Becoming a Musician in Black South African Communities: Domains of Music Learning, Training and Apprenticeship Processes

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Abstract

Music education encompasses both formal instruction in institutions and informal community apprenticeships. In South Africa, formal music education is limited to a specific social class or race, thus creating substantial barriers for disadvantaged aspiring musicians due to resource scarcity and high entry requirements. This makes it nearly impossible for individuals from poor backgrounds without prior school-level music education to enter university music programmes. Despite this, young Black musicians with impressive knowledge and skills are emerging in local communities. Something must account for this development. This research utilised a qualitative methodology to explore the success factors in non-formal, informal and formal music skill acquisition domains. As an empirical study, it relies on insights gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with musicians. Logic dictates that restricted access to formal training for black students must lead to a shortage of high-calibre musicians. However, the rising number of proficient musicians suggests the presence of equally, if not better, alternative training pathways. These pathways often derive from church and family influences. The success stems from blending diverse backgrounds with advancing technology, which democratises music lesson access for self-taught musicians lacking university education.

Keywords: music education, formal training, informal apprenticeship, community-based learning, bandstand learning, self-taught, non-formal training

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Introduction

It is crucial to investigate the interplay between non-formal, informal and formal music knowledge acquisition in the context of Black South Africa. Children are musically socialised while still in their mother's womb (Ullal-Gupta *et al.* 2013; Al-Qahtani 2005), in the homestead (Trehub 2019; Kreutzer 2001) progressing through kindergarten, school and, if privileged enough, tertiary institutions. From the womb to the tomb, African children engage with music, including learning, through non-formal and informal means. Only those who eventually make a living as music educators, or to a lesser extent as performers, encounter some kind of formal music training. This interplay between non-formal, informal, and formal music knowledge acquisition is a continuing subject of investigation, particularly concerning youth music training. For instance, Douglas and Dickens (2016) examined the musical experiences of London's youth in informal, formal, and non-formal environments. Scholars posit that conventional music education may encompass these domains. It is suggested that combining these three methods could enhance popular music education (Ng 2020; Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004).

These are formal, non-formal, and informal music learning approaches. Formal music education is structured and occurs in schools, focusing on music theory, history, performance, and composition. Non-formal music education offers flexibility and occurs in community settings or online, enhancing personal and cultural competencies. Informal learning is unstructured, occurring through personal experiences and self-directed activities, influenced by factors such as age and culture. To the three, I propose the introduction of a fourth domain, namely incidental music learning. Incidental music learning is unplanned and happens through everyday activities (Ellis 1995; Sharples 2019). A pertinent example in the African context would be the accrual of music performative skills by initiates who primarily undergo healing training processes. These four music learning domains are crucial to the successful acquisition of music skills in Black communities in South Africa. The extent to which they are present in the gospel music training spaces was the subject of this research.

It is important to note that music education, as defined here above, is not the sole method of acquiring self-sufficiency. Other forms of music learning are more prevalent and equally effective. Weidner (2018) identifies music apprenticeship as one of the most formidable alternative approaches that involve transferring music skills across various settings within broader

transactional frameworks. Like music education, which is school-based, this approach equally, or perhaps differently, enables 'student' musicians to develop competencies that foster musical proficiencies such as critical thinking, reflexivity and dexterity expected of 'educated' motor skills. The strength of music apprenticeship lies in its broad reach that typically transcends formal, non-formal, and informal boundaries. Apprenticeship generally offers a form of situated and embodied learning, which aligns more closely with professional practice compared to the distanced and theoretical approach often encountered in formal education. This model enables learners to engage directly with experts and the community of practice, thereby providing a more authentic learning experience (Groth 2024).

This paper employs the terms 'music education' and 'music appreciation' interchangeably as they both encompass aspects of the music learning process. The study aims to demonstrate a hypothesis that the apprenticeship model, as it exists within the Black gospel community, is potentially more effective in training musicians. This empirical research adopts an Africa-sensed theoretical approach, integrating various methodologies, including phenomenology and ordinary African musicology philosophy, to investigate music training within the context of the gospel music apprenticeship phenomenon.

Shokane and Masoga (2018) contend that research in and about Africa must primarily be relevant to Africa and her people. Only then will it become beneficial through effective interventions, social change, and knowledge production that respects and empowers local communities. The Africa-sensed approach ultimately seeks to decolonise and transform research methodologies in African studies.

Phenomenology is a philosophical method that investigates human consciousness's experiences and perceptions, focusing on their essences, meanings, and necessary relations. It endeavours to transcend the mind's inclination for abstraction and conceptual frameworks, striving for an unbiased perspective to engage with and examine immediate experiences directly. Insofar as Africa is concerned, Mutema (2003) finds phenomenology particularly valuable for studying indigenous knowledge systems. Phenomenology, when applied to music, emphasises direct aesthetic experiences over naturalistic methods, focusing on engagement with the music. It addresses fundamental questions about the nature, reality, and spatial, temporal, and consciousness-related aspects of musical works (Martinelli 2020; Medova & Kirichenko 2020; Szyszkowska 2018; Dura 2006).

To further localise it to a particular cultural context, Mapaya and Mugovhani (2018) propose 'Ordinary African Musicology' as a philosophical approach to analysis. Whereas a phenomenon can be observed, language would be better used to express ideas and thus form the basic tool for analysis. The combination of phenomenology and ordinary African musicology represents ethnographic qualitative research designs that facilitate the exploration of investigative and contextual questions beyond the scope of a single methodological approach (Krueger 1987).

On the 'non-formal' Music Training/ Apprenticeship

The discourse concerning the informal realm or sphere of music appreciation engenders two institutions that are instrumental in the initial socialisation and training processes, namely the family and the church. The family connection to tradition, culture, and values is a crucial precursor to understanding how and what kind of musical sensibilities prevail in a particular context. Equally significant in expanding musical perceptions is the role of the Church, where mainstream denominations and their Pentecostal and African-initiated Church variations influence the musical direction of aspiring musicians who, by default, belong to one church or another.

Family as a Site for Incidental Music Apprenticeship

Music apprenticeship within the family context is incidental, with no obvious syllabus or curriculum to follow, no so-called trained professionals to provide guidance and no deliberate intent to acquire musical skills or knowledge. The family is the initial institution that initiates a child's lifelong journey of exploration and learning (Dukaļska 2021). As part of this process, children become familiar with family and communal customs and traditions, and music is an important aspect of this unfolding cultural universe. For instance, singing is the soundtrack of all rituals – from soothing the baby to interment (Onwekwe 2019). Accordingly, families, including children, frequently employ aural-oral sustained strategies as a means of transmitting and acquiring music skills across generations. Although the purpose may not be overtly stated, the inclusion of pedagogical suggestions implies a conscious effort to acquire music skills. This is supported by Mapaya's (2011) identification of several family-based music-learning strategies, such as immersion, isolation, imitation, drilling, and coercion, which encompass various stages of a child's

development.

Given their prevalence as typical family and communal socialisation milestones, it is reasonable to assume that all African children undergo some form of music apprenticeship. This is supported by the fact that all community members in African societies actively participate in various music-making performance settings (Barber 1997). Participation in performative music engagements can take many forms, such as *go phaphatha* (clapping complementary rhythms), *go dumela* (singing or humming a refrain musical phrase), *go thekela* (sporadic flirting and decorative dancing), or simply *go letša mphuludi* (ululating).

As per the African worldview, individuals from families said to be 'called' by communal deities into sacred functions such as music-making in rituals are recognised by all, akin to individuals born into royal families, families responsible for divination and healing, or families that are custodians of rainmaking rituals. In most African societies, including among Sesotho speakers, such recognition is often framed in terms of the child having taken after a particular family member(s). The Bukusu people of Kenya believe that '*kalonda kumusambwa kwe bakuka bewe*', implying that the child has inherited the spirit of their ancestors. As a result, it is expected that children from musical families should excel in music-making and performance. This expectation is based on the understanding that musical abilities are genetically transmitted from one generation to the next, despite the presence of a musical apprenticeship environment in such families.

Unfortunately, African family values and customs have been continually eroded by colonial institutions such as the Church, media, invasive technologies, cell phones, and Western-modelled education (Katundano 2020). Consequently, the reliability and durability of these methods for acquiring music skills have become weakened and fragile, rendering them unable to withstand persistent disruptions and erosions. Regrettably, this has resulted in the diminishment of family-based modes of talent nurturing to the point of insignificance.

Non-formal Music Apprenticeship and the Church

In South Africa, non-formal music training and apprenticeship 'pedagogies' are found in most churches, especially the African-initiated churches (AICs) such as the Zion Christian Church, African Israel Church Nineveh, iBandla lamaNazaretha, and churches such as the Holy Ghost Church of East Africa.

In these AICs, singing is influenced by the African performative ethos, and there is typically little emphasis on rehearsals since singing and performance are organic and often spontaneous. During the mass singing, there is no discernible separation between the congregants. Collectively, they form a unified musical entity that occasionally comprises distinguishable subsets, such as male or female choirs. Apart from their musical function, these subsets serve as essential social structures within the church. They contribute to fostering a sense of belonging and significance for those affiliated with the church.

Because musical performances are inherently organic, the acquisition of performative skills is usually incidental. Participation in church activities enables individuals to acquire musical proficiency unconsciously. The traditional method of identifying music leaders involves recognising inherent qualities, which is analogous to the procedures observed within African family and community settings. Natural talent in leadership or singing is identified and then afforded the opportunity to fulfil their designated roles. It is undeniable that music apprenticeship within AICs is informal, reflecting the ongoing tradition of family and communal music instruction.

The mainline Church tradition has a well-established and respected position in formal educational, artistic, and architectural institutions (von Simson 2016). In contrast, the Mainline Church (MC) in South African villages and townships lacks a vibrant music environment, with choral singing being the only form of music-making, to a lesser extent. During an interview, choir adjudicators Nick and Christina Hoffman asserted that African choral music ought to be valued for its own intrinsic merit. They posited that choral singing is as laudable as any other genre.

Formal music education is not always accessible in Black communities, so MCs rely on informal methods, such as apprenticeship or non-formal training, to enhance their choristers' skills. This typically involves forming groups and committing to regular rehearsals. Ideally, the church could hire a trained or experienced musician to teach music skills, such as singing scales, voice production, and tonic-solfa reading, to the groups. However, in most cases, music skills are acquired informally through incidental learning or social needs. Joining the choir is often a social necessity rather than a formal requirement. Even without regular rehearsals or sporadic sharing of musical information, many South Africans possess the ability to sing in a choir informally. Being a choir member is sufficient for managing this type of music apprenticeship.

On the Formal Music Training/ Apprenticeship

The relationship between Western classical music education and Mainline Churches (MCs) is analogous to that between MCs and universities. Western classical music has been employed in religious services for several centuries, thereby establishing a lasting connection. The use of classical music in liturgical services by the Roman Catholic Church is a time-honoured tradition that dates back to the Gregorian chant era. According to John McManners (2003), composers such as John Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Georg Friedrich Händel derived inspiration from their religious convictions and primarily composed music for religious purposes.

Notably, this era's extensive body of musical works serves as the foundation for the music education curriculum. From a Chinese perspective, classical music is highly valued in students' music education and holds significant importance in fostering music literacy, particularly in the context of higher vocational colleges (Huifang & Hao 2021). The centrality of Western classical music is entrenched by concepts such as 'musical arts' as propagated by scholars associated with the Pan-African Society for Musical Arts Education. Nzewi (2007) explains the rationale behind the term to frame or integrate music, dance, and what he refers to as plastic art as a single entity. This concept is closely linked to the Western Art Music version. This serves as a prime example of the lingering influence of Western classical music. Indigenous African music is only recognised as such in relation to classical music.

It is widely acknowledged that formal music education is highly valued within the white sector of South African society. This appreciation, combined with their higher levels of financial resources, has enabled the MCs in these communities to employ university graduates as organists, music directors, and music education leaders. It is worth noting that a substantial portion of the music curriculum is geared towards producing concert musicians who can serve as church musicians, thereby perpetuating the cycle.

Kindergarten Music and School Music Education

In South Africa, formal education encompasses kindergarten, preschool, primary, secondary, and high school (Venter 2022). In both countries, students who exhibit exceptional talent and commitment may pursue further education in music by enrolling in programmes at colleges or universities (McPherson

1997). Some children may have been exposed to music at home and may come from musical families, possessing either innate talent or skill. It is crucial to nurture the initial musical aptitude of children (McPherson 1997). Music, like other art forms, can be a powerful tool for teaching various aspects of the curriculum. This suggests that children possess an innate understanding of music. They may all have needed to learn new rhymes.

Learning music for its own sake depends on the teacher's abilities in front of the class. It is crucial that the musical experience, even when directed by the teacher, remains connected to the child's culture. Emphasis should be placed on African rhymes, as Muwati *et al*. (2016) state, 'provide a curriculum of life and living that is indentured to African people's agenda for child growth and human development [while Western rhymes] canalise African children's consciousness along the path of morbid Western traditions and value systems'. Instead of introducing 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' and 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' too quickly, cultural rhymes from the home environment should be incorporated into play-based activities designed to nurture and enhance social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Thus, in using music to learn other subjects and exchanging nursery rhymes, the music education domain remains non-formal, despite the teacher's direction, structure, and mediation.

Music education is primarily offered in white-only schools in South Africa, while townships and rural schools do not offer it at all. Hence, the policy's stipulations regarding music education are rendered immaterial. Consequently, the tradition of high school bands is non-existent. The absence of music activities in schools deprives learners of an essential avenue for emotional and personal development (Ros-Morente *et al.* 2019). Instead of engaging in band activities, learners often turn to DJing as an alternative. However, the usability of DJing in education remains inconclusive. The DJ phenomenon is typically associated with the rap music genre, which is believed to be disruptive (Au 2005). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that rap music can be positively utilised in counselling students (Gonzalez & Hayes 2009). Currently, there is no DJ curriculum or designated space within the music curriculum for the study of DJing in African universities. Although DJing may have social benefits, it remains an area that requires further exploration. Compared to participating in music activities, DJing still has some way to go in terms of establishing its merits.

Traditionally, postgraduate music studies have focused primarily on classical Western music. This has led to the advanced study of Western classical music being situated within the field of musicology. In the 19th

century, the need to align with the colonial project necessitated the development of comparative musicology. For African scholars, the choice of where, when, and with whom to study African music is between ethnomusicology and African musicology. However, the relevance of this level of study to this paper is assumed to be limited, as it is presumed that at this level, we are working with musicians who may have passed their active performing lives or have left performance in favour of an academic career.

On Informal Music Training and Apprenticeship

Informal music training is defined as the self-guided and self-directed study of music or musical instruments in non-traditional settings. This type of learning encompasses concepts such as 'self-taught musicians', 'the bandstand', 'learning on the road', and 'online lessons' (Hess 2020). Informal music training can be an effective way for individuals to enhance their musical ability and creativity. In popular music, informal approaches to instrument learning often lead to innovative and unconventional methods of music creation. Jazz and popular music genres have produced numerous musicians who exemplify this phenomenon, including Wes Montgomery, Thelonious Monk, and Django Reinhardt.

Self-study, which is closely linked to informal music study, is often seen as an alternative to formal education due to the inability to enrol in an institution for 'formal' education. As a pedagogy, informal self-study places the aspirant musician at the centre of their learning. They determine what to learn, when to learn it, with whom to learn it, and how to learn it. Aspirant musicians can choose their own learning path, pace, and content, which is suitable for their career goals.

Similarly, accomplished self-taught musicians are also attracted to the church. It is unclear whether the attraction lies in the gospel teachings of the church, the power of its music, or both. Some churches run large praise and worship ministries that rival many secular music genres.

Gospel music has emerged as a thriving industry in many African countries, including South Africa, attracting musicians from diverse backgrounds. In South Africa, gospel music has become a viable career option, with musicians viewing participation in praise and worship not only as a service to the church but also as a lucrative profession. The growth of the gospel music industry in South Africa can be attributed to several factors, such as: 1) the expansion of the Charismatic Church Movement, resulting in the

establishment of numerous Pentecostal churches in various locations; 2) the large size and impressive scale of these churches, often referred to as megachurches; 3) the support of the corporate sector for gospel music festivals, such as the annual Joyous Celebration concerts led by Lindelani Mkhize and the Spirit of Praise project by Benjamin Dube; and 4) the presence of gospel music on South African television, which has helped to portray the industry as thriving and successful. The annual awards ceremonies also help to raise the profile of the gospel music industry, albeit primarily as a television show.

When compared to the concept of 'big-time evangelism', as described by Gordon and Hancock (2005), the popularity of the music of charismatic churches (CCs) is more readily apparent. This type of evangelism involves large-scale events and highly organised campaigns led by charismatic preachers or leaders with the aim of converting as many people as possible to their denomination of Christianity. One of the most well-known big-time evangelists was Billy Graham, who began his ministry in the 1940s and went on to become one of the most influential religious leaders of the 20th century. His crusades often drew tens of thousands of attendees and were characterised by his powerful preaching style, emotional appeal, and focus on personal salvation (Wacker 2014).

Today, the practice of big-time evangelism is widespread among various religious groups worldwide, with each employing different methods but aiming to spread their message and convert individuals (Bruns 1993). This musical aspect often takes the form of grandiose performances. The Hillsong Church in Australia, based in Sydney, is an exemplary example of this, as it demonstrates substantial investment, branding, and showmanship. The church services are nothing short of spectacular (Wade 2016). Hillsong has significantly contributed to defining the modern blueprint for church music, particularly in terms of attaching glamour to praise and worship. The repertoire is focused on celebratory singing, dancing, praise, and worship, and the harmonic structure of most songs follows the traditional tonic-subdominant functional harmony, which is familiar to most churchgoers. The study of gospel music in South Africa is akin to that in other countries, with the majority of musicians being self-taught and following the patterns established by early crusaders.

Gospel music education is primarily disseminated through informal channels, such as learning from seasoned musicians, attending concerts, or receiving informal mentorship from experienced practitioners. Formal training programmes for gospel music are rarely provided by institutions, whether

operating independently or in collaboration with a church. For those seeking advanced training in gospel music, studying jazz music has been used as a reference, particularly its improvisation and harmony aspects, as noted by Legg and Philpott (2015) and Smallwood (1980). It is essential to note that online music education is a relatively recent, potent, and effective method that has gained significant popularity. Lessons are accessible at any time, seven days a week, from the comfort of one's own space. However, one drawback of this approach is that students cannot observe master musicians at work in the same way they would in a bandstand environment. Additionally, students may not adhere to the demanding learning path required for their development, leading some to adopt a 'noodling' approach (Claxton 2006:352).

Church and the Confluence of Differing Apprenticeships

The church serves as a unique confluence of informal, non-formal, and formal music apprenticeship traditions. Musicians from diverse backgrounds converge in this space, including trained musicians, self-taught musicians, and naturally talented novices. Schröder (2021) identifies a similar trend in American and German case studies, where the church functions as a nexus of music training and apprenticeship traditions. The path to the music ministry may involve studying secular music, which takes advantage of existing music training in formal institutions or may be need-based due to 'musical and pragmatic considerations' (Schröder 2021:210). These different musical skill acquisition paths, experiences, and traditions coexist within the church music-making space, often intersecting and influencing one another, as expressed in the perceptions of those who uphold these traditions.

Hani Mutele, an accomplished musician with a university education, experienced a tense environment when appointed to direct music at his church. He aimed to establish fundamental musical literacy among the band members. However, communication among the band members proved to be more unpredictable than expected. Furthermore, trust between Mutele and his less-skilled colleagues was notably lacking. Although Mutele held a university degree, self-taught musicians, such as Daniel Mamphogoro (personal communication) and Mahlori Chauke (personal communication), a university-trained jazz pianist, criticised certain approaches adopted by schooled musicians. According to Chauke, university-trained church musicians' musicality is constrained by the rigidity of Western harmony curricula's rules governing vertical and static chords. He suggests that schooled musicians can

benefit from replacing the conventional I-IV-V harmonic structures with a movement-oriented playing paradigm, in which harmony is primarily viewed as simultaneous voice movements. This approach, Chauke argues, can lead to enhanced hearing and an abundance of innovative harmonic movements. In this paradigm, the appropriateness of a particular harmony is determined by the ear rather than by imposed rules. As rock guitarist Eddie van Halen famously stated, 'to hell with the rules[!] If it sounds right, then it is'. This perspective on music liberates church musicians, whether formally trained or not, to effectively function in a praise and worship context.

Sifiso Siziba (personal communication), a university-educated musician, argues that self-taught church musicians often overplay their instruments in support of the schooled musicians. These musicians learn from social media and practice in their own spaces, but they tend to be louder and less sensitive to music. Sifiso characterises them as egoistic, but this may not be a fair assessment. For example, Alex Odiekila (personal communication), a self-taught church musician, has acquired enough skills to work as a teacher and musical director alongside his university-educated counterparts. He does not experience tension in the church and instead values the opportunity to collaborate with other musicians, regardless of their training background.

Despite the uncomfortable relationships among some church musicians, the environment is conducive to the effective transfer of music skills. Informal exposure plays a minimal role in the study of CC music. All musicians come from families that have been exposed to informal music absorption. Depending on the church, the skills acquired during this stage can be enhanced or restricted. This modification of the musical future takes place in kindergarten and continues through school, where the demands of a curriculum geared towards a career undermine arts education.

Conclusion

South Africa is currently experiencing a surge in the number of skilled musicians. Although some of these musicians have attended formal music training or hold university degrees, a significant number have taught themselves. When it comes to instrumental proficiency, it is difficult to distinguish between schooled musicians and their self-taught counterparts. This suggests that there are effective alternatives to formal music education. This study aimed to explore non-formal and informal options for music education. The Church plays a crucial role in providing music education by

offering open entry requirements, in contrast to universities' meritocratic systems that accept or reject students. In the church environment, musicians from diverse backgrounds, including non-formal, formal, and apprenticeship, come together to make music, despite potential biases and suspicions. Furthermore, the frequency of music-making opportunities, ranging from rehearsals to weekly performances during church services, provides an ideal environment for studying musicians. This is beneficial because aspiring musicians can develop their musical identities within praise and worship groups. Some go on to establish themselves in the music business, while others become ministers or leaders of churches. However, these opportunities can be expensive if you do not obtain music theory entry grades or tuition fees.

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