

Musical Choices in the Classroom: Masala Dosa,
Pizza, Pad Thai, Bubble Tea and Poutine?

One of the raging controversies in the music education profession today concerns what kinds of music we should teach in the classroom. Some say that the Western art canon should form the core curriculum. Others advocate traditional musics, world musics, and popular genres of all kinds.

During discussions of this controversy with my class¹ at the University of Western Ontario, I asked students to stake out their positions and argue for the “musical menu” of their choice. Their thoughtful responses inspired me to assemble this article as a way of connecting experienced professionals in our field with those who will be joining us in a year or two.

A musical menu for Ontario?

“I often find myself daydreaming about the future, about walking into my first school, and standing in front of that first group of students. I get so excited I can hardly contain myself. Ideas begin to pour out of my head, but for now all I can do is write them down, and maybe share some of them with you.” Kathaleen Spiller favours a broad palette of choices, while acknowledging that they can't all be addressed in the same semester. “However, perhaps the goal of a music teacher, or, the point of taking music in the classroom,” Kathaleen writes, “is to make the students interested in music so that when they graduate and start off on their journeys in life they will want to continue learning and participating in music.”

Because of the multitudinous ethnic make-up of this province, Ontario offers challenges to both preservice and seasoned music educators. Starting with a relatively small settling of First peoples, Ontario's population has grown through immigration over the past few hundred years. English and French settlers were followed by Scots, German, Ukrainian, and more recently by Asian and South or Central American emigrants. Others from Africa, India and the Middle East continue to arrive.

¹ M496 Philosophy of Music Education. Class members are Erin Hamilton, Shari Hodgson, Meagan Irvine, Allison Knight, Laura Koiter, Jodie Laidlaw, Sheenagh Linnen, Mark Michalak, Joy Nesseth, Carinna Pellett, Matthew Rollo, Kathaleen Spiller, Alex Teske, and Jennifer Wells.

Thus, Canadians are challenged to assert collective identity as a pluralistic democracy by retaining cherished heritages, overcoming cultural barriers, and interacting with respect for differences.

Music (and related arts) play a crucial role in Canadian life, a theme recognized through mandates of the Ontario Curriculum. The theme of multicultural music is a strand in the Ontario Arts Curriculum from Kindergarten through Grade 8: “Student expectations: to identify and perform music from various cultures and historical periods.” Similar themes continue into secondary levels. For example, in grade nine open:

“[students will] explain the function of music in a variety of historical and cultural contexts (e.g., Indonesian gamelan, 2500 b.c.e. Turkish war cymbals); identify and describe, orally and in writing, how the elements of music work together in a particular historical style and cultural context in a variety of musical works that are dealt with chronologically, conceptually, thematically, and/or by genre (e.g., chronologically: Baroque, classical, Romantic, contemporary, jazz, popular music, etc.; conceptually: rhythmically oriented music, melodically oriented music, loud or quiet music, music of a specific texture, etc.; thematically: music for celebration, music for dance, music for film, music for rituals, music that tells stories, patriotic music, etc.; by genre: impressionism, ragtime, big band, jazz, rock 'n' roll, Kodo, Ghanaian drumming, aboriginal songs, Canadian Maritime music, etc.).”*

In grade eleven university or college preparation “appreciation” classes, students are expected to understand musical concepts and contexts as shown in the following requirement:

“[students will] analyze the relationship between the audience and a live performance in a specific setting (e.g., a drum ceremony at an Ojibway gathering; a late-night performance by a quartet in a jazz club; an opera performance in a large theatre), and explain why a particular audience might find the performance satisfying.”

The Grade 12 Music, (University/College Preparation) course emphasizes “appreciation, analysis, and performance of music from the romantic period and the twentieth century, including art music, jazz, popular music, and Canadian and non-Western music.” In addition to work with art musics, students are expected to “describe,

through research and listening, a distinctive aspect of a non-Western musical tradition (e.g., throat singing in Inuit culture)."

My class of preservice music educators is very conscious of the new Ontario curriculum. They view it as a catalyst for inclusion. "The core curriculum for music education in Ontario demands that teachers allow their students an opportunity to learn about music outside of the Western art canon," notes Meagan Irvine.

Given Ontario mandates, most students in this particular class advocate a balance of familiar and unfamiliar musics: "The Western art canon is a very important part of the musical education we should be giving our students, but to . . . ignore all of the other great music in our world would be neglectful" says Shari Hodgson. "Musics from all cultures and genres, past and present, should somehow find a place in the music curriculum, whether the time spent on them be small or great."

Concerning the music of the "greats" (Handel, Bach, Beethoven and Mozart), Erin Hamilton writes: "[It is] exquisite, complex, meaty and sublime. And, because it is music of our culture and of our lifestyle, classically trained music educators tend to understand and respect classical music above all else . . . but it is merely one of a vast number of dialects within the universal language of music."

Jodie Laidlaw allows that a variety of musics should be part of the child's diet, but says: "I think that [Western music] should be the base of study in the music classroom. Western music is the predominate form of music taught in North America, and there is value to its study."

"Beatles or Bach?" queries Joy Nesseth. She adds: "Why is it . . . that many music teachers seem to think that they are standing in front of classes full of Anglo-Saxon Protestant/Catholic European children back in the early 1800s? That is the way that many teachers come across, simply because of the content that is taught (and not taught) in North American classrooms. . . . Balance is the most important thing in a music teacher's career . . . a whole plethora of musical qualities, styles and sounds."

Caveats and approaches

In addition to endorsing a full spectrum of musics in the music program, Allison Knight argues for "a non-linear, seed-germination process to a straight and narrow

chronological Western canon approach. Seemingly unorganized, this approach takes a single idea, selected intentionally or at random, and networks out to a never-ending number of possibilities.” She adds: “My biggest problem with world music appreciation is, as with all education, the danger of uninformed teaching. I wholeheartedly disagree with the dissemination of pseudo-culture for the sake of filling a curriculum requirement. Let there be no more choirs singing *In the Jungle* as their token ‘multicultural’ number! Let instead the teacher’s, students’, and community’s expertise combine to form its own cultural niche.”

Laura Koiter asks how to find that golden mean between all parts of the menu: “Obviously we cannot include music from every cultural group in the world, so how does one choose between them? Should just the groups that the students represent be included or should ones that are represented within the larger community be incorporated into lessons? . . . how much time? . . . How does one reconcile Western art music, popular genres, traditional music, and world music in a school year?”

Authenticity and context are important issues for the beginning practitioner. Meagan Irvine observes: “The effectiveness and importance placed on these types of music [traditional music, world music, popular genre as well as high art music] within curricula are completely dependent upon the design, implementation, and approach of these musical experiences by the music educator. Therefore, it is essential that teachers consider and realize the potentials of these types of music within the classroom or rehearsal setting, ensuring a genuine representation of these specific genres.”

Several students remarked on the difficulties they foresee with infusing [excellent] multicultural musics into their classrooms. They noted a lack of teacher training, limited funds for instruments and resources, and time restrictions. Alexandra Teske writes: “Most university music programs are heavily influenced by the Western art canon. It is true that institutes . . . may offer courses including world music, popular music, etc., but they are not a mandatory component of the undergraduate degree. . . .” Alexandra adds that teachers in schools are also expected to emphasize learning that will prepare students for post secondary music programs, thus further marginalizing other kinds of music.

Popular genres/world musics?

The inclusion of popular music in the curriculum is one issue that divides my class of preservice music teachers. While most accord popular music some place as part of a balanced musical diet, they disagree on how much time should be given to “non-art” musics. Shari Hodgson opines that: “Education is not really about teaching children what they already know, so I suppose I feel that it is maybe not useful to spend a great deal of time talking about pop music.”

Matthew Rollo would give contemporary genres some place in the curriculum, but limit their use: “I would most likely support the idea of popular music as a gateway to the music of the Western world, or to the music of the Asian, Mexican, or African world . . . I think that it's fine to introduce a familiar tune once in a while, but I hold reservations against a repertoire saturated by cheesy Disney arrangements.”

Mark Michalak argues for popular music as “the forgotten ‘world’ music.” He continues: “Stating that popular music is actually a form of world music may cause enough controversy in itself to fill an entire paper, however I will attempt to give a brief explanation of my thoughts on this topic. Popular music is multicultural by definition, because it appeals to the widest audience compared to any other musical genre in the world. It is very popular. In our situation, it appeals most strongly to the youth we will be teaching. Children place great value in the music they listen to; it is an inherent part of their culture. . . .”

Several students note that pop music isn't just another “flavour” in the repertoire. If chosen well, popular music can illuminate changing values and perspectives. Historical and contemporary contexts may be best understood in juxtaposition. “Discovering all kinds of music demonstrates . . . the importance of critical thinking,” says Sheenagh Linnen. She advocates “singing and discussing songs with lyrics containing gender issues” as one way to examine societal norms.

Other students commented that the inclusion of contemporary music may shift the emphasis of a music class. Carinna Pellett notes that: “Characteristics of certain types of music might challenge our comfortable classroom structure and routine. For example, an idea inherent in rock music is that of revolution, of resistance to the conventional. To study rock music in a structured classroom with students sitting quietly in rows, raising

their hands to speak and taking notes in their notebooks, is inconsistent with the ideology of the music culture they are studying.” Mark Michalak agrees and adds that: “Incorporating popular music into the classroom changes the entire classroom dynamic from that of the 'Teacher / Student' model to a more group learning experience.”

Model teachers

Although we face challenges in selecting appropriate repertoire and deciding how to teach it, several students acknowledged the Ontario music teachers who had inspired them. Jennifer Wells paid tribute to a mentor: “My high school teacher, Mr. Sisler, was passionate about many styles of music. I loved his class. The fact that he loved the music that he presented to us, made many of us love it as well. We played mostly classical and jazz compositions in band, but in his classroom we listened to the Beatles, Tom Waits, Kate Bush, and other wonderful artists. In some cases, it was the first time I had heard the artist. He always taught us about what we were listening to. When we were learning about duple and triple time, he played “drop the needle” on recordings of Eastern music and Irish Celtic music. I graduated from high school with a love and appreciation for all sorts of music. I hope that someday I can do the same for students of my own.”

Solutions or just more questions?

Changing demographics in Ontario present challenges and opportunities to music educators at all levels. While it is difficult to engage the wide spectrum of students in Ontario schools, the wide spectrum of teachers must also be considered, as illustrated by the range of perspectives and opinions in this article. This group of preservice teachers asks penetrating questions, but can only offer humble answers.

Carinna Pellett looks at the broader panorama of music's place in education: “The movie “The Gods Must be Crazy” addresses the irony behind our complex society, and the fact that we have to send our children to school for 12 years in order to understand our world. . . . Education is not located in a closed environment [and thus] should be proportional to society and address its components. In a music educator's world, this includes all music present in society.”

Matthew Rollo summarizes the thinking of the class of 2002 music teachers: “So, what's on the menu in the music classroom? Change . . . The only way to effectively nourish the student's appetite for music education is through flexibility, open-mindedness, and, above all, balance.”

Kari Veblen

The Ontario Arts Curriculum for grades 1-8 may be accessed on the internet at

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/arts/arts.html>.

Arts curriculum for the secondary level may be found at

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/seccurric.html>