“Hey, I Know that Song!”
Using Popular Music to Bridge Elementary Students’ In-School and Out-of-School Musical Experiences

In elementary general music we strive to lay a foundation of musical skills, knowledge, and experiences on which our students can build a lifetime of music making and enjoyment. In this respect, we think of building “up”- sequencing instruction progressively over time. However, we also need to think about building “sideways” by connecting the various musical experiences in our students’ lives.

Our students often live in two musical “worlds:” the world of school music and the world of music outside of school. Unfortunately, these two worlds seldom intersect. According to Kratus (2007), “students perform music in school that they rarely, if ever, hear outside of school” (p. 45), and thus “in-school music experiences have become disassociated from out-of-school music experiences” (p. 45). McPherson and Hendricks (2010) found this dichotomy between in-school and out-of-school music in a survey of students’ interests. Students in sixth grade rated their interest in school music lower than all other subjects; yet when asked to rate their interest in music outside of school, those same sixth grade students rated music the second highest! McDowell (2002) surveyed sixth and seventh grade students on their perceived value of school music and found that over ten percent of students actually supported the removal of school music programs, citing reasons such as its “boring” nature and the fact that “the music they teach in school is not always what kids want to hear” (p. 28). If we do not help our students make connections between school music and music in their everyday lives, we cannot expect what they learn in our classes to have much staying power.

In addition to helping our students build “up” their musical skills and knowledge, it is also our responsibility to help them connect the various musical worlds in which they live. One way we can do this is through using popular music in our general music classes, which, according to Mills (2000), can help our students discover the “relevance in education [that is] critical to maintaining students’ interest and having them see the connections between the world of school and the ‘real’ world that they experience daily” (p. 3). Popular music can become a bridge that will help students to apply the musical knowledge and skills they learn in the world of school music to their “real-life” musical experiences, thus enabling what they learn in our music programs to, in the words of John Dewey (1938), “live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (pp. 27-28). The following are some ideas for how we might begin to incorporate popular music into our elementary general music classes. Your students will be excited to hear “their” music and connect it to the musical concepts and skills they are learning in class.

Popular Music for Moving
Silence vs. Sound: Help students coordinate awareness of silence and sound with body awareness by playing “Move and Freeze.” Using a recording such as “Whip My Hair” by Willow Smith, invite students to move or dance when they hear the music and come to a complete freeze when you pause the music.

Steady Beat: Model various ways of moving to the beat of a song such as Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way.” Then let the students take turns leading by creating a way for the class to move to the beat, such as clapping, snapping, moving different body parts, or dancing to the beat in various ways. Switch leaders every eight beats.

Popular Music for Listening, Describing, and Analyzing
Tonality/Meter: Have students identify the tonality or meter of a song. Play “Keep Holding On,” from the album “Glee: The Music, Volume 1,” and move to the big beats and little beats, such as swaying to big beats and patting little beats on shoulders. Move to each separately first, and then try moving to both at the same time. Help students recognize that the song is in triple meter because the little beats are grouped in threes (or because certain rhythm syllables fit, such as “du-da-di” or “tre-o-la”). If students are learning to discriminate between major and minor tonality, listen for the tonality change between the verse and refrain of Selena Gomez’s “Naturally.” (I initially teach my students to discriminate between major and minor by using DO as the home tone/resting tone in major and LA as the resting tone in minor.) Pause the Selena Gomez recording at various times during the verse, having students sing the resting tone on LA while the music is paused, and then pause the recording during the refrain, having students sing on DO. Lead students to realizing the verse
is in minor tonality because the resting tone is LA, and the refrain is in major tonality because the resting tone is DO.

Tonal/Rhythm Patterns: Find repeating patterns in songs. Listen for the descending major tonic pattern SO-MI-DO in the recording of “Single Ladies” by Beyonce. Lead students to realizing where the pattern happens (“woah-oh-oh”), and read the pattern in notation. This recording also works well with a tonic drone or ostinato!

Style/Timbre: Compare and contrast different versions of songs, such as “The Time” by the Black Eyed Peas and “(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life” by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes. Guide students in listening to the chorus sections of each recording, discussing elements such as melody, timbre, tempo, and style. How are the recordings same or different?

Popular Music for Singing, Playing, or Composing

Harmony: Students can learn to sing simple bass-lines to pop tunes such as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” which uses a I-IV-I-V chord progression. Have students sing the chord roots (DO-DO-FA-FA-DO-DO-SO-SO), and then you can extend it to full chords on boomwhackers or resonator bells. Justin Bieber’s “Baby” is another good song for harmony, with its repeating I-vi-IV-V progression. After students can sing the bass-line/chord roots, have them try singing the full chords in three-part harmony: Teach each chord-tone part (see Table 1) by rote and sing each with the recording; then try combining them until students can sing the parts in three groups.

Recorder: My students were often bored playing tunes like “Hot Cross Buns” on their recorders. However, almost all of them were motivated to learn tunes such as the introduction/interlude of Rihanna’s “Disturbia” (“bum-bum-bee-dum…” uses B, high-D, A, G, and F#), the chorus of the Jackson Five’s “ABC” (which uses low-D, E, G, B, and A if played in G Major), or “Best Day Ever” from SpongeBob SquarePants (uses low-D, B, A, G, and high-D in G Major). These are also great opportunities for students to develop their aural skills by learning to play tunes by ear!

Songwriting: Use John Mayer’s recording of “Every Day I Have the Blues” or Elvis Presley’s “Hound Dog” as a springboard for learning about the harmonic progression and lyric pattern of blues form. Listen for and discuss the AAB pattern in blues lyrics. Sing the 12-bar blues chord roots (DO-DO-DO; FA-FA-DO; SO-FA-DO) with the recordings. Contrast these with Michael Franti’s “Say Hey (I Love You),” which uses a variation on the blues progression and a different lyrical pattern. Then help students write their own blues songs! (See table 2 for steps to blues song-writing.)

Tips for Using Popular Music

Keep it simple. One of the challenges to using pop music is that it is always changing and can be hard to keep up with. Be flexible and incorporate popular music frequently in simple ways.

Include students in the decision-making. Invite students to suggest songs you could learn about in class or to bring in recordings of music, but...

Always preview first! We know that some of the language or subject matter of popular music can be questionable for young students, and what may be acceptable in one setting may not be appropriate in another.

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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Chord-tone parts for Justin Bieber’s “Baby”</th>
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<td><strong>Part C:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Part A:</strong></td>
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<th>Table 2: Blues Songwriting Project</th>
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<td>1 After singing chord roots to the 12-bar blues progression of “Hound Dog,” try singing arpeggiated pitches for each chord (i.e., DO-MI-SO for tonic, FA-LA-DO for subdominant, SO-TI-RE for dominant). Label each chord as tonic, subdominant, or dominant. Teach students to play the chords on Q-chords or autoharp or to play the arpeggiated chord tones on Orff instruments (i.e., C-E-G for tonic, F-A-C for subdominant, and G-B-D for dominant) along with the “Hound Dog” recording.</td>
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<td>2 As a class or in small groups, brainstorm topics that might make students want to “sing the blues.” After students choose their topics, guide them in writing verses of lyrics that fit the AAB form.</td>
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<td>3 Model various ways that you could sing a melody over the 12-bar blues progression. Guide students in creating a melody—a way to sing their lyrics—by ear over the progression. Once students have had time to revise their melodies and lyrics, record each song and share on a school website or make a school CD!</td>
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Keep an open mind. There is a “teachable moment” in almost every song. We just have to find it!

Finally, it is important to remember that when we express a judgment about a student’s musical preferences, we are not only judging the music; we are also implying a judgment about that student as a person. “We should trust children’s and young people’s instincts and natural inclinations for music learning, sometimes allowing them to go where their interests and passions take them, rather than imposing our definitions of what counts as music on them” (Green, 2004, p. 239). Honoring students’ musical choices and opinions is just one way in which we can honor our students, both as musicians and as people.

References


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