Incorporating Multicultural Music into the Elementary Classroom

General Music Methods 65:364 Dr. S. Scott

2/12/2008

Carrie Elliott (050014)
As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, “Music is the universal language of mankind.” Listening to another culture’s music and understanding more about who that culture is and where they come from is one of the easiest ways to travel the globe. Music is a part of everyone’s life, but to take that extra step of going outside one’s traditional culture is often easier not to do. By exploring these borders within the education system, students and teachers can both benefit from the familiar environment while experiencing the unfamiliar. Keeping students engaged is a goal of educators and as Patricia Shehan Campbell (2002) points out, “Good music from anywhere in the world will gain and maintain the attention of young people” (p. 31). Multicultural education has grown in popularity over the last century and the Elementary Music curriculum easily allows the addition of multicultural music. Multicultural education has been defined as including multicultural content that is authentically and respectfully presented, addressing different perspectives, biases, and stereotypes of that culture, and being equitable to students from all backgrounds (this includes gender, handicaps, and poverty, as well as race) (Teicher, 1997). This paper examines different views of multiculturalism, the history of its emergence in the educational field, and why incorporating culture in the classroom is important. An exploration of the benefits and difficulties of adding multiculturalism will follow. The last section will help teachers incorporate multiculturalism by inspecting how to choose cultures, how to select music from these cultures, and
how to teach multiculturally. Plato himself observed, “Music is a more potent instrument than any other” (Parr, 2006), so educators should consider using music as a tool to promote global humanity.

Roger Rideout (2005) scrutinized opposing views of multicultural music education. The aesthetic position suggests studying musical masterworks to encourage students to adopt new understandings and perceptions. As long as a piece is of high quality, it can be included. Those teaching from the aesthetic position might include excellent works that would be too religious or politically incorrect for other schools. The sociological position feels that music expresses cultural values and that educators should help students understand their own heritage and society. These teachers tend to be less traditional and prefer to teach what the students are interested in, such as jazz, composition, and drum lines. Rideout recommends that the pragmatic political reality is a balance of the aesthetic and sociological views in order to keep public support for the music program and provide students with a quality educational experience.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, interest in foreign cultures and their music has grown. The first multicultural musics used in classrooms were presented in Western notation and fit easily into Western meters and diatonic scales. The texts were loosely translated into English and the original languages were not shown. Songs were transcribed to fit treble clef or SATB choral scores. Recordings were not sung by the natives of the culture, but rather by
natives of the country where it was to be marketed. Stereotypical drawings would accompany the scores if there were any images. The civil rights movement, desegregation of schools, and war veterans returning with a worldlier view all encouraged a more accurate representation of multicultural music. The Tanglewood Symposium of 1967 was a turning point for authentic music as it sought to advance the teaching of music from all cultures. Resulting from this symposium was the idea of making music meaningful to all students from all backgrounds. Mary Goetze and Carol Scott-Kassner (2006) feel that it took until the 1990’s to have materials that represented music authentically. These authentic pieces have lyrics in their original language with pronunciation appearing in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Recordings now have native speakers pronouncing the words and native children performing the songs. These improvements in authentically representing multicultural music have made it easier for educators to incorporate culture into the curriculum.

There is much support for starting music programs early in a child’s life. Kodály and Orff both emphasize early introduction to music, as younger children are more open to exploring, singing, and listening than their older counterparts are. The same effect is found with multicultural music. Jan McCrary (2000) demonstrated that younger children accept foreign music better than their older peers, so elementary is a good time to implement these ideas. Thus, by
beginning to incorporate multiculturalism into early year’s music classrooms, we can increase the positive impact it can have on students.

Multicultural music education is important in today’s society for several reasons. One considerable idea is that multicultural music can “engender tolerance and appreciation of people” (Goetze, M & Scott-Kassner, C, 2006). Racism and other “isms” are huge issues within the school systems and world. Thus, society should seriously consider any method that can reduce these problems. C. Victor Fung (1995) proposed social, musical, and global rationales for teaching world musics. The social rationales include developing multicultural awareness, promoting open-mindedness, better serving the diversity within the country, and preparing students to live in global environments. Musical rationales embrace the ideas of developing more sensitive perceptions of familiar music, providing opportunities to strengthen our understanding of musical concepts, and increasing tolerance of foreign music. The global rationale relies on the fact that “music is a global phenomenon, and no culture is without it” (Fung, 1995, p. 38). Fung also feels that music is useful for enhancing political and international relations. Doug Goodkin (1994) points out that by continually exposing students to music from around the planet, educators can widen the language of music. By making music programs global, it appears that the improvement of several of the world’s key issues is possible.
Benefits also exist on the local level. Doug Goodkin (1994) notes that multicultural music can greatly increase “the colour spectrum of the child’s sound palette and noticeably change the quality of the child’s improvisation and composition” (p. 42). Carlos Abril (2006) feels that schools play an important role in multicultural education, as it may be the only place students learn about cultures other than their own. Open-mindedness and tolerance of others are very important characteristics for students in the classroom as well as around the Earth.

Difficulties of incorporating multicultural music oftentimes prevent teachers from providing their students with the experiences they need. Teachers have generally been educated in a Eurocentric fashion, which Judith M. Teicher (1997) examines. She notes, “Teachers lack the resources, training, and expertise necessary to develop and implement multicultural music lessons” (Teicher, 1997, p. 417). Other issues Teicher explores include educators not seeing the value of adding multicultural music to a curriculum brimming with Western music and teachers feeling there is no need for other cultures in predominantly Caucasian classrooms. She also points out that when teachers are uncomfortable with the materials, students suffer, so some teachers are afraid of taking the risk. Patricia Shehan Campbell (2002) adds to this list of issues something she calls “backlash” – when programs do not carefully consider cultural meaning to the creators of the music and the students of the class.
Steven M. Demorest and Sarah J.M. Schultz (2004) continue this list of issues with the fact that there is still a lack of high-quality materials and recordings for teachers to use. Dealing with these problems is rather easy; they just require more effort than avoiding multicultural music. Teachers can research to make up for their lack of prior instruction. The benefit of culling poorer quality Western music in favour of worthy multicultural pieces is well worth the time. Even classes where all students are Caucasian can gain from experiencing other cultures and ways of life: prejudice is very abundant in all-white schools. When teachers put the time into learning the materials and cultures, they will be comfortable in class, preventing the “backlash” phenomenon. New materials that fit Teicher’s (1997) definition of multicultural education are coming out more and more, making quality world musics more accessible.

Some cultures are easier to teach than others are, so educators should be careful when choosing where to start. C. Victor Fung (1995) recommends beginning with the musical cultures closest to one’s self and those one knows the most about. Doug Goodkin (1994) advises that the simplest way to add multiculturalism to the curriculum is to supplement a unit taught in other classes. Goodkin proposes a unit-end class party to celebrate students’ learning with food, song, dance, and costumes. More specifically, Patricia Shehan Campbell (2004) suggests that teachers:
(1) Recognize each musical culture for what it offers in the way of understanding music as music, as human experience, as culture, and in context, (2) study unfamiliar music cultures by listening, reading, viewing, tapping into the expertise of local musicians, culture-bearers, and scholars as resources. (p. 14)

Another way to ease into multicultural materials is to use them to reinforce certain musical concepts. Ersébet Szőnyi (1973) points out characteristics of multiple world musics. French and English folk music are good for teaching Dorian and Phrygian modes, 6/8 time, and the anacrusis. French folk songs base themselves upon DOH–SOH melodies. German folk songs also feature the anacrusis, but tend to be in ¾ time. They favour SOH–ME intervals. Slovak folk songs can teach the Lydian mode. Minor modes are characteristic of Romania folk music. To find irregular rhythms, study the music of Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece. Japanese children’s songs tend to end on the second tone (RE) of the pentatonic scale. The pentatonic scale is a good musical feature to explore, as it is popular in many cultures. Doug Goodkin (1994) suggests that by comparing pentatonic musics, students can learn that not all pentatonic melodies are above a drone, different tones within the scale can serve as the home key, texture can vary from monophonic to polyphonic, and that the scale is not the only factor that determines the quality of music. Goodkin also advocates formulating units by instrument types. China, India, Tibet, Turkey, Bali, and Germany are good exemplars of cymbals. Drums of the world are another option to feature. These
are all simple ways to select a culture to focus on; now deciding upon the music to use is the next step.

When deciding on appropriate music, authenticity, enculturation, awareness, and knowledge are some effective tools to rely on. Educators can depend upon advice from colleagues, past encounters with the piece, or assess the music for its quality. Carlos R. Abril (2006) suggests that musical authenticity is evaluated in three ways: (1) musically – the formal properties of sound, (2) for its meaning – surrounding context, and (3) for behaviours – the methods in which it is taught, learned, and performed. Abril (2006) also notes that absolute authenticity is impossible to achieve in the classroom setting as it is “performed a) by and for members of the culture, b) in a typical setting, as determined by members of the culture, c) with instruments specified by the creator(s), d) in its original language” (p. 40). Thus, teachers must find an acceptable mix of authentic and arranged music so that the musical experience is still representative of the culture, yet appeals to the students and their audiences. Abril (2006) recommends using reputable publishers, a musician who understands the musical style and culture, singing songs in their original language, and discussing historical, cultural, and political contexts to promote understanding of the selections. When addressing bias, students gain a better understanding of the culture they are examining and their own culture. Abril (2006) advises, “Prejudice or stereotypes are most harmful if not addressed
appropriately by teachers” (p. 43). The curriculum needs to be consulted to check if musical selections reinforce appropriate musical concepts. A culture-bearer is someone who is from that culture and is willing to spend time in the classroom passing on his or her knowledge and history. Research has demonstrated that some places are better to begin with within the culture’s music than others. Steven M. Demorest and Sarah J.M. Schultz (2004) advocate using instrumental music with expressive dynamics, faster tempos, regular rhythms, and low levels of vibrato. Latin American music is similar to Western music and thus creates a logical entrance into the world musics.

Now that the culture and songs are chosen, teachers need to worry about teaching multiculturally. Carlos R. Abril (2006) recommends that teaching unfamiliar cultures is a process of discovery, and teachers must focus on educating themselves first. William M. Anderson (1991) released a four-video and book set after the 1990 MENC Symposium that can help visual learners with American Indian, African, Asian, and Hispanic cultures. In order to aid in the learning process, Clayton Parr (2006) proposes questions that teachers must answer in order to provide instruction regarding multicultural music. These questions comprise of can one connect with the culture, can one listen to other performances from the culture, can one provide context for the performance, can one seek authentic sources, can one learn the language, can one teach authentically, and can one leave their comfort zone. By “learning the language”,...
Parr does not mean learning how to fully speak Zulu, but rather researching details like the fact that the German dialects tend to place a stronger emphasis than the French tongue on accented syllables. The idea of teaching authentically means that if music is traditionally learned aurally, then it must be presented orally. Parr also suggests that focusing on one culture at a time will help students understand the context better. On the other hand, Doug Goodkin (1994) suggests celebrating different culture’s holidays for instance, Jewish Hanukkah and Passover, African-American Kwanza and Martin Luther King Day, Chinese New Year, and Cinco de Mayo. Another idea is to focus on a theme and study cultures around these themes. Examples are animals, love, heroes, lullabies, dance songs, and devotional songs. Alternatively, a class could go on an “Amazing Race” and approach music geographically. Another possibility is that for each musical concept introduced in class (ostinato, canons, I-IV-V progressions, drones, hocketing, etc...), music from global sources can be used to provide a direct experience with the various ways of applying that concept.

The easiest way for teachers to begin teaching music multiculturally is to study their own cultural heritage. These educators should have access to culture-bearers (their family or other culture-groups they belong to) and will understand the language and contexts. The next level is to do quick classes as Doug Goodkin (1994) advises that focus on musical concepts, holidays, or themes. These overviews lack the in-depth understanding that comes from
contextual information about the cultures, but teachers will easily find resources. An example of a resource that could be used for a trip across Canada is *An Orff Mosaic from Canada* that was edited by Lois Birkenshaw-Fleming in 1996. The most time-consuming method for teachers is a deeper examination of a culture that might last a month. This format will require a lot of research and effort but Patricia Shehan Campbell (2002) and Clayton Parr (2006) feel that the students’ understanding of multiculturalism will be well worth it. Perhaps teachers can start out preparing one new in-depth multicultural unit/year, and then the next year they will be able to study two cultures.

Incorporating multiculturalism into the elementary music curriculum relies on balance. Classes must be interesting to students and yet teach musical masterworks. In other words, utilizing both authentic and arranged versions is recommended. Social, musical, and global rationales for studying multiculturalism should all be spotlighted. The number of ways that teachers feel multicultural studies benefit their students must outweigh the difficulties they face in preparing the units. Cultural studies have to be based upon the required musical concepts as determined in the curriculum. Educators need to decide for themselves which cultures, music, and techniques fit best within their classroom. I feel the time invested is well worth all the benefits the students will experience and with gas prices only going to increase in the future, it only seems logical to begin planning an educational music tour of the world today.
References


