

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY



in the music classroom

BY RENÉ BOYER

For more than two centuries, traditional Western European music has been the foundation on which teachers have built music programs throughout the United States. However, in recent decades, shifts in demographics and growth in the respect for other cultures have motivated teachers to enhance traditional pedagogies and materials with teaching methods designed to address the growing musical needs of a diverse group of learners.

At Fort Bend ISD, you'd probably find one of the most diverse groups of students in the state of Texas. With a 75,000-student population, this school district southwest of Houston is the most diverse among the state's traditional, non-charter school districts. The makeup of its student population is a nearly balanced share of the nation's four major ethnic groups—white (16%), Black (27%), Hispanic (27%), and Asian (26%). This district is a true microcosm of the changing demographics of Texas's student population comprising more than 5.3 million.

Cultural Diversity and Our Standards

Many of today's music classrooms are characterized by cultural diversity that demands an inclusive and comprehensive approach to how teachers teach, along with recognition of how children learn. In inner-city schools, for example, serving racial and language minority students requires a greater obligation by the teacher to ensure that classroom pedagogies and lessons result in a culturally meaningful learning experience for every student.

Although many music educators support a position regarding inclusion of a more diverse curriculum, some agree yet limit what that means to exclude genres of pop, hip-hop, rock, and others. I believe, however, that *good music* should include whatever is *meaningful to the learner*. In fact, whatever it takes to engage a child in a meaningful musical experience should be the primary focus of any music educator.

Sharing Cultures in the Music Classroom

Sharing important cultural events through music-making is a wonderful way to acknowledge diversity among students and bridge cultural gaps. We have a deep wealth of traditions to teach and celebrate, from the traditional Greek dance *Tsamiko*, to African-American spirituals, Native American round dances, and conjunto and mariachi music, to name just a few. Every child enters the classroom with a cultural background to be valued. When teachers discover, recognize, and honor differences in students, they can more easily plan for a more culturally inclusive music program.

Teaching Elements of Music

Teaching basic elements of music (melody, rhythm, form, timbre, harmony, texture, dynamics, and tempo) and providing musical experiences and activities to reinforce those elements are essential to any music program. In fact, it is the teacher's choice of musical literature and activities chosen to reinforce these elements that make or break our students' willingness to participate in the program. As a music educator and clinician, working with children and teachers in diverse settings, I have observed teachers who struggle to teach children from different backgrounds and cultures, because they use repertoire that isn't interesting or meaningful to their students to teach basic music elements.

Teachers with students from diverse backgrounds should select musical examples that not only reinforce the learning of a specific concept but also acknowledge the diversity of students involved in learning the concept.

For example, if a majority of students relate to songs from *The Lion King*, then that's where a teacher can begin. Familiarity of songs not only facilitates the teaching of musical concepts but also enhances most students' willingness to participate in the learning process. In Latin America, *La Mar* (The Sea) and *Arroz*

con Leche (Rice with Milk) are two popular lullabies young children enjoy listening to and singing. For teachers, these two songs are perfect for reinforcing the concept of an *anacrusis*, or pickup note.

Songs, instrumental pieces, and accompaniments that contain interesting rhythms are important to children because that's what they hear and experience in their world. Unquestionably, appropriate examples of rap and hip-hop can be used to reinforce the element of rhythm, especially the concept of *syncopation*.

Teachers can take advantage of these popular styles of music by encouraging students to create their own rap and hip-hop compositions and accompaniments, thus giving students opportunities to learn the elements of music in an enjoyable and productive way. These types of activities—composing rap and hip-hop within set guidelines to realize specific objectives—will also help students understand why it is important to read and write music.

Shabooya is a composition defined by its powerful syncopation and rap-like B section. It is an exciting song, best performed in a circle with students taking turns inserting their names during the B section (see the music on this page). Percussion and movement can be added. After engaging students in its performance and analyzing specific musical concepts contained within *Shabooya*, students should be encouraged to create their own hip-hop compositions.

A plethora of songs, instrumental pieces, and listening examples that reflect culturally diverse communities and reinforce the learning of basic elements and their concepts are readily accessible through many music publishers. Sometimes, however, depending on the students, teachers may need to seek alternative sources for literature. In short, to be successful in helping all students attain academic and musical excellence, teachers must approach content in ways that will reflect an understanding and sensitivity to those they teach. Let's consider other examples of how to incorporate diversity in the music classroom.

Considerations for Song Selections

Patriotic Songs: It is important to include patriotic music in the classroom because these songs can help promote unity. It is important to mention that

La Mar

Mexican Folk Song

La mar es - ta - ba se re - na, se re na esta - ba la mar. La mar es - ta - ba se - re - na, Se re - na esta - ba la

Arroz con Leche

Spanish Lullaby

F C7

Ar - roz - con le - che me quie - ro ca - sar, con Que se - pa - n - a - se - no - ri - ta que se - pa can - tar. u - na - se - no - ri - ta que se - pa can - tar. se - pa can - tar. pa - r - a - ju - gar.

Shabooya

Rene Boyer

Sha - boo-ya! Sha - sha - sha - boo-ya, roll call! Sha - boo-ya, Sha - sha - sha - boo-ya, roll call!

*My name is _____, I'm as happy as can be;
'Cause I've got my rhythm and my music with me.
I can sing it, I can clap it, I can move to it too,
Just come along with me and I will show you what to do.*

many of America's historically patriotic songs are controversial for a variety of reasons. I wrote "United We Stand" as a contemporary tribute to unity in our country. When we teach any music, including patriotic music, we must be aware of its history and use the teaching of the music as an avenue to enlighten our students about our country's past.

The Power of Lyrics: Through song lyrics, most children learn about the environment in which they live. They learn their ABCs. They learn about farm and zoo animals, colors, modes of transportation, and seasons. They also learn about the importance of respecting one another, acknowledging one another's differences in positive ways, and the importance of being sensitive toward others. The list goes on and on. Lyrics to songs affect us all. One of my favorite songs I have used when teaching in diverse classroom settings is "We Want to Sing" by Roger Emerson. This song has

powerful and meaningful lyrics set to an equally beautiful contemporary pop-like tune that appeals to most children.

We want to sing.

We want to tell the world.

We want them to know that they are loved,

With our music, we can make this world a better place for everyone.

Singing, moving, and listening to songs similar to "We Want to Sing," as well as other selected pop, rock, or country songs, are important to many children. These genres of music enhance socialization and communication within diverse cultures and serve as a common bond when language is a barrier. Therefore, we can be encouraged to find appropriate examples of popular music and add them to students' existing repertoire. Sometimes popular tunes can be played on instruments

like recorders, barred instruments, melody bells, keyboards, guitars, and digital devices. Playing pop tunes on instruments is especially recommended for teachers who are less comfortable teaching songs in languages other than English but who may wish to include music from other cultures in their curriculum.

Considerations for Instrumental Music

The Drum Circle: Most children enjoy drumming. Adding unpitched percussion (if available) like claves, maracas, güiros, cowbells, and tambourines allows teachers to sweep students into a circle of music-making, where communication and togetherness is unparalleled. The formation of students into a *drum circle* provides opportunities for them to keep a steady beat, explore a variety of percussion sounds, accurately play patterns of rhythms, and maintain a specific rhythmic pattern without deviation. Improvisation can also be incorporated as a key element.

The Nigerian drumming song *Jingo Ba* can be used to spark students' participation in a drum circle. Begin by singing the song. While singing, establish the basic beat by patting or clapping it along with the song.

Once a beat has been established, a student leader can replace the teacher to create and assign other rhythmic patterns or ostinati that can be layered on top of the beat. (See the example at the top of the page.) All directions to players should be given using nonverbal cues.

The leader can choose to invite individuals or small groups to improvise. Clearly, a student leader's success lies in their ability to offer equal opportunity among all players in the drum circle.

Ukuleles: The ukulele is one of the most portable instruments around. During a time in which distancing is crucial, a stringed instrument, like the ukulele, can be easily used to teach the basic elements of music to children from varying cultures.

Alternative Instruments: Children love to play instruments, but they are not always readily available. Orff instruments, guitars, and recorders make wonderful additions to the classroom but can be cost prohibitive. In these cases, alternative instruments should be considered. For example, I use boxes from the school cafeteria for drums and cut dowel rods for rhythm sticks. Maracas can be easily

Jingo Ba

Nigerian Drumming Song

assembled in the classroom or at home by putting seeds, rice, beans, or loose beads inside a plastic bottle or other container. Keys tied by fish line to a rod, or clay flowerpots secured with a knotted rope inside and then dangled, produce melodious sounds that can be used instead of wind chimes or bell trees. Garden hoses can be cut into segments and used as pitched instruments. A mouthpiece for a hose can be found for less than \$10 online, and a funnel can be found in a dollar store. Thin nylon filament or guitar strings can be placed over a hole in a box, secured on either end, to produce pitches.

Instruments made by children and used in performances can be mesmerizing and bring a music classroom alive with joy and excitement. Such activities also promote self-esteem as well as respect and admiration for all participants involved in the process.

Resourcefulness

In today's classroom, teachers are challenged to do more with less, despite larger class sizes and the commitment to support our diverse student population. To ensure the greatest program success, teachers should ask for support from the administration, community, and parents. For example, parents can share a favorite lullaby or children's song, teach a stick, rope, or hand-clapping game learned from their childhood, or introduce and perform on a special instrument. Folk dances, including Asian fan dances, might be on the request list. Folk tales, with accompanying props, might be dramatized with the help

of a parent or other supporter. By engaging our students' families, we underscore our commitment to understanding and celebrating all cultures.

As music educators, we have incredibly rich resources through which we can honor and teach the cultures of our students and of those not represented in our classrooms. We can better select song repertoire, instrumental pieces, and other musical activities, with a dedicated purpose to engage all students in a positive and worthwhile musical experience. We must forge ahead in a positive, resourceful, and inclusive way to continue our efforts to provide meaningful and exciting musical experiences for all.

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