

Shelly Coyne
SEMPRE/ Gerry Farrell Travelling Scholarship
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Choirs, Arts and Homelessness in Rio de Janeiro

Summer 2016 and across the world Rio de Janeiro comes significantly into focus - July marked the build up to the first Olympics to be held in a South American country; it was the launch of the first International Arts and Homelessness Movement bringing together delegates from 6 countries; the Cultural Olympiad saw 11 homeless choirs perform for the first time in public spaces across the city and it was the start of my transition into being a fully-fledged data-collecting researcher.

My journey really began in 2010 when I formed a choir at a centre in Glasgow, set up to support people affected by the issues of homelessness, which was invited to perform at The Royal Opera House in 2012 for an event called With One Voice, the brain child of Matt Peacock MBE and founder of Streetwise Opera (www.streetwiseopera.org). This event was part of the cultural Olympiad and saw 300 people affected by homeless challenge many of the myths and preconceptions around street people and instead shift the focus to celebrating talent and achievement. A second With One Voice event was then planned for Rio for 2016, after a series of cultural exchanges between the UK and Brazil.

My doctoral research is borne out of my experiences as a choir leader and explores the experience of homeless choirs and explores whether participation might lead to singers moving forward with their lives. This international arts and homelessness exchange and the launch of the new movement in Rio fell serendipitously at the end of my first year as a PhD student and I was certain it would be a unique and illuminating research opportunity and unlikely to be repeated during my studentship.

The trip afforded me an unparalleled opportunity to understand homelessness through meeting representatives from the Homeless People's Movement of Brazil, with volunteering at the Cathedral and serving breakfast to 400 people and by visiting homeless centres, talking to the staff and residents and spending time with street people of Rio. I was able to shadow the choirs as they performed across the city, watch them rehearse and perform and invite them to take part in my research. I also was delighted to be able to teach and share some songs from my repertoire and leave a file of songs for the two Brazilian choir leaders to teach at a later date.

Data was collected through field notes, observing and filming choir rehearsals and performances and conducting interviews, with choir members, choir leaders and international delegates. Although there is still many hours ahead of transcribing and analysis in order to unpick all this rich data there are some interesting thoughts that have bubbled up during the experience. The main emerging theme is best summed up by a chance conversation with a member of the Public Defence office who visits street people at night to record and respond to the many human rights violations. She said that the choir is like a time machine it takes the homeless singers back to who they used to be and forward to where they want to be, and this idea that choir participation somehow restores identity and brings a stronger sense of self and authenticity was backed up through many of the interviews. This will be an area that I hope to explore more when I conduct further interviews with choir members and choral leaders in the UK.

The learning opportunity has been rich! It is certainly satisfying to have conducted successful interviews with singers and choir leaders, negotiated the recording equipment and storing and backing-up of data, over-come issues around researching in a foreign culture, faced new ethical challenges and learnt new skills working with translators. My take away message is that you can never over plan or be over prepared and that having

control over some part of the experience helps to remain flexible and positive during the times that are challenging and require resilience and patience.

I should add that I did have time to enjoy being a wide-eyed tourist too; I visited Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer), Ipanema and Copacabana beaches, Sugar Loaf Mountain, the circus and visited various museums. The build up to the Olympics was happening during these 3 weeks and I just managed to squeeze in seeing the men's artistic gymnastics the day before I flew home.

I have submitted two news reports about this research trip, one to the Institute for Music in Human and Social Development (IMHSD) based in the Reid School of Music and the second to the Edinburgh College of Art, both based at The University of Edinburgh.

More information about the International Arts and Homelessness Movement can be found at the With One Voice website (with1voice.org.uk) and this remarkable trip would not have been possible without the support and generosity of Matt Peacock MBE, Streetwise Opera and the People's Palace Projects.

Finally I am indebted to SEMPRE and The Gerry Farrell Travel Scholarship, who kindly awarded me a generous and substantial contribution to make this unique research trip a reality, with additional financial support from Edinburgh University's Gwen Clutterbuck Scholarship, Post Graduate Expenses Fund and Principle's Go Abroad Fund.

Photos

1. Homeless choirs singing at the Museum of Tomorrow



2. Watching the sunset over Ipanema



3. The International Arts and Homeless Delegation



4. The *Uma Só Voz* - With One Voice event in Rio



5. Choir Leader Rico Vasconcellos prepares his choirs for a performance

