The Absorbent Musi

Adam Phares makes a case for world music in Early Years Education.

I recently attended a concert at a respected Canadian music faculty, during which undergraduate students performed in various world music ensembles for credit. The program included a Klezmer band, steel pan drums, Taiko drumming, and an African drumming circle, among other ensembles. I recall my initial reaction to this concert being quite negative. The first ensemble was a group performing African drumming and dancing, comprised of undergraduate students who presumably had little connection to African heritage or African music prior to this experience. The performers took the stage barefooted and were dressed in colourful robes, perhaps to make the presentation more authentic. Half of the students played one drumbeat or variations of that beat repeatedly, while the other half danced in a circle, chanting and making foreign gestures. To my surprise, the audience, which I could only assume included mostly classmates, proceeded to laugh and mimic the gestures their peers were performing on stage.

Although the performers comported themselves professionally, the actions of the audience members could be interpreted as ignorant, immature, and disrespectful. What was causing this reaction? Presumably, these students did not have a strong understanding of the music they were hearing or the cultures being represented. The sounds and context were foreign to them, and one could argue they were simply responding to a feeling of 'alienation,' as described by Dr Lucy Green in her analysis of the holistic musical experience. Through this model, Green suggests this response can occur when we, as listeners, do not understand the musical patterns we are hearing, and further, "when we feel the music delineates social or political values of which we disapprove, or social groups from which we are excluded."

In this case, the use of the term 'alienation' is poignant. In a time when classrooms are becoming increasingly

diverse and when the majority of educational discourse promotes the importance of global citizenship for our students, reducing the potential for alienation between cultures seems imperative. A recent study conducted at the University of Toronto suggests we may have a difficult time showing empathy towards those who are visibly different from us. In this study, Caucasian participants watched videos of Caucasian, African, South Asian, and East Asian men performing simple tasks. The results found that the participants' motor cortex – a part of the brain believed to demonstrate physical signs of feeling empathy – was less likely to fire when watching non-Caucasian men perform the tasks, and in some cases, registered as little brain activity as when watching a blank screen.

Researchers, however, remain hopeful, as there is no reason to suggest these prejudiced responses are in any way hard-wired or unlearnable. Strategies are in place to develop perspective-taking exercises that may lead to increased levels of empathy and understanding, with musical exercises among the forefront of this research. It is believed that by simply attempting to understand, appreciate, or at least tolerate the music of differing cultures, one may experience increased acceptance during social interactions with such cultures. Currently, practical applications of this theory are gaining global recognition. British schools, for example, are incorporating traditional Indian music into their curricula, and some American programs are beginning to feature mariachi bands. Comparable motives can also be seen in Canadian schools, where we are battling a definite lack of understanding, appreciation, and representation of our indigenous cultures.

The field of music education has put forth countless attempts to alter outdated curricula that once favoured the music of male, Caucasian, Western composers, in fear of failing to satiate the complex needs of 21st century learners. As early as 1967, a prominent national symposium held in Boston resulted in a new mandate, which stated that musics of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures were to be included in the curriculum moving forward. Although several decades have since passed, some worry that little progress has been made on this front, and that multicultural music education still lacks authenticity and context. As Dr David Elliott warns us, "People do not immediately understand, appreciate, or enjoy 'the music' of other cultures." In fact, the opposite is more often true.

Although the adult learner's ability to re-construct ingrained patterns is open to question, research, not surprisingly, continues to highlight the sponge-like capabilities of the child's brain. One approach to familiarizing children with music from a multitude of cultures is to have them absorb a wide array of genres and sounds, in the hope that this may anticipate and reduce feelings of unfamiliarity or alienation. Studies suggest that this exposure should take place as early as possible to achieve its desired effects. The human baby's hearing fully develops during the final three months of pregnancy, and newborns may even be able to distinguish between melodies they heard in the womb during this period.

This is evidently a crucial stage in infants' development. It is a time when they begin connecting sound patterns from their surrounding environment, and start to learn how to differentiate between, say, the sound of a symphony, versus the sound of a dog

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barking, or a fire alarm. This phenomenon may be exhibited through the influential work of music psychologist Mary Louise Sarafine, whose results revealed overall that young children do not score as well as older children on tests of musical aptitude and pattern recognition. One might hypothesize that these patterns simply have not yet been rooted into the minds of the youngest children, and may further demonstrate how it is during these early years that children undergo a form of enculturation.

In many ways, the above findings parallel the research of Dr Maria Montessori and her awareness of the absorbent mind. Montessori recognized the child's unique ability to absorb information unconsciously from prenatal life to approximately six years of age. Seemingly, this is the period when the child will come to know and construct his or her own environment and reality through use of the five senses. Utilizing this sensitive period to its potential has already proven successful in regards to learning multiple languages. Could these same principles be applied to music in an attempt to help children become, in effect, musically multilingual?

In practice, it should be easier now than ever before to accomplish such a feat, thanks to technologies such as the Internet and portable music devices. In true Montessori fashion, the focus need not be on how to 'teach' world music to a child. The primary concern, rather, should be to simply create an environment in which the child is exposed to – and can therefore absorb – a variety of sounds and cultures. In many ways, music serves as a universal language, and there are several common principles that can be implemented regardless of culture. Children enjoy moving to music, so allow them to do so. Choose fast music for dance and play, and slow music for downtime and bedtime. Children bond through music making, so sing often in as many languages as you know. Children crave hands-on, manipulative learning, so have a variety of simple percussion instruments accessible.

For educators, this may serve as an opportunity to increase creativity and diversity in the classroom. Incorporate music into your circle time, story telling, and cultural studies, or experiment with tone bar patterns that look beyond the basic major scale. Above all else, follow the child, as their responses – verbal and non-verbal – will advise you of which musical pathways to follow.

The benefits of the above suggestions are not unfounded, as research supporting musically multicultural upbringings continues to pour in. The following is an excerpt from a series of interviews preceding an anti-bullying campaign, which used musical performances to increase awareness of different cultures among school children. One young girl, Amber, remarked; "And then you just sort of feel like you know more about the people – you can't really specify something because it is just a song, right? But it's, like, just something that they know and you know. And it's like a common bridge – like finding something in common with someone who is completely your opposite."

Realistically, we cannot expect to completely avoid or eliminate all feelings of 'alienation'; however, we can come to recognize these feelings as opportunities for growth. Although I initially found the audience's reaction to the undergraduate world music concert distasteful, in truth, the directors of that program should be commended for attempting to have a conversation that many others avoid.

Striving to develop a wide and eclectic musical pallet has proven to be a worthy pursuit, with recognized social, cultural, linguistic, and musical gains. In Green's model, the direct contrast to 'alienation' is labeled as 'celebration': the feeling of understanding and enjoying music, while also feeling supported by the social context in which it is placed. Let's give our children reason to celebrate.

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