

Prize Winner in the 2012 Kenneth Bray Undergraduate Essay Competition

## Making the Invisible Visible: First Nations Music in the Classroom

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*Abstract: This essay seeks to call attention to the importance of bringing First Nations music into the classroom to help students to create a Canadian cultural identity. Teaching First Nations music is an excellent way to break down stereotypes, but brings with it many controversies. These controversies are discussed followed by what these controversies imply for music educators. Finally, students reap many benefits when learning about and experiencing First Nations music and it is made clear that First Nations music should be a part of the music classroom.*

One of the four main ideas underlying the arts curriculum in Ontario is understanding culture. This involves “constructing personal and cultural identity (developing a sense of self and a sense of the relationship between the self and others)” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Many countries have a nationalist tradition to turn to when creating a cultural identity through music such as Russia’s “Mighty Handful,” the group of five composers credited with bringing Russian Nationalism to music, Poland’s Chopin, or Finland’s Sibelius. In a diverse country such as Canada, finding an over-arching cultural identity through music is not as easy. Multiculturalism is an important part of Canadian cultural identity and if the arts are to help develop a cultural identity, multiculturalism should be included in the music classroom. One major part of the diversity that is Canadian culture is the First Nations people. First Nations topics are often left out of classes other than history where residential schools and other horrors are discussed. The myth of the “Vanishing Indian” came into effect with the European settlers and was summarized by Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan in 1889: “[The Indian race]...is disappearing and probably within the lifetime of some hearing me there will be very few in this country...” (quoted in Mohawk, 2002). The “Indian” has not vanished but efforts to reclaim their indigenous identity are constantly being made (Mohawk, 2002).

Music educators can help to ensure that First Nations culture remains part of Canadian cultural identity by including and fostering appreciation for First Nations music in their classrooms. Fostering an appreciation is not as simple as playing recordings or presenting facts. Integrating First Nations culture in the classroom presents educators with the opportunity to break down stereotypes and give students a new way to view music’s importance; however, there are many controversies surrounding the teaching of First Nations music. This paper will examine how music education can be used to break down First Nations stereotypes, the controversies surrounding the teaching of First Nations music, how to work past controversies, and how overall, this will benefit students.

### Breaking Down Stereotypes

Regarding controversies surrounding First Nations music, Boyea (1999) describes a scene in a classroom in the year 1950 in which children danced outside, patting their mouths to create a high pitched tremolo as they played “Indian” and did a “war dance” while they were encouraged by their teacher (p.

113). This stereotype has been perpetuated by media-created images where the sound of First Nations music is a threatening, foreign, warpath (Heilig, 1996, p. 46). Today these stereotypes are seen as out-dated, but new stereotypes take their place. First Nations people in today’s media are often presented as the “noble savage” in a new, romanticized, stoic stereotype (Boyea, 2000, p.15).

Music can be used to subtly perpetuate stereotypes as can be seen in the example of another 1950’s classroom where the children were read a story about a good Indian girl who put a baby to sleep and were then taught an “Indian Lullaby” to go along with the story. The melody was Western European and had no connection to First Nations music. The song and story gave the sense that the culture was a make-believe one as opposed to something real and current (Boyea, 1999, p.113).

Burton and Dunbar (2002) suggest taking a post-colonial approach in the classroom. A post-colonial approach involves looking past the way of thinking which was developed during European colonization. To take a post-colonial approach, educators must see different cultures as individual as opposed to looking at everything from a European point of view. Critiquing contradictions between cultural sources and strategies through which music is taught will help to overcome teaching music from a European viewpoint. A student’s way of thinking is naturally culturally derived (p.57). Our own backgrounds and training will always hinder our understanding. There is a tendency among teachers to extract musical concepts from their cultural context and use Western European methods of analysis to understand and teach the concepts (Sarrazin, 1995, p.33); if a post-colonial approach is to take place, this must be avoided. Even universalism, which often seems like a way to make multicultural music relevant to students by describing it as a “universal language” goes against a post-colonial way of thinking as it provides the notion of a unified human nature, excluding distinctive characteristics (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995 cited in Burton, 2002, p. 57). Refraining from a Euro centric viewpoint involves teaching music “in terms of itself” (Hood, 1971 quoted in Burton, 2002, p. 57).

### The Controversies Involved with the Teaching of First Nations Music

Many of the issues surrounding bringing First Nations music into the classroom stem from differing roles of music in different cultures (Boyea, 1999, p. 105). In the Western world, music is seen as an art form (Boyea, 1999, p. 108), but in First Nations cultures, music serves a purpose and “is rarely regarded as something to listen to apart from its social and ceremonial function” (Rhodes quoted in Boyea, 1999, p. 107). Western culture is most often written down for public access and there is a tendency to do the same with other cultures; to write down what should be an oral transmission, and to publicize what should be private. This problem of the publication of private events as well as other controversies will be addressed later.

Tribal traditionalists want to protect sacred customs and privileged practices. Participation in some First Nations ceremonies requires intensity of spirit with a lesser degree of im-

portance placed on talent. This importance of spirit is because the ceremony is not being performed for an audience, but so that others may participate (Boyea, 1999, pp. 105-108). For educators, this is important as having students perform music meant only for First Nations people of a certain spiritual level is disrespectful to the culture.

Setting is important in First Nations music. Boyea (1999) gives a very clear example of this importance when describing a situation where a professor at a large university played a tape and passed out a transcription of a First Nations prayer which was never to be performed indoors or for non-First Nations, uninitiated listeners. There was great controversy on campus and the Indian Education Advisory Council met to discuss and address the complaints of sacrilege. While not everyone on campus was outraged, it is clear that the teaching of any culture's sacred music, including First Nations, must be dealt with delicately and respectfully (p.109). Had this professor employed post-colonial ideals, critiquing the contradictions between the cultural source and the strategies he was using to teach it, he would have realized that teaching the prayer under a roof contradicted the nature of the cultural source.

### Implications for Music Educators

Returning to the idea that, according to the Ontario curriculum, understanding culture through the arts is a key goal of music education, it is understanding that can help the music educator avoid controversy. With so much possibility of controversy surrounding a culture whose identity "has always been an enigma to the Western mind" (Mohawk, 2002), it can be intimidating for anyone not of First Nations descent to decide where to begin teaching a class about First Nations music. There are many options available to music educators which, if carried out respectfully, can effectively open students' eyes to how moving and significant First Nations music is.

Boyea suggests that pairing First Nations music with storytelling is very effective as stories can be used to shape and articulate a culture's character. Stories provide a context-creating narrative which gives distinction. Stories are non-threatening but can help to move beyond the romanticized stereotype of the stoic native as well as helping the listener to further grasp the significance of music to the culture and show emotional and historical complexity. A story alone can have a far-away quality, but music brings with it an immediacy. Incorporating stories with the music being taught can include hearing a story associated with a particular dance or ceremony before hearing the music itself (Boyea, 2000, pp.15-22). Boyea also discourages teaching First Nations music to simply expose the culture and teaching it more as an artifact than as a culture still in existence (Boyea, 1999, p.112). This serves to perpetuate the myth of the "vanishing Indian" by reinforcing the idea that First Nations culture is something that existed only in the past.

First Nations music can be taught through traditional works as well as through modern First Nations artists such as Buffy Sainte Marie. As previously discussed, when teaching through traditional works, consulting anthropological and historical writing is important to find a traditional work which can be performed in the classroom while still respecting the culture. Boyea uses the example of traditional lullabies which use techniques such as vocables to help students experience the nuance and complex details of First Nations music. When taught with the inclusion of background stories and translations, traditional lullabies show a culture with a rich history as well as giving a sense of domestic life, helping students to connect with something familiar (Boyea, 1999, p. 115). Current works such as Buffy Sainte Marie's "My country tis of thy people you're dying" not only show that First Nations music continues to grow and evolve

today, but it brings to light many political and social issues. In "My country tis of thy people you're dying," Buffy Sainte Marie sings of residential schools teaching children that "American history began when Columbus set sail out of Europe," (quoted in Burton, 2002, p. 61) giving the opportunity for discussion about the resilience of First Nations Culture despite oppression (Burton, 2002, p. 61). When presenting First Nations music to students, it is important not to present it the same way one would present Mahler or Stravinsky: to evoke a mood or emotional response. As traditional First Nations music is used to serve a purpose, presenting it in the same way as Western music takes away some of the integrity (Sarrazin, 1995, p. 35).

First Nations culture can also be brought into the music classroom by adopting some of the philosophies upheld by the First Nations people. In First Nations culture, there is generally a larger emphasis on community rather than the individual. This is particularly useful in an ensemble setting when the togetherness of an ensemble, is more important than the talent of individuals within it. In general, in many First Nations communities, "To excel for one's personal fame is frowned on because it sets one above and apart from the others. This disturbs the group's cohesiveness and balance" (Shutiva, 2004, p.135). This mindset can be applied in the music classroom to foster intrinsic motivation so that students will better themselves for the sake of being better musicians as opposed to seeking attention from fellow classmates.

Community is an integral part of any arts program. Partnership with a community can enhance students' education greatly by helping them to relate to life beyond the classroom (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Music educators can seek out representatives from the First Nations community to have as guest speakers in the classroom or can arrange trips to experience First Nations music first hand in a live setting. This would be especially beneficial as authentic experience is essential for making the music emotional and memorable (Boyea, 1999, p. 106). A large obstacle faced by music educators attempting to bring multiculturalism to their classrooms is that the classroom is an artificial setting and inhibits the authenticity of any experience (Sarrazin, 1995, p. 33). Experiencing First Nations music in a live setting would eliminate this problem as well as eliminating any possibility of disrespecting the culture as it is being demonstrated by First Nations people themselves as opposed to a teacher who may not be qualified to perform or teach the specific type of music to the class. Experience in a live, authentic setting is also the best way to take a post-colonial approach to teaching as it will eliminate conflict between the culture and the way it was taught as there is a danger of doing in the classroom.

### Benefits for Students

The study of music of other cultures gives students an opportunity to learn about music even if they are not going to become performers (Walker, 2000, p. 31). Music and music education have a close bond with the society in which they occur (Walker, 2000, p. 38). This bond can be beneficial if music education occurs in a very diverse society, but if it occurs in a primarily Caucasian society then students will come away with a very Western European music background. Presenting a community with music of a different culture can create a better relationship between the students and the rest of the community as it helps students to feel as if they have brought something new and worthwhile to the community and in turn, helps the community to feel more in touch with their cultural identity as Canadians. If the community is fortunate enough to have First Nations people available and willing to assist with education, students can have the opportunity to learn about a culture from someone liv-

ing in that culture and to gain some insight into the differences between their culture and First Nations culture giving them the opportunity to critically examine how their own culture could benefit from a different perspective.

First Nations music is based less on talent and more on the emotion of the participant which benefits students who do not enjoy the performance part of music as it shows that music can be more internal than external. By giving students the opportunity to explore the music-making techniques of a culture which has a greater focus on community as opposed to the individual, students can begin to discover how beneficial it can be to step away from a European way of life, focused on excelling past your peers, and view music-making as a group effort.

Perhaps the largest benefit of teaching First Nations music to students is that it provides the opportunity for critical thinking. Teachers can encourage students to consider their own cultural identity and examine how the arts help to shape this (Morton, 2000, p. 118). Critical thinking can be encouraged when examining the work of Buffy Sainte Marie by encouraging students to think about how the hardships encountered by First Nations people have helped to shape them as a culture. By using music to encourage critical thinking, First Nations culture is not only brought to light, but students are given the opportunity to examine the complexities of Canadian cultural identity through music.

### Conclusions

The Ontario curriculum states that the arts provide “unique ways for students to gain insights into the world around them.” Studying works of art gives a deeper understanding and appreciation of other perspectives. It also states that “The openness that is fostered by the study of the arts helps students to explore and appreciate the culture of diverse people in Canada including First Nations” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). While European countries have distinct national identities which can be found in music, Canada is so culturally diverse it is hard to pinpoint a cultural identity through the arts. One part of Canada’s cultural identity is the country’s First Nations people.

For music educators, the task of teaching First Nations music can seem overwhelming. Much controversy surrounds the teaching of First Nations culture due to the differences between First Nations culture and Western culture including the fact that First Nations music usually has a purpose whereas Western music is often art for art’s sake; First Nations music is an oral tradition and Western music is often written down; First Nations music is not as talent focused because the music is not a performance for the audience, but is an experience dependant on spirituality meaning that an authentic experience is imperative if the music is to be fully appreciated.

Creating an authentic experience can be done in many different ways but it must be done respectfully as many First Nations prayers and ceremonies require specific settings and participants with specific abilities. Using stories along side of music gives cultural context to the music. Performing lullabies in class are a good way to have students experience the music and get a feel for domestic life to familiarize themselves with the culture.

Reaching out to the community is the best way to create an authentic experience for students. By finding members of the community who are of First Nations descent or who have ties with First Nations people, teachers can provide mentors for their students to help to gain insight into First Nations culture in the world. First Nations culture can be used to develop classroom philosophies as well such as creating a sense of community where excelling for fame is frowned upon. This helps to create intrinsic motivation so that students grow as musicians by learning from and helping each other.

Overall, fostering the study of First Nations music in the classroom is important to help students develop a cultural identity and can be done through many different means. Creating a positive, respectful environment for students to learn about First Nations culture will help to ensure that the myth of the “Vanishing Indian” is banished once and for all, and that future generations respect First Nations people as a unique, important part of Canadian history.

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