As our country grows increasingly diverse and the Internet makes distant lands seem closer, many music teachers look to incorporate a wider range of repertoire in their music classrooms. Listening experiences are a prime way to introduce students to new musical genres. The first step toward creating effective listening lessons of world music is to choose music that is appropriate—a task that can seem daunting when faced with musical cultures about which we may have minimal knowledge.

When selecting world music, keep in mind the following principles, which can help you create lessons to excite learners and lead them to making new connections about the diversity of the musical experience in the world:

**Music with a consistent beat and faster tempi.** Music that drags can be, to quote my elementary students, “booooring.” As a young teacher many years ago, I remember telling my administrator, “It doesn’t matter if they like what they’re doing, it only matters if they’re learning.” How wrong I was! When the music is engaging, students will more likely participate actively, leading to the increased knowledge and skills we hope will grow through listening lessons. Children typically prefer music with faster tempi (LeBlanc & McCrary, 1983), particularly those in upper elementary and middle school. In addition, music with a clear, steady beat often provides a straightforward rhythmic framework that can make it easier for students to perform along with the piece.

**Short excerpts.** When students first hear a recording in a listening lesson, we often ask them to listen for something in particular, such as the number of performers, the types of instruments, or the region of the world from which they think the piece originated. An excerpt that lasts three minutes provides more time than needed to answer these types of questions, and providing this much listening time can also lead to classroom management issues. If the excerpts take 30–60 seconds, students can listen with the specific question in mind, brainstorm answers to the question, and then listen again. This can be particularly important for students who might not have heard the answer the first time through. Listening a second time with a suggested answer in mind (e.g., “Do you hear a string instrument, like Angelo suggested?”) allows students a chance to check if the sound actually occurred.

Shorter examples also allow students to listen multiple times with different questions in mind, participating in some active way during some of the later repetitions. With repeated listening, nuances of the music become more ingrained in students’ ears, and the increased familiarity derived from repeated hearings can lead to increased preference for it (Hamlen & Shuell, 2006).

**Thinner textures.** Listening experiences with world music often focus on instrumental genres because they provide sonic experiences that are furthest from our students’ previous experiences. Sometimes, though, the music can be incredibly complex. While richly textured music can be gorgeous (and compelling for teachers), young students often need simpler music to actively engage with it. If music has only two to four instruments and voices, young listeners can more easily discern individual parts. In addition, the greater the timbral difference of the parts, the better. Students will have an easier time identifying the instruments in a recording with a string instrument, a drum, and a singer than one with three string instruments.

**Straightforward vocal timbres.** I recently taught a piece of Turkish music I thought would be a huge hit with my fourth
graders. It was an up-tempo number with easily identifiable instrumental parts, voice, foot stomps, claps, and clucking sounds I just knew my students would have fun trying to replicate. (To hear an excerpt, go to www.folkways.si.edu and search for “Bacon is in the Larder.”)

What I didn’t think about was the vocal timbre, which was high and nasal, beginning with a wailing sound that had no discernable melodic pattern. Much in the way that opera singing can make students laugh, this vocal style was different enough that they had a difficult time moving beyond the initial shock at the sound to be able to engage with the piece. While many instrumental timbres initially sound odd to students, there is something about unusual vocal timbres that makes many students—particularly those in upper elementary and middle school—uncomfortable enough that they begin acting silly. Keeping this in mind can be important in maintaining a positive classroom climate.

**Music that students can replicate.** With listening lessons of world music, an essential objective is for students to develop an understanding of the authentic sound and to replicate aspects of the tune themselves. While they don’t need to be able to perform an entire piece for an audience, they should be able to perform at least part of the piece. This can be as simple as singing a repetitive vocal part, playing a percussion part along with the recording, or replicating an instrumental part on a xylophone.

Performing aspects of a piece of world music can demystify the music, allowing students to connect with it on a more personal level. At the same time, if there are only some aspects of a piece that students can perform (and they recognize the virtuosity that is at play with other parts), it provides them with the opportunity to marvel at the skill that musicians in other cultures can develop.

**Repetition.** One way to select music students can perform is to look for repetition within the musical example. A recurring vocal ostinato, for example, will often provide a fairly easy access point for participating in the music. A brief lesson could break down as follows:

1. Listen for a vocal line that repeats in a 30–60 second excerpt.
2. Listen (again) for how many times the line repeats.
3. With the recording playing, sing along with the ostinato.
4. Listen to the recording again (without

---

**NEW DEGREE PROGRAM**

**Master of Music in Music Education**

WHAT SETS TARLETON APART

Completely online degree

For working music educators and musicians seeking career advancement

Elementary or secondary music education emphasis

10-week courses each semester

OUR GRADUATE FACULTY

Teresa Davidian, Ph. D., Music Theory and Musicology, University of Chicago

Analytical Techniques, Ethnomusicology, Musicology

Vicky V. Johnson, D.M.A., Music Education, Boston University

Technology in the Classroom, Research Methods, Pedagogy

Anthony Pursell, D. A., Instrumental Conducting and Music Education, Ball State University

Advanced Arranging

Gary Westbrook, Ph.D., Music Education, University of North Carolina of Greensboro

Research Methods, Psychology of Music

---

For more information:

Dr. Teresa Davidian
(254) 968-9245
davidian@tarleton.edu
singing) to note any particular vocal styling that is different than the way the class performed.

5. Without the recording, sing the vocal line, incorporating the stylistic particulars.

6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 as many times as desired, trying to replicate the performance style as closely as possible.

7. Listen to the recording once more, singing along with the repeated vocal line.

The repetition allows listeners a chance to learn more quickly. Focusing on the sound source also allows them the chance to incorporate the nuance of the performance through aural means, likely leading to a performance more akin to those of the culture bearers.

**Connecting to culture.** World music listening is most effective when students are provided cultural context. When selecting music, ensure that cultural connections can easily be made. This can be as simple as pointing out the country or region on a map, offering specific information from liner notes about the performance, or showing pictures of traditional styles of dress. Sharing facts about same-aged youth in the culture can be interesting for the learners as well: Does everyone go to school? What sort of chores do children have? How big is a typical family? What sports do kids play, if any? Part of the reason to create listening lessons of world music is to note the similarities and differences across cultures, to celebrate our global diversity.

Another way to incorporate culture is to bring in a culture-bearer, perhaps someone from your school community, such as a parent or a fellow school employee. I have often found these connections pop up once I begin teaching a lesson. Last year, when teaching a mini-unit of music from Japan, two students in the grade level told me that they were of Japanese heritage, one whose mother grew up in Japan. A quick phone call later, and the parent was willing to speak with the students about her country and her memory of the music.

When deciding between two pieces of music for a world music listening lesson, the amount of cultural context I have (and the interest I believe the students will have) is sometimes the deciding factor.

**Resources for World Music**

**Smithsonian Folkways** (www.folkways.si.edu). Access field recordings from the 1950s to the present day from around the world. Thirty seconds of any recording can be freely sampled, and individual tracks can be purchased for 99¢. Extensive liner notes from and lesson plans based on various recordings can be downloaded at no cost.

**British Library** (sounds.bl.uk). Collections made by ethnomusicologists are available for free streaming through the website, along with descriptions of the collector and the context in which the material was collected. The site includes recordings from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Europe.

**Alan Lomax archive** (www.culturalequity.org). Lomax is best known for his collecting work in the U.S. during the last century, but he also traveled to locations including Italy, the Caribbean, and Morocco, making recordings of genres that were dying out. Recordings can be streamed at no cost from the website, and lesson plans for some recordings can also be found on the site.

**Global Music Series** (www.oup.com/us/globalmusic). This series includes slender 100-page books on music from individual countries. While primarily intended for use at college level survey courses, they can be excerpted for secondary and primary as well. Free, extensive lessons for all ages that accompany the books are available for download from the site.

Listening lessons of world music can provide students with the chance to marvel at the variety of ways that the impulse to make music plays out in different cultures. Carefully selecting pieces of music that will work for a given set of students is an essential first step for designing effective listening experiences.

With a well-chosen piece of music and a well-designed lesson plan, listening lessons of world music can broaden your students’ sound base, leading to captivated students who celebrate the diversity of the musical experience.

**References**


**TMEA Scholarships**

Do you teach seniors interested in becoming music educators?

Are you a college student who will student-teach next year?

Do you need financial help pursuing a graduate degree?

Apply by November 15 for this incredible scholarship opportunity.

WWW.TMEA.ORG/SCHOLARSHIPS