

CROSS-CULTURAL ALTERNATIVES FOR MUSIC IN EDUCATION

BY LARRY SCRIPP

“THE GREAT DIFFICULTY IN EDUCATION IS TO GET EXPERIENCE OUT OF IDEAS.”

—GEORGE SANTAYANA

JEFF THIEBAUTH



Diverse forms of mallet and percussion instruments challenge Music Program Director Paul Oullette's kindergarten students' large motor coordinations, and collaborative, improvisation, ensemble, musical and spatial thinking skills at the Conservatory Lab Charter School.

However, as Warren Senders and Lyle Davidson show in the next article, music in most traditional societies is something that is learned within a social community and not limited to the school experience. Senders' contribution to music programs in schools is precisely his ability to employ cross-cultural alternatives in music to build a strong school community. Warren Senders is a New England Conservatory faculty member who is also a Learning Through Music specialist. He dedicates one day a week to collaborating with a music teacher and several classroom teachers in a public elementary school in Nahant (MA) where his efforts in musical community-building include instrument-building projects, group compositions, and improvisations that draw on practices from traditional, non-Western cultures.

The ethos that Frank Lloyd Wright endorsed at his studio at Taliesin was “learning by doing.” In proof of this, Wright's apprentices were required to work on the actual construction of the buildings they designed. But their activities within the local community did not end with their work as architects; an apprenticeship at Taliesin also entailed full participation in all aspects of a self-sufficient community culture, including farm work, for example.

Likewise, Learning Through Music programs represent an opportunity for establishing a musical culture through community-building. Here, the resident or visiting musical artist is both a master of his or her craft and an emissary from a musical culture. The artists must draw students of all abilities into the experience of being apprentices in a (school) community to make their own music a significant part of their school culture.

Senders employs devices such as “drones” and “grooves” from non-Western cultures as alternatives to classical music training. Their function, however, is not only to introduce variety or to train students in particular styles of music; these techniques are resources and represent guiding principles — opportunities for children to develop musically on their own terms while at the same time fostering the musical culture in their school community.

For students, the drone is a context for exploring issues of tuning and for developing the ability to sing back detailed melodic motifs by ear. From seemingly static textures of pitch and rhythm (the groove), students learn to attend and respond to subtle shifts in patterns and nuance over long periods of time. Those students who learn to keep a groove together for twenty minutes as an entire class are able to participate in what Warren calls a “highly concentrated, non-competitive, collective, cooperative activity” as

part of their new musical school culture. And this new school culture, now based on a rich introduction to principles of music-making in Indian and African cultures, also enables students to reconnect with aspects of the youth culture and popular music forms they enjoy outside of school.

One of the hallmarks of Senders' Learning Through Music activities is his instruction in instrument-building. Students construct homemade, yet high-quality percussion instruments, and thus create impressive artifacts for their growing musical school culture. In addition, students develop their own invented notation systems in order to compose original music for these new instruments. Such activities foster original forms of communication and collaborative thinking which then disseminate throughout the school culture. Later on, these compositions and modes of representation provide a medium for students to interact with visiting musical artists both from Western and non-Western cultures.

If Santayana is correct ("the great difficulty in education is to get experience out of ideas"), then Warren Senders succeeds by insisting on direct musical experience as the basis for exploring ideas, both musical and extra-musical. As students design their own instruments and compose structures for group improvisation, Senders makes certain that they are in touch with mathematical, linguistic, and scientific concepts as well. These experiences, in turn, stimulate new kinds of listening, performance, and reflective thinking skills that further the integration of music into the elementary school community.



Left: Diverse forms of mallet instruments provide a "gamelan" experience for kindergarteners in a Learning Through Music program.

The Musical Fiesta at the Conservatory Lab Charter School allowed children (guided by Paul Oullette, Spanish teacher Sandra Carillo, and movement specialist Alex Van Buren) to express their understanding of Latin American culture through Spanish lyrics, dances, recorder playing, and percussion instruments.

Goethe describes the relationship of the arts to learning by asserting that "in art, it's not thinking that does the job, but making." Although Senders' activities more often than not engage reflective thinking through rich cross-cultural and interdisciplinary connections with math and language, these connections occur consistently in the context of direct experience. Personal observation of Senders' work in the classroom reveals how much he generates discussion through drumming. Reflections on alternative interpretations of invented notations are expressed in performance first and in discussion sessions or reflection sheets later. In this way Senders teaches elementary school children that music-making does precede reflective commentary, questions, and discoveries that are distilled later from rich "artifacts" or products of learning, such as the recordings, notations, and journal writings.

To complete the circle of community-building through music, Senders directs after-school percussion ensembles for parents. As he states, when "children see and hear their elders making music in time-honored ways, they are aware that their own futures hold these sounds as well."

Educators who advocate experience as the basis for education can turn to Warren's Learning Through Music approach as a strong model for implementing this philosophy in elementary schools. Lyle Davidson argues persuasively in the next paper for examining the psychological basis of cross-cultural alternatives in Learning Through Music programs. Phrases such as "situated learning", "distributed cognition", "peripheral participation" and "multiple entry points", weave together powerful cognitive orientations which underlie the cross-cultural experience of music in elementary school education and help parents and administrators to assess and interpret Learning Through Music programs.

In Senders' and Davidson's portrait of Learning Through Music programs in action, we see how these practices, informed by



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cross-cultural perspectives, can promote learning communities in public elementary schools. Elementary school Learning Through Music communities can, in turn, challenge entire school systems to use music (to paraphrase John Dewey) to serve not as preparation for community life, but as community life itself. ¶