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Colliding Perspectives? Music Curriculum as Cultural Studies

By Peter Dunbar-Hall

Over the past few decades, music teachers have faced questions about whose music should be studied in classrooms and who has the right to make such decisions. For example, if they are teaching the music of indigenous peoples, should music teachers consult indigenous people about repertoire, resources, and teaching methods, or should they stay with the tried-and-true? Clearly, music education that centers almost exclusively on Western art music has become a thing of the past, and it is common now to include many types of music in the curriculum. While this development has made music education a more equitable and broad undertaking, music educators are left wondering how and why their subject became so controversial. Meanwhile, little attention is being paid “to the formal and informal teaching and learning practices that go along with a variety of world music.”¹

One way of seeing music education is to think of it as the study of music as a series of sounds and silences. This model has dominated North American conservatories and many universities² and found its way into classroom practice. Another way of seeing music education is to define it as *cultural studies*—that is, a subject concerned with uncovering the differences and power relation-

A cultural-studies approach to the music curriculum requires teachers to be aware of the social and political roles of music in various cultures.

special focus
Reconceptualizing Curriculum



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Students can learn more about the world by exploring the music of cultures beyond their own.

Cultural-Studies Glossary

- **Cultural Studies** is an area of study in which uneven power relationships between different cultures and analysis of the processes through which these relationships can be identified, analyzed, and circumvented is the focus of investigation.
 - **Culture Wars** is a term used increasingly by writers to define the current era as one in which cultural background has become a driving force in international conflict.
 - **Pluralism** accepts in the broadest sense that there are diverse approaches to all aspects of teaching and learning and that no one of these is more correct than any other.
 - **Postcolonialism** is an ideology through which colonialist treatment of people is contradicted by allowing previously subjugated voices to be heard.
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ships among groups of people and their cultures. (For a definition of cultural studies and other italicized terms in this article, see the Cultural-Studies Glossary.)

One consequence of a cultural-studies approach to the music curriculum is that music education is brought into areas of political debate, something that not all music educators are comfortable with, even though it brings the music curriculum closer to the realities of everyday life—realities that involve poverty, ownership, and social justice. This connection with everyday life is one reason why it is important for music educators to consider a cultural-studies perspective in music education. I begin this article with an overview of current practice and then proceed to a definition of cultural studies, a look at its origins, and its implications for music education. I also offer a list of additional resources in the Suggested Reading sidebar for those who wish to learn more.

Music Education and Culture: The Multicultural Solution

A political ethos introduced in Australia circa 1970 from Canada, multiculturalism avows the equality of all cultures. Transferred to education, multiculturalism ideally requires the use of teaching resources from all cultures, acceptance of culturally derived responses to teaching and learning situations, and acknowledgment that teaching and learning styles differ from culture to culture.

In music education, however, the use of music from wide-ranging sources without acknowledging the cultural implications of music has resulted in a superficial application of multiculturalism. Because music lessons regularly include music from a range of cultures, some members of the music education community mistakenly assume that music education already sufficiently addresses cultural issues through multicultural music education. This misconception has developed unchecked since the 1970s,

Suggested Reading

- Ellis, Catherine. *Aboriginal Music: Education for Living*. St. Lucia (QLD): University of Queensland Press, 1976.
 - Reimer, Bennett, ed. *World Musics and Music Education: Facing the Issues*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2002.
 - Rodriguez, Carlos Xavier, ed. *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2004.
 - Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage Press, 1994.
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when the types of music studied widened to include music from all styles, periods, and genres. At that time, for example, forms of popular music, including jazz, became standard as examples of music in classrooms. In addition to welcoming different kinds of music, music teachers began incorporating some peripheral study of culture, often in the form of basic contextual information about the roles of music in specific settings (e.g., to accompany a calendar event, to relate historical events, to assist with work), thinking that studying music in this manner sufficiently addressed culture.

A further factor assisted in the entrenchment of this limited implementation of multicultural policy: curriculum statements about the value of studying music from a range of cultures. Typical rationales for music education are that, both in schools and in other settings, music contributes to the development of individual identity, encourages aesthetic awareness, acts as a form of socialization, and assists in the acquisition of performance skills on voice or an instrument. These rationales for music education regularly appear in curriculum documents worldwide, from Australia to Canada, from South Africa to New Zealand.

That the experience of music from a range of cultures can help students learn about cultures other than their own and can aid in the development of multiculturalism as a desirable attribute of society is another regularly cited rationale for the music curriculum.

Curriculum documents, however, typically state that the purpose of studying music from a range of cultures is to develop a comprehensive understanding of how music works as a system of manipulated sounds. Support for a tolerance of *pluralism* and comprehension of culture as a factor influencing contemporary life has not been a clear expectation of the multicultural focus of music education.

What Is Cultural Studies?

References in curriculum to music as a cultural object and the study of music from different cultures have led

to the assumption that music education is a form of cultural studies. This is not the case. Cultural studies is a discipline in its own right and a basis for teaching other subjects. It has a strong ideological basis that differs from those put forward for music education.

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Cultural studies, regardless of the domain of its application (theater, literature, dance, etc.), focuses on ways of studying culture that question the relationships between cultures. This questioning is particularly important in situations where one culture assumes power over another—whether this power is overt or more subtle, such as through financial, medical, and educational programs, or through the provision of culturally influential artifacts such as films and television programs, music CDs, computer games, or types of food and dress. Ways in which aspects of Western popular culture, especially clothing and music, have become the norm for teenagers worldwide is a clear example of this type of overwhelming cultural influence.

The Origin of Cultural Studies

The introduction and growth of cultural studies as a subject in universities since the 1970s occurred at the same time as the development of *post-colonialism*, that ethos of contemporary life that focuses on the opinions and voices of the colonized rather than the colonizers. Postcolonialism interprets culture as an object that is manipulated both literally (through

the loss of lands and material goods) and figuratively (through research and teaching that incorporate cultural artifacts, such as music and dance, as objects of study from the perspectives of those teaching them, rather than from the perspectives of the bearers of a culture). Like postcolonialism, which seeks to affect political agendas and ideologies, cultural studies is an avowedly political and politicized area of study. It defines the study of cultural artifacts, such as music, as a dialogue between the artifact, its creators and practitioners, and those who study it. It is concerned with exposing and deconstructing the positions of each of these to show how some cultures exert power over others.

Usually the focus in this context is on cultures in ideological conflict—something now regularly defined as a characteristic of contemporary life and increasingly referred to as *culture wars*. The ideological conflict of cultures sometimes results in actual violent conflict, as, some would argue, the events of September 11, 2001, in New York City and the bombings of tourist bars in Bali in October 2002 demonstrate. A strong belief in the need to establish a truly equitable world underpins cultural studies. While many music educators may sympathize with the idea of an equitable world, the issue is not addressed in music curriculum rationales or in many music classrooms where the focus is exclusively on the music itself. It is much safer to focus on balance and blend and on register and texture than it is to consider the social impact of music in our lives.

Cultural studies is concerned with identifying and critiquing the ways cultural artifacts are studied and represented, especially when their study is within a system that prescribes, however implicitly, the methods of study and cognitive frameworks in use and therefore validated. Numerous writers have noted that, in many cases, the methods applied to teaching music are at odds with methods used in the cultures where the music being studied originated.³ Thus, while current music education practice includes music from many cultures, it often applies teaching methods that undermine the cultural autonomy and

meanings of music.

An example from Australia will illustrate what I mean. In Australian music education, it is common practice to use traditional Aboriginal music as a teaching resource. These musical selections are regularly studied as examples of pitch patterning, durational practices, and musical structure. Syllabi and teaching texts describe the music as “Aboriginal.” However, Aboriginal Australia is not a unified, national bloc. Indigenous Australians are more properly named as members of separate nations, among them, Aranda, Luritja, and Yolngu. Study of the music from these nations requires acknowledgment, through naming, of people as members of their specific nationalities.

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On another level, breaking down this music into the concepts used to analyze Western music robs it of the holistic approach that indigenous musicians adopt—an approach in which pitch cannot be separated from the words of a song, the rhythms of the music, the dance it accompanies, the story it describes, or the places where it can be performed.

A form of cultural imperialism is the result. The lack of acknowledgment of this situation has the potential to fuel current culture wars, and teachers and students are often unable to engage with issues of culture and cultural control because of it. In music classrooms, this situation is evident in teaching that uses Western terminology to define musical events, instead of

Sample Music Lesson Using a Cultural-Studies Perspective

1. Listen to a song by an indigenous rock group, noting the topic of the song. How does the topic of this song relate to issues of indigenous life? How does the song further understanding of indigenous cultures?
2. From listening to the song, perform sections of it with your own accompaniment.
3. What sounds can you hear that might typify this song as by indigenous musicians? Are there instruments associated with indigenous peoples? How are these instruments used? After performing these parts, notate them in some way—you might use standard Western notation or invent your own. Perform sections of the song again and incorporate these instrument parts into your accompaniment.
4. What languages are used in this song? What might be the reasons for using indigenous languages in rock songs?
5. Does the structure of this song reflect that of rock songs by other musicians?
6. How does this song help us understand something about indigenous people?
7. Use what you have learned from this song in the composition of your own song. Use a topic that is relevant to your own life and incorporate what you have heard in this song in the structure, sounds, and accompaniment of your song. Perform your song to the class and record it for future listening.

valid terminology from a music's own background. In some Australian Aboriginal cultures, for example, there is no word for "music," but the word "inma" is used to refer to song, dance, and the stories they accompany or describe. By using "inma" instead of "music," teachers can show how these specific culture bearers think of their music as one part of a holistic expression.

Music Education as Cultural Studies

To raise these issues takes music education into new and often uncomfortable territory. As mentioned above, doing so not only redefines music curriculum, it emphasizes the political nature of music education and implicates it in day-to-day events where cultures collide. What would happen if the music curriculum were to become closer to cultural studies?

While music education is concerned with cultural artifacts (pieces of music), it does not always distinguish between the cultural sources of different pieces of music, preferring instead to treat all musics as examples of the manipulation and exemplification of musical concepts such as duration, pitch, and structure. While this way of studying music (usually

labeled "the concept approach") can increase students' knowledge of how music functions as the organization of sound in time, it rarely acknowledges how cultures influence the ways musical concepts interact to create music, or how cultures set parameters on the ways music is studied, taught, and learned. It also ignores the fact that this concept approach is derived from Eurocentric ways of analyzing events and artifacts and prioritizes Western ways of studying culture.

Maybe the concept approach is an example of one culture exerting its influence over others. This problem neatly captures the dilemma of music as cultural studies. The study of music concepts allows the comprehensive analysis of pieces of music, but from a Western perspective; thus, a Western perspective underpins the ways students develop their understandings of music and their knowledge of culture and its expression.

Solutions to this dilemma are not simple, if even possible. The most important first step is recognizing and accepting that teaching is culturally embedded, that it relies on assumptions about knowledge, how knowledge is constructed and taught, and how knowledge construction implies culturally influenced ways of presenting its objects of study, in our

case, music. Realizing that different cultures have different ways of defining and valuing music, and that these are not the same in every culture, is a primary step toward moving the music curriculum closer to cultural studies. The various ways of teaching and learning music in different cultures have the potential to help students not only learn about music's cultural dimensions but also learn music in deeper ways. *Pluralism*—not only of music but also of ideas about music, expectations of the music curriculum, and methods of delivering teaching—thus becomes an essential outcome of and rationale for the music curriculum.

A strong belief in the need to establish a truly equitable world underpins cultural studies.

Strategies for applying pluralism challenge us because, for the most part, we have been steeped in a Western way of teaching and thinking about music. Pluralistic strategies contradict current teaching; they require rethinking what happens in the music curriculum. Acknowledgment of the cultural embeddedness of teaching styles and ways of approaching music is essential. Allowing the voices of all musics into the dialogue of teaching can draw attention to the cultural positions of music, musicians, teachers, and students. How can teachers assist in questioning current cultural biases in the music curriculum? Here are some suggestions:

- Use the music terminology of a culture as its practitioners use it.

- Read descriptions of music by its creators and performers.

■ Adopt teaching methods that correspond to the music being studied.

■ Become aware of and teach from the aesthetic positions of each music being studied.

■ Consciously identify received teaching methods as derived from Western thinking and seek out other methods, when appropriate.

It is much safer to focus on balance and blend and on register and texture than it is to consider the social impact of music in our lives.

In the teaching of music by indigenous people, consideration of the topics of songs cannot help but lead to a cultural-studies approach because songs by these musicians refer to aspects of life that are relevant to them. This approach automatically raises questions about the topics of songs and the purposes of music as a vehicle of opinion. The Sample Music Lesson Using a Cultural-Studies Approach sidebar shows an application of a cultural-studies perspective in a music lesson for middle school students. I try to focus on aspects of the song that will raise questions about the position of indigenous people—this strategy is not out of the ordinary for elementary or middle school Australian music education, where the federal government mandates that all education include teaching about cultures and histories of Indigenous Australians.

The ways we study Western music also need rethinking. Students need to adopt what could be called an ethnomusicological approach to all music. For example, if teaching a piece by Bach, why not deconstruct

its background—religious, political, class, northern European eighteenth century? All these aspects contribute to the piece's original context and purpose. If we look at more recent versions of pieces by Bach (e.g., the Swingle Singers, selections used in films and ads), the contexts of usage change, and the meanings change as well. This to me is what music education is about: music (like culture) as a continually shifting aspect of life. Anchoring pieces of music to some labeled period without looking beyond the music's original appearance is unrealistic and does not prepare students for lives in which they will experience music as evolving; it creates a wrong impression of what music is about. From this viewpoint, current music education may seem to not be serving music at all.

To define music curriculum as cultural studies is to suggest a new way of thinking about music education and its purposes. It is a way of clarifying the relationship between music education and culture. Implementing a cultural-studies perspective will not be easy, but it would help music educators address what could well be

their biggest challenge in the twenty-first century—relevance.

Notes

1. Lucy Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 6.

2. Jere Humphreys, "Popular Music in the American Schools: What History Tells Us about the Present and the Future," in *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education*, ed. Carlos Xavier Rodriguez, (Reston, VA: MENC, 2004), 96–97; and Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

3. Bryan Burton and Peter Dunbar-Hall, "Teaching about and through Native American Musics: An Excursion into the Cultural Politics of Music Education," *Research Studies in Music Education* 19 (2002): 56–64; Peter Dunbar-Hall, "Concept or Context? Teaching and Learning Balinese Gamelan and the Universalist-Pluralist Debate," *Music Education Research* 2, no. 2 (2000): 127–39; Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn*; and Trevor Wiggins, "The World of Music in Education," *British Journal of Music Education* 13 (1996): 21–29. ■

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MENC Resources

The following MENC publications offer more information on the interaction between music and culture. Visit <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/booksrch.html> or call 1-800-336-3768 for more information.

- Anderson, William, and Patricia Shehan Campbell, eds. *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education*. 2nd ed. Reston, VA: MENC, 1996. Provides a pragmatic approach to teaching world music traditions. Item #1509. The companion CD (Item #3017) includes musical samples from around the world. Both are available as a set (Item #3027).
- Campbell, Patricia Shehan. *Music in Cultural Context: Eight Views on World Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1996. Includes interviews with eight musicologists on specific cultures and advice on introducing music of those cultures in the classroom. Item #1634.
- Reimer, Bennett, ed. *World Musics and Music Education: Facing the Issues*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2002. Offers insight from a variety of music education professionals on issues related to the use of multicultural music in schools. Item #1512.