

## Music without borders in Viana do Castelo

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In Viana do Castelo, the seaport was the most important connection between its people and the populations of various continents for centuries and also exchange for art, skills, customs to culturally enriching traditions. Currently, it is the cultural spaces and events that largely encourage the gathering of people and cultures and bring new worlds to Viana do Castelo, both due to various annual festivals dedicated to the blues, jazz, classical music, folklore, drama and cinema, as well as other events such as the Lusophone Book Fair in which all Portuguese speaking countries are invited to take part. Every year, musicians, composers, writers, painters and actors are invited to participate and present their work, exhibiting new ways or styles of portraying the world, knowledge, different cultures and identities.

There are, however, two educational institutions in Viana do Castelo, where various cultures meet on a daily basis. I am referring to the Vocational Music School (EPMVC)<sup>1</sup> and the Music Academy of Viana do Castelo (AMVC),<sup>2</sup> as among teachers and students, one may find fourteen different nationalities. These institutions represent a cultural foundation of the local community, recognised for providing the finest music education and organising outstanding cultural events. Angola, Brazil, Byelorussia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, France, Iran, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Ukraine and United States of America are the country of origin of several teachers and students from these two institutions that share the same premises. A 'Tower of Babel' where classical music, this too, belonging to the world, is taught and learnt.

As a teacher at the EPMVC, but mainly as a linguist, I am fascinated by the socialising of the diverse elements of distinct cultures, the nature of their knowledge and traditions. My first surprises took place in the 'teacher's room' where both greetings among colleagues as well as the discussion on the various educational systems were made in different languages. Then, came the surprise of the mix of traditional instruments from several countries, used mostly in the musical moments organized for the students' families. I recall, for example, the use of Cuban maracas and the Portuguese cavaquinho in the same performance. A greater surprise, was the ease with which evaluation meetings were organised, in which approximately forty teachers, all using Portuguese (with a variety of accents) as the medium of communication, reviewed and assessed the efforts and work undertaken by each student and, then, the class as a whole. Leisure activities and sociable gatherings are also quite entertaining. Stories of linguistic slips and misunderstandings are cheerfully retold amongst teachers. This year, the Christmas Dinner of both institutions, organised by the Cuban teachers, proudly presented Cuba's traditional food and music.

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Students also benefit on a social, cultural and educational basis from their contact and acquaintance with their foreign teachers, conductors and/or colleagues, as they unveil much wider networks of knowledge. This helps them to rapidly comprehend our condition of citizens of the world. Many of the teachers from these two institutions have graduated from some of the most prestigious music conservatories in the world, such as the Moscow Conservatory. Their aim is to transmit to their students what was learnt from their own masters in the area of musical interpretation and performance. However, in addition to this training, students also discover that the different ways of eating, speaking, displaying happiness and sadness, commemorating important dates and socialising are, in themselves, of great importance to their own citizenship education. The direct contact with the manners in which different cultures express themselves, during the students' development stages, is an exceptional scaffold for the requirements of today's globalised world.

In fact, many teachers hold a special status at the School/Academy either due to their successful professional background or because they have taken on management responsibilities for many years. Mutual support and the sharing of responsibilities lead to better understanding and respect. This reminds me of a couple who worked for this school, he, the conductor of the EPMVC Symphonic Orchestra for many years, Miguel del Castillo, of Cuban nationality and she, Tatiana Sajarova, Russian, soprano and a piano teacher, whose life as a couple is a reflection of the world's history in the 20th century. The musical groups, which through the years have been created, are also a fine example of the excellent professional relationship amongst all involved. It is the case of the FAM Ensemble, a group whose composition may vary but which congregates musicians of various nationalities, whose academic or professional background is linked to the EPMVC or the AMVC and which performs under the musical direction of the Spanish conductor, Javier Viceiro, or other invited conductors. It is also the case of the Bóreas Quintet, which in addition to Portuguese musicians also includes the Russian pianist Yuri Popov.

In years gone by, the sea linked Viana do Castelo to new worlds, new people. Today, the teaching and learning of music, in Viana do Castelo, makes the universe even more united.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.fam.pt](http://www.fam.pt), accessed on 05.01.2010.

<sup>2</sup> Available at [www.amvc.pt](http://www.amvc.pt), accessed on 05.01.2010.