

## Music

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### A Multicultural View of the Music Curriculum

Remember when school songbooks featured a collection of rousing patriotic hymns, holiday carols, and the folk music of our European neighbors? Or when music class meant learning songs, dances, and instrumental works that were Germanic rather than Japanese, French rather than Filipino, and British rather than Brazilian? Or when study of Native American Indian culture (usually during the dreary days before Thanksgiving) consisted of war whoops and beating drums? Or when all of Africa was represented in a single song, so that we developed a kernel-sized view of the myriad traditions on that vast continent?

I do. I grew up in a time when newly arrived immigrants shamefully concealed their old-world ways and sought to adapt quickly to life in the USA, when exotic cultures were known firsthand only by the very wealthy, who were still making the journey by leisure ship rather than same-day flight. I learned little about the world in my social science classes, read few novels whose plots were set outside Western Europe or mainstream American culture, and believed that music beyond the Western art tradition was certain to be a primitive "noodling of the natives" experience.

Times have changed, thankfully. Today we can no longer maintain a narrow focus on the customs and values of a single culture in the social sciences, nor can we ignore the realities of our multicultural society in our study of the arts. As in the rest of the curriculum, multiculturalism has emerged as a principal theme in music instruction. The Music Educators National Conference (MENC), as the core of its professional philosophy, maintains the slogan: "Music for every child, and every child for music." Multicultural music education is a "two birds with one stone" concept, in that (1) children develop skills in music

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appreciation and performance through the musical expressions of various cultures, and (2) they become more accepting and tolerant of the people whose beautiful music they experience.

When students play an Indonesian *gamelan* piece on Orff xylophones and Chinese percussion music on drums, woodblocks, and gongs, they begin to understand the aesthetic values of these cultures. When they dance a Hungarian *czardas* or an Appalachian clog dance, and sing an African-American spiritual or a Laotian song of honor, they are learning to respond to music as people within the culture would. As they are guided in their listening to music for African *mbira* (thumb piano), Indian *sitar* (lute), Middle Eastern *santir* (hammered dulcimer), or Peruvian *sicu* (panpipes), they are discovering musical expressions that are different from their own—but equally valuable.

How and where do we begin to reflect multicultural America and the global village in school music? Enter MENC's new book, *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education*, a pragmatic approach to the integration of world music traditions into general music classes, particularly at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The text is a convenient compilation of lessons that contribute not only to music instruction but to the

social studies curriculum as well. Strange as the sounds first seem to them, students who learn through assorted performance and listening activities may come to understand and appreciate not only the music but also the people who make it.

After all, popular culture has paid tribute to the merging of musical styles through such genres as *reggae*, *soca*, and *mariachi*. New bins in our favorite record stores have been set up for "international rock" and "world music." With a turn of the dial, we can pick up nearly any major ethnic group's music on radio or TV within a given week. Local theatres feature foreign films with subtitles for insight on how other people live, relate, and confront their antagonists, all to the accompaniment of music from their traditions. In short, we have plentiful opportunities for appreciating our world neighbors.

I remember too well that time when our society was narrow and restricted in its views of the world and of the all-American stereotype. I see beauty in diversity and in the myriad musical traditions that are available for us as performers and consumers of music. Our survival as a world community, further, depends on our ability to understand the similarities that bind and the differences that distinguish us as subsets of the human species. For today's students, we should do no less than to steer our schools toward providing a multicultural view of our society, offering music as a key to the world's cultures. □

#### Reference

Anderson, W.M., and P. Shehan Campbell, eds. (1989). *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education*. Reston, Va.: MENC.

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