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Reflecting Cultural Diversity in the Music Classroom

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# Reflecting Cultural in the Music

by René Boyer-White

**P**rospective music teachers need to introduce and use cultural diversity as a means of developing their students' music appreciation and aesthetic sensitivity. America is a land of great cultural variety, and the composition of many of our classrooms, especially those in

urban public school systems, reflects this wide diversity. All students are individuals with distinct characteristics and are influenced by the cultures in which they were reared and by that in which they live. Many black Americans, for example, are sensitive to the Negro spiritual because this art form reflects a portion of their cultural

history. This sensitivity, however, is not unique to black Americans. Our society is a greater whole than the sum of its component parts. Robert Garfias has stated:

By allowing the specific to define the whole, we as Americans have, in large, been taught to view the American culture as one homogeneous tradition. Upon reflection, we all realize that there are a number of different cultures that we consider American. Those that usually come to mind may be salient only because large segments of the population are engaged in them. In addition, however, there are an almost limitless number and variety of cultures in

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*Photographs courtesy of Press Information Bureau of India; Department of Education, San Juan, Puerto Rico; and National Education Association*



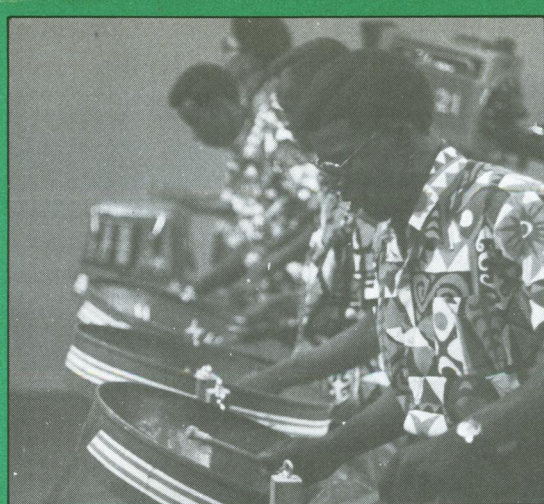


# Diversity Classroom

America. In many, music may be the culture's strongest or most widely perceived manifestation.<sup>1</sup>

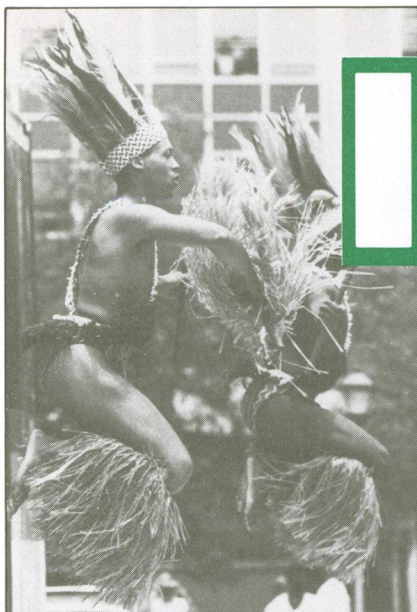
## Teacher education programs

University music education programs have the challenging task of ensuring that prospective music teachers will be able to adjust adequately to their future teaching environments. Typical elementary and secondary methods teachers in choral, instrumental, and general music on the undergraduate level often are responsible for helping students develop the capacity to prepare and implement successful music programs in schools. College music education programs provide recommendations for methods, approaches, techniques, literature, and other materials that can be



1. Robert Garfias, "Music in the United States: Community of Cultures," *Music Educators Journal* 69, no. 9, May 1983, 31.





If we believe that music education is for all children, we must seriously consider cultural diversity.

used when teaching general, choral, and instrumental music to K-12 students. If these courses, recommendations, and resources represent only one facet of American culture, students will be crippled intellectually even before beginning their teaching careers.

An editorial published in the January 1970 issue of *MEJ* presented the problem of teacher preparation in urban areas of the United States. The editor reported that many music teachers were disillusioned during their first years of teaching because they found that what they were taught in college could not be used. They were forced to discard teaching techniques, concepts of curriculum and course content, educational philosophies, and methods and materials that had proved unworkable in real classrooms. Many of these educators felt that their college education was not only inadequate, but that it did them a disservice by leading them in the wrong direction.<sup>2</sup>

Although an understanding of music from a multicultural perspective is important, this understanding is usually not a requirement for the completion of undergraduate or graduate music education degrees. Students are expected to learn about the music literature and the standards of the Western European tradition; some programs may also

give a brief nod to early American music. The students in such programs seldom have the opportunity to explore the polyrhythmic structures found in many types of African music or the tonal systems of the Orient.

At the Tanglewood Symposium held in 1968, David P. McAllester stated that in today's electronically linked world, "communication has changed everything. We are all in instant touch with each other. Practically speaking, we now share the same nervous system. All men are indeed brothers; in fact, we are closer than that; we are Siamese twins, like it or not. How then can we go on thinking of 'music' as Western European music, to the exclusion of the infinitely varied forms of musical expression in other parts of the world?"<sup>3</sup>

Music education instructors and prospective music teachers should be made aware of the variety of cultural backgrounds of their students. They should realize that even the dominant American culture is made up of many subgroups; among them are Irish, Italian, Polish, and German ethnic identities. In addition, there are four other important groups that are integral parts of American society: native Americans (including Alaskan natives), Asians and Pacific Islanders, black Americans, and Hispanic Americans.

Students who enter college music programs should have some exposure to children of various ethnic backgrounds. This usually is not the case, however. This puts the university music educator at a great disadvantage: Many first-year college stu-

dents have a gravely limited perception of the aspects of life among ethnic minorities that influence good teaching and effective learning.

This lack of exposure is coupled with the reality that many high school seniors who enter college music programs are not from the inner city but from the suburbs. The talents and scholarship of many suburban students are often molded and nurtured for years in an environment that is supportive and conducive to study of the arts. Because of this nurturing, such students are better able to understand and reproduce Western European music than are their inner-city counterparts. Since understanding and reproducing Western European music are major criteria for acceptance into music education programs, these more affluent applicants make up the largest percentage of students accepted into such programs across the nation. These prospective teachers will, in turn, teach as they were taught. This situation makes it increasingly important that all music educators provide their students with multicultural experiences. This exposure will enhance their growth and understanding as prospective educators.

Despite the fact that ethnic populations are increasing in numbers throughout the United States, many teacher education programs still lack appropriate curricula and staff to help students address the problems created by these changes. Wiley Housewright acknowledged that "there is much to be gained from the study of any musical creation. . . . To delimit concert halls, schools, and colleges to a steady diet of the 'masters' is as absurd as permitting only Euripides, Shakespeare, and Molière to be per-

2. "Overtones," *Music Educators Journal* 56, no. 5, January, 1970, 103-104.

3. David P. McAllester, "The Substance of Things Hoped For," in *Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium*, ed. Robert A. Choate. (Washington, DC: Music Educators National Conference, 1968), 96.

formed in the theater. Music education must encompass all music. If student musical attitudes are to be affected by music education, the music teacher's openness to new music serves as a necessary model."<sup>4</sup>

Teachers and administrators need to include foreign languages (both in the school curriculum and in the music classroom) as basic tools for understanding the musics of other countries and cultures. Although many other countries require the study of the English in addition to one or more native languages in school, meaningful foreign language requirements have become almost extinct in American undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs. Without a second language, music students will not be able to function intelligently as administrators or music educators in what is fast becoming an English- and Spanish-speaking society. Additionally, English-only speakers are limited to the theoretical and musical knowledge that has been translated for us.

### Diversity in the curriculum

Teaching about music of many cultures can lead students to value cultural pluralism. To teach a multicultural music program, teachers must understand and appreciate the differences in musical expression that exist among the nation's citizens. Educators must recognize that knowing about and enjoying a broad spectrum of musical styles can foster the development of students' respect for the intrinsic worth of every group within a given culture. It is generally accepted that the arts, especially music, can help stimulate students to learn, especially in a multicultural setting. There are songs, instrumental literature, books, recordings, and films that can be used to reflect the multicultural heritage of our society. Unfortunately, many music teach-

ers and educators are unwilling to include a better representation of ethnic materials in their music education programs.

### Myths and realities

Some music educators believe that a multicultural music education program would create conflict by emphasizing differences; they think it would be better to emphasize commonalities among their students. I believe, however, that commonalities cannot be recognized unless differences are acknowledged. For too long music educators in university programs have ignored ethnic differences: They have treated such differences as negative characteristics and thereby have unintentionally promoted bigotry and racial stereotypes. Unfortunately, few music education programs have recognized either the commonalities or differences in American society that are positive.

On the bright side, the work of ethnomusicologists is beginning to be recognized by people in many disciplines, including music educators. Ethnomusicologists study differences in the composition and performance of music throughout the world as well as among the various ethnic groups that make up their own societies. The information they have reported will prove valuable in developing better teaching methods and approaches. For example, teachers could use information about the speaking and singing timbres of various societies throughout the world when they determine criteria for judging competitions that involve multicultural choral ensembles. Competition officials must revitalize the process of adjudication with more judges whose artistic integrity and knowledge are broad enough to appreciate artistic performances by people from a variety of cultural traditions within and outside the judges' own societies.

At the Tanglewood Symposium, the Committee on Music of Our

Time reported that "there are different kinds of music existing side by side with relative degrees of aesthetic values. Separate musics have separated functions; and the functions are multiplying. There are happenings all around us, on the street corners, in churches, events both political and social. They pose the problem of value judgments, not only of the quality of the music, but quality within the [framework] of the musics. Can we and should we assign a value hierarchy to various musics?"<sup>5</sup>

### Melting pot myth

Many claim that multi-ethnic educational curricula would shatter the "melting pot" idea that so many Americans believe in and support. In fact, a genuinely multicultural society is not one that molds all ethnic groups into one homogeneous group. The melting pot society has never existed in the United States. It is, however, a value that many people accept and nurture without fully understanding it. The stereotypical "melting pot" portrays the ideal American as a person of northern European (primarily English) heritage. American education has traditionally presented non-Western culture as inferior, and we as a society are only now beginning to perceive other cultures as having intrinsic worth. When American society truly acknowledges the best of all its cultures, it will be a truly great society with complementary parts.

Music teachers should learn as much as they can about the cultures that their students represent. Teachers can and should use the cultural differences of form and outlook that exist among their students as tools for building a strong and lasting educational foundation for their music programs. Open minds and sincerity in accepting music that is representative of all

4. Wiley Housewright, "Youth Music in Education," *Music Educators Journal* 56, no. 3, November 1969, 45.

5. "Music of Our Time," in *Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium*, ed. Robert A. Choate (Washington, DC: Music Educators National Conference, 1968), 122.

Americans will help students overcome their own prejudices.

### The teacher's role

The role of the music teacher in helping students become sensitive to the various cultures within our society is an important one. William Anderson and Joy Lawrence stated that "music teachers have increasingly endeavored to present a greater variety of music representative of many different cultural groups. This trend has paralleled the work of music scholars, who have documented that music is a worldwide phenomenon occurring among all known peoples of our earth. We now know that our planet contains a number of highly developed musical systems of which the European-American classical tradition is just one. Such findings have clearly challenged many traditional views."<sup>6</sup>

Music educators must equip students with the tools needed to understand better the variety of music systems that exist. Comprehending basic structural elements provides a framework on which students can develop such a better understanding, since these structural elements and their interrelationships are fundamental to the very existence of music itself.

In short, instructors who design and implement teacher preparation programs must realize that it is their job to ensure that prospective music teachers possess the tools necessary to function intelligently in any environment, including the multi-ethnic environments found in many of our inner-city areas. Music, regardless of where it originates, will consist of the basic structural elements: melody, rhythm, timbre, form, texture, and harmony. Only the style of composition differs, because style is dependent on the manipulation of the structural elements by a person or group of people in a particular place and

time. True music educators are able to develop their students' ability to understand and be sensitive to different cultures' uses of structural elements.

### Program guidelines

The following are some guidelines that I hope will provide a basis for discussion among music educators regarding the issue of multicultural diversity:

1. Music educators should identify the different ethnic groups in their music classes, seek information regarding the musical backgrounds of the students, analyze the musical styles that are most representative of the students' backgrounds, and investigate the major characteristics of those styles. These characteristics can be used as a springboard for helping students understand the structural components of music.

2. Music teachers also should encourage students to share their unique cultural backgrounds in the classroom. (Teachers can start the process by sharing some of their own cultural values and traditions.) In ethnically diverse communities, parents, community leaders, and musicians who represent a particular ethnic group can also be invited to perform and talk with the students.

3. Music teachers need to learn as much as possible about minority students' homes and communities, interests, talents, skills, and potentials and construct the music program to reflect these. If such diversity does not exist in a community, teachers who have studied multicultural music can obtain materials that can be used to expose their students to other cultures.

4. Music educators should find out how minority students in the class wish to refer to their ethnic group; for example, some Mexican-Americans prefer to be called Chicanos, but others may be offended by the term. The use of the terms "Negro" and "colored" to refer to a black person ended in the mid-

1960s, and "black American" became the preferred terminology.

5. Music teachers can invite parents to help collect research data, materials, and other resources that pertain to a particular ethnic group. Parents are indeed the greatest resource for information relating to special days and celebrations that occur within a particular ethnic identity. They also can help ensure that performances in ethnic music, movement, drama, and other art forms are as authentic as possible.

6. Educators must treat all students equally, regardless of their ethnic background. Do not fall into the trap of reverse discrimination.

7. All educators must see that assessment and evaluation techniques are appropriate and take cultural differences into account.

### The challenge ahead

If we music educators still believe that music education is for all children, we must seriously consider cultural diversity. The demographic makeup of our classrooms is changing rapidly in some parts of the country, and prospective teachers will have to prepare with an eye toward the future. It is not unusual for those receiving teacher education training in the Midwest to eventually apply for a teaching position in Florida, Texas, or southern California or for graduates with music education degrees to find themselves in the urban areas of Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., or New York—all of which have large ethnic populations. We must be prepared to teach and learn from the variety of people that make up our society.

The future of education will depend on teachers who can think beyond cultural boundaries. Knowledge pertaining to different cultural practices will become increasingly necessary to successful functioning in an interdependent world. To be effective, educators must continue to learn about the multicultural aspects of our society and the world. ■

6. William M. Anderson and Joy E. Lawrence, *Integrating Music into the Classroom* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1985), 251.