the third chapter of the video captures the same concert, but during the encore. You may notice the choir is now very free and relaxed and in the end there is the participation of a group of the audience dancing on stage and some lively choreographies by the choir. This is the aforementioned improvisational part where, as noted by Francesca Faramondi, the guitarist of the ensemble, the space dedicated to the role of percussion is predominant compared to other instruments. She graduated in guitar from the conservatory, currently she is part of a music therapy choir and plays in a Swiss plucked orchestra, so her approach in the Elikya choir is interesting as it starts from a classical training, enriched by a passion for traditional music. What, in her opinion, differentiates the music of the choir from other repertoires in which they perform, is the rhythmic approach to all instruments, for example, «the flute is played in a more rhythmic way [...], but also the voices are used as if they were instruments».⁷⁵

4.3. *External-Compositional Compensations: Written and Oral Ideation*

As previously mentioned, performance and composition are two facets of a single, spontaneous arrangement process, as there is no clear distinction between improvisation and composition/performance. Consequently, the external compensations – performative and compositional – can sometimes converge, meaning compositions may emerge from improvisation and, in turn, are subject to alteration during performances, both due to the interchange of roles among musicians and the inclination to vary from the written or oral framework. Within this musical complexity, the work of collective composition naturally tends towards simplification where possible, through an internal distribution of tasks that respects each musician's skills. Written scores are produced by the Italian musicians, mainly for their own use and to preserve the structure of the pieces, also for future musicians who may join the ensemble from time to time.

74. Interview with Jackson Bizimana, conducted by Luciana Manca, on the online platform Zoom, on 28th December 2021.

75. Interview with Francesca Faramondi, conducted by Luciana Manca, on the online platform Zoom, on 27th December 2023.

There are rhythms of ours that we have tried and (Federico) struggles to harmonise them, so what do we do then? We distribute the roles a bit and I say, «this is the harmonisation, add your part of the violin, the part of the strings, so double bass, cello, based on a pre-set harmony already by us, by me».⁷⁶

4.3.1. Lokumu na Mokonzi and Pro patria pro Deo

Even this division of roles based on skills is a type of social compensation, which arises not only from aesthetic intentions but also from the propensity to help each other. A significant piece from this point of view is *Lokumu na Mokonzi*, arranged by Federico Bonoldi, who, while listening to the African musicians perform the piece for the first time, transcribed it.

They started playing with the percussion instruments and I understood the rhythm to adapt it to the ensemble. [...] Each person contributes based on their own skills. What they invented, they were not able to write it down, so I did it for them.⁷⁷

This form of composition with multiple voices is related to the concept of «poli-brain»⁷⁸ by Joseph Jordania, which mentions the relationship between the voices of John Lennon and Paul McCartney in *Love Me Do*, a song that is strongly characterised by collective composition, as can be seen from the polyphonic play in which sixth and fourth intervals alternate. *Love Me Do* wouldn't have been as interesting if it had been composed by only one of them, as you can feel the imprint of both. Even *Lokumu na Mokonzi* is a song in which traces of multiple people have settled, because in Elikya everyone is free to learn and play in the most suitable way for their training; Donat Munzila does it orally and Federico Bonoldi in writing, but the moment when we help each other coincides with the act of composition.⁷⁹

On the first page of the score, the absence of percussion and guitars is immediately evident, because as we said, the percussionist Faustin and the guitarist Donat do not read, or rather, they do not need to read the music. Even the Italian guitarist, Francesca, does not have the score but follows harmonic progressions.⁸⁰ In fact, Bonoldi specified that he writes for wind instruments and strings, and in case new musicians from the European tradition join for a concert, he takes care of transcribing the parts for them.

In that score [*Lokumu na Mokonzi*], all the offbeat parts of the wind instruments, violins, and strings are derived from the rhythmic structure of the percussion that Raymond and other African musicians played for us when

76. Interview cited with Raymond Bahati.

77. Interview cited with Federico Bonoldi.

78. JORDANIA, *Social factor in traditional polyphony*, p. 149 and following.

79. See at link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=styrw1XRsmI> at minute 00:17.

80. Interview cited with Federico Bonoldi.

they presented the piece. For example, even Faustin with the marimba follows a certain rhythm that we have then translated for other instruments, thus coordinating the rhythm of the percussion with the other more Western instruments.⁸¹

The starting point is always the percussion, and even wind instruments and strings play rhythmic melodies: the sixteenth note rest at the beginning of the measure and the syncopated rhythm played by the trumpet always start on the upbeat of the first and third beats, generating emphasis on the second and fourth beats, progressively emphasised by the guitars as well. According to Raymond Bahati, the rhythmic peculiarities of this piece strongly highlight the contamination between Europe and Africa. He explains how complex it is to explain to amateur choristers how to start a piece on an upbeat, which is why the compositional choice proposed in *Lokumu na Mokonzi*, together with the other African musicians that Federico Bonoldi gathers and develops in the score, highlights and transforms this difficulty into the strength of the piece. Essentially, the melody (rhythm) of most instruments arrives on the second and fourth beats, emphasising this shift with syncopations that precede the beat (Example 1).

Another significant piece on this theme and on pedagogical-compositional compensations in the Elikya choir is *Pro patria pro Deo* ([Video 2](#)), composed by Maestro Bahati and arranged by an Italian composer, Sebastiano Zucchelli. I attended some online rehearsals where I could observe the difficulties that the director was talking about, especially regarding the ternary rhythms. Evidently, the ability to divide into triplets is a prerequisite for producing offbeat entries, and these are challenging topics in intercultural music communication between Europeans and Africans, just as modal scales and non-tempered intervals could be for dialogue between Europeans and Asians, Middle Easterners, or North Africans. Each time, directors of intercultural choirs find strategies to transform difficulties into stimuli. For example, for Bahati, the inconvenience of ternary rhythms in pieces like *Lokumu na Mokonzi* or *Pro patria pro Deo* has given him the input to enhance his pedagogical methodologies. In fact, he has developed an anatomical theory for learning ternary rhythms. He explained to me that the lungs have an internal movement that adds to the inspiration and expiration, and this third internal movement can help Italian amateur choristers reproduce the ternary rhythm in singing. To learn the 6/8 rhythm (which Bahati explains in first chapter of [Video 2](#)) he therefore recommended singing barefoot to focus more on the body:

I see that in the choir, making the timing match is a difficult thing... and do you know what I discovered? I changed the rehearsal approach with the choir, but I really sweated in these ten years to identify the learning methods, how to convey a piece and a rhythmic sense. I asked them to dance while singing because when you move, your lungs undergo movements. In this way, they manage to match that rhythmic part, because I perceive those milliseconds

81. *Ibid.*

Example 1. *Lokumu na mokonzi* (bb. 1-3; score kindly provided by Federico Bonoldi)

Coro Elikya
 (arr. strum. Federico Bonoldi,
 arr. coro Edgar Vayemba)

INTRO STRUM.

(in alternativa ai flauti, alla marimba)

f Coro Elikya

of delay and I am not satisfied, something is missing because they rely on the beat... they really distort the groove. They realised it when we went to the recording studio, because all the track graphics are there and you can see those small milliseconds of delay that are only perceived when you «zoom in» on the track and you realise that it is shifted a bit, it's not right, it doesn't fall where it should.⁸²

In the end, the director was not satisfied with the achieved result, so the compromise made by the Italian arranger, was to transform the $\frac{6}{8}$ into a $\frac{4}{4}$ with

82. Interview cited with Raymond Bahati.

triplets or $\frac{12}{8}$ to make it more understandable for the Italian amateur choristers (second chapter of [Video 2](#)). Compensations are processes that involve directors, composers, and choristers, and the results may resemble some «fusion» outcomes of world music,⁸³ although they may be less musically complex. However, in these case studies, the stereotype of musical contamination between different geographical origins, in which musical roles are assigned based on ethnicity (for example, rhythm to Africans and harmony to Europeans, as Bahati stated), is not aimed at performances or record productions, but rather serves social inclusion and arises from the desire to share real-life experiences. Constant agreement on how to play is almost impossible, but negotiation is ongoing, and the effort that sustains the relationship within the Elikya Choir is the ‘joyful price to pay’ for social sharing.

In conclusion, I believe that interpreting musical practices through the compensation paradigm can benefit studies on musical practices in multicultural contexts from a pedagogical perspective, as what was spontaneously learned and applied by the musicians in the Elikya Choir could be replicated in educational contexts to facilitate amateur collaboration. The musical journey of this choral project, where people also share private life, holidays, etc., can serve as evidence of the utility and desirable replicability of their strategies, contributing to musicological case studies that enrich transcultural psychology and special pedagogy.

AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS

(last accessed January 2025)

Video 1. *Esila* by Lokua Kanza (arr. by Donat Munzila). Elikya Choir (Milan, Italy), Raymond Bahati, cond. Live performances from concerts in Amatrice (RI, Italy), Town Square, August 22, 2021 and in Milan (Italy), Pime Theatre, April 28, 2023. Camera, sound, and editing by Luciana Manca, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nof-zU4Tpys>.

Video 2. *Pro Patria pro Deo* by Raymond Bahati (arr. by Stefano Zucchelli). Conversation with Raymond Bahati and live performance by the Elikya Choir (Raymond Bahati, cond.). Milan (Italy), Pime Theatre, April 28, 2023. Camera, sound, and editing by Luciana Manca, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIzbUuryqWQ>.

83. On «world music» cf.: BOHLMAN, *World Music, a Brief Introduction*; AUBERT, *Le culture musicali del mondo*; AROM – DENIS-CONSTANT, *Commercio, esotismo e creazione nella «World Music»*; STEVEN FELD, *My Life in the Bush of Ghost*; BALTZIS, *Globalization and Musical Culture*; DARI, *Orchestrale multiethnische*; WHITE, *Music and Globalization*.

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