

## Encouraging Vernacular Musicianship in the Music Learning Theory Classroom

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### Abstract

This article begins with a rationale for the inclusion of vernacular music and the development of vernacular music-making skills (“vernacular musicianship”) in school music programs. After outlining the distinguishing characteristics of vernacular musicianship, the author describes ways in which practitioners of Music Learning Theory might incorporate vernacular musicianship into the audiation-based music classroom.

### Keywords

audiation, music education, music learning theory, popular music, vernacular music

As practitioners of Music Learning Theory (MLT), one of our primary goals is to advance our students’ music understanding through audiation. Furthermore, we strive to help our students use their audiation to build a solid base of musical skills. In promoting the development of students’ personal musicianship, our ultimate goal is to enable and empower our students to become independent, lifelong music-makers.

Unfortunately, accomplishing this goal of lifelong music-making can be impeded if students do not see the relevance of what they experience in music class as it relates to their daily lives. While students may enjoy traditional school music repertoire, they may have difficulty imagining themselves making that music at home or with friends. Even more problematic, some have suggested that this disconnect between the ways students experience music in school and the ways they interact with music outside of school may be to blame for students discontinuing their participation in school music programs (Griffin, 2009; Kratus, 2007; Lamont, Hargreaves, Marshall, & Tarrant, 2003).

In order to better meet the musical needs and interests of our students and thus help them see the relevance and purpose of music education in their lives, we might examine “how music is actually used in the world, *not* the ways it exists in schools” (Kratus, 2007, p. 46) and tailor our curricular content so that it “better [reflects] the musical world in which [our students] live” (Woody, 2007, p. 32). This might be done through the incorporation of vernacular music-making and encouragement of vernacular musicianship in our music classrooms.

### Why Include Vernacular Music in Schools?

According to Merriam-Webster (2013), the word “vernacular” may be defined as “of, relating to, or being the normal spoken form of a language” or as “using a language or dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary, cultured, or foreign language.” Vernacular music, then, can be understood as the “normal [aural] form” of music that is “native” to a group of people, which Small (1983)

describes as music “of the common tongue” (p. 66). This is in opposition to music that some may perceive as more “cultured,” mainly Western classical art music. While vernacular music does include popular music, it also can include a wide variety of forms, such as rock, country, hip-hop, rap, dubstep, reggae, and so on (O’Flynn, 2006; Small, 1983).

Inherent in definitions of classical versus vernacular music may be judgments of the value of these types of music. Many believe that “serious” (classical art) music is the only music of value to be taught in schools because it is of “high quality.” The result is often that musical styles other than classical may be “devalued, disregarded, even actively dismissed in schools” (Regelski, 2007, p. 25).

However, it is our duty as music educators to consider the music that is of value to our students and is relevant in their lives. Adolescents in the United States spend an average of 2.52 hours each day listening to music (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2000). The majority choose to listen to popular music styles, with only 10% reporting that they listen to classical or jazz music (Lamont et al., 2003). This suggests that not only do students typically have more familiarity with vernacular musical forms and value them more than classical music, but that vernacular music may be more meaningful for students and more relevant in their daily lives.

If music education is to relate to and build upon students’ prior musical experiences and live on in their future music-making, then it is logical that vernacular music should be included in the music classroom. By providing students with relevant and meaningful musical experiences that connect to their daily lives as well as develop their musical independence, we may increase the likelihood that they will continue to engage in music-making after they leave our classrooms. This can be done through the incorporation of vernacular music into audiation-based learning and teaching.

### **What is Vernacular Musicianship?**

It is not enough to merely alter the content of our music programs by including vernacular music; we must also adjust the practices of music teaching and learning in our classrooms so that they reflect vernacular music practices (Green, 2002, 2005; Jaffurs, 2004, 2006; O’Flynn, 2006; Woody, 2007). Vernacular musicianship is comprised of unique skills and values that are in some ways distinct from those of classical music-making. These include particular aspects of listening and functional aural skills, creative music-making, group learning and collaboration, choice of repertoire, and self-teaching.

### **Listening and Functional Aural Skills**

The essential role of listening and aural skills in developing vernacular musicianship is in contrast to the development of classical musicianship, which tends to happen primarily through knowledge of music notation and music theory (Hannan, 2006). Vernacular musicianship typically uses “an aural/oral approach without a significant dependence on notation” (Jaffurs, 2006, p. 21). The foundation for this aural learning is laid through “enculturation.” Similar to Gordon’s term “acculturation,” enculturation “refers to the acquisition of musical skills and knowledge by immersion in the everyday music and musical practices” (Green, 2002, p. 22). The informal listening skills acquired during enculturation are crucial because “vernacular musicianship emphasizes functional aural skills” (Woody, 2007, p. 35). These aural skills include making music by ear, copying familiar songs or songs from recordings, and singing/playing chord progressions and harmony parts (Green, 2005, 2006, 2008; Woody, 2007; Woody & Lehmann, 2010). While many vernacular musicians do make some use of notation, it is typically in connection with aural practices, such as transcribing other musicians’ solos (Green, 2002; Woody & Lehmann, 2010).

## **Creative Music Making**

While many classical musicians rate composing and improvising as the least important skills for them to have (Creech et al., 2008; Zacharias, 2011), creative music-making is an important aspect of vernacular musicianship. The aural musical vocabulary gained through listening and playing by ear form the readiness and “building-blocks” for this creative music-making (Green, 2002). Creative music-making in vernacular musicianship includes improvisation, creating, arranging, and composing; specific examples include “messing around,” group improvising, improvising solos to recorded accompaniments, improvising harmony parts, and composing songs (Green, 2005; Woody, 2007; Woody & Lehmann, 2010).

## **Group Learning and Collaboration**

Group interaction is a key aspect of vernacular musicianship. While vernacular musicians do spend time honing their skills alone, they spend a great deal of time learning music through interacting with others in a small group. Unlike classical music-making that is controlled by a teacher or conductor, the group collaboration in vernacular music-making involves learning by observing, imitating, and discussing with one another, as well as improvising together (“jamming”) and collaborative group composing (Green, 2005, 2006, 2008; Woody, 2007).

## **Choice of Repertoire**

In contrast to traditional large ensembles in which the teacher/director chooses the repertoire, vernacular musicianship involves at least some level of choice regarding the music that is practiced and performed. In her study of informal music learning in popular musicians, Green (2006, 2008) found that repertoire typically was chosen by the musicians based on that which they liked and/or with which they identified. The music chosen is considered by vernacular musicians to be “real-world” music. Additionally, this is the material vernacular musicians typically focus on while practicing. Rather than exercises such as scales or long-tones, vernacular musicians choose to practice “real” music by working on tunes or licks from the music they have heard (Green, 2002; Woody, 2007).

## **Self-Teaching**

Many vernacular musicians do not have (or may not even want) formal training in music. In a survey of popular musicians, Zacharias (2011) found that “having formal music training” was the least important of their musical goals. Finnegan (1989) contrasted the formal teaching and learning required by classical musicians with that of learning among popular musicians, many of whom learn to perform “with little or no formal tuition [and instead] teach themselves to perform on guitar, percussion or vocals, playing with their peers in . . . small bands” (p. 136). Similarly, Zacharias found that self-teaching was the most common form of music learning reported by popular musicians.

## **Incorporating Vernacular Musicianship in the MLT Classroom**

When first learning about the characteristics of vernacular musicianship, I was struck by the similarities between vernacular musicianship and MLT. Both stress the importance of listening and learning through immersion/enculturation, as well as the acquisition of functional aural/oral skills. Both incorporate creative music making as a way of enabling students to independently put to use the musical vocabulary they have acquired through listening and imitating. Additionally, self-teaching sounds strikingly like inference learning.

Because of these parallel principles underlying both vernacular musicianship and MLT, they have the potential to work well together in the music classroom. How, then, might vernacular musicianship be incorporated in the MLT classroom?

Enculturation is the first step in developing vernacular musicianship, so MLT teachers might provide an environment in which students can become further enculturated into vernacular music-making, including popular and folk repertoire. This could include not only the use of recorded examples of these types of music but also teacher modeling of these styles. While many students come to school with an existing “listening vocabulary” in popular styles of music, the teacher’s live model and guidance in experiencing this music in various ways can enrich students’ enculturation.

Students can also develop their vernacular music “speaking vocabulary” by learning to sing and play these styles of music in an authentic way—aurally. Learning popular melodies through notation is not only inauthentic in terms of vernacular musicianship but often requires simplifying the melody’s tonal or rhythmic complexity in order to accommodate only the pitches and rhythms students know how to read. Learning popular melodies by ear is a way to expand students’ oral music vocabulary in a way that is true to the spirit of vernacular music-making. We can begin helping our students learn by ear by providing opportunities for them to aurally (and orally) reproduce simple musical patterns. For example, students could try to figure out how to play the pitches of a simple tonal or melodic pattern on a one-octave bell set. These simple aural/oral replication activities can provide scaffolding for more challenging ear-playing. When students are ready to reproduce whole songs “by ear,” they can take a song they previously have learned to sing and figure out how to play it on a classroom instrument, such as a xylophone, recorder, or traditional band or orchestra instrument.

Students’ continued enculturation in vernacular music provides an opportunity for application of their MLT knowledge and skills. In addition to traditional folk songs like “Bow Belinda” and “Joshua,” you might challenge your students to find, perform, and verbally label the resting tone or macrobeat/microbeat in recordings of vernacular music. Or you could listen for certain tonal or rhythm patterns/functions in pop songs: Beyonce’s “Single Ladies” uses a very clear descending major tonic pattern (SO-MI-DO). Applying labels at the verbal association skill level to familiar recordings such as these helps students see that their skills and knowledge can apply to a vast array of music beyond commonly-used traditional tunes like “Sandy Land.”

An important focus in the MLT classroom is the development of harmonic audiation, and harmonic skills are also an essential component of vernacular musicianship. In addition to traditional folk melodies, students can learn to sing or play bass-lines/chord roots to popular tunes, such as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” or “Some Nights” (by Fun). This also could be explored through popular tunes in tonalities other than major. For example, Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” uses a I-VII-IV progression in mixolydian tonality while Green Day’s “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” and Gary Jules’ cover of “Mad World” (originally by Tears for Fears) both use a i-III-VII-IV progression in dorian!

As their vernacular music vocabularies grow, students can be pushed to further their harmonic skills. Instead of just singing the roots of each chord in the progression, my fourth grade students sang chord tones in three-part harmony to Justin Bieber’s “Baby,” which uses a I-vi-IV-V progression in major. First, they learned to sing each of the three parts (see Table 1 on the next page) by rote and then combined them by singing in three groups. We even labeled the chords as tonic, submediant, subdominant, and dominant. Students also can be challenged to use the harmonic vocabulary they have developed at the discrimination levels of learning to make inferences at the generalization skill level by figuring out the harmonic progressions to new pop tunes. Additionally, these harmonic skills could be applied to instruments. The ukulele, which is gaining popularity in many music classrooms, is fairly inexpensive and can easily be used to play harmonic accompaniments.

**Table 1.** Chord-tone parts for Justin Bieber's "Baby"

"Baby" Progression:	I	VI	IV	V
Part C:	SO	LA	LA	SO
Part B:	MI	MI	FA	FA
Part A:	DO	DO	DO	TI

Students can continue to build their audiation and vernacular musicianship skills by actively applying what they have learned through enculturation and by ear to create their own music. This can happen through vocal or instrumental improvisation, class "jam sessions" (where students take turns improvising over a set of chord changes, individually or simultaneously as a whole group), composition, and songwriting. For example, after learning the harmonic progression of 12-bar blues, students could vocally improvise over the changes.

Vernacular musicians' skills are "acquired not only as individuals but, crucially, as members of a group, usually from very early stages" (Green, 2002, p. 82), so students could be given opportunities to compose in small groups, as well as other tasks such as performing by ear and arranging. After learning and analyzing the chord progression and lyrical form of the blues using several recordings, my fifth grade students loved working together in small groups to compose their own blues songs! We then recorded each group performing their song, and these recordings were shared on our school website as well as in CD format. Not only did this project leave the students with a tangible musical product in which they took pride and ownership, but it also allowed the students to be creative and express themselves through a familiar and relevant style of music.

Finally, we might empower our students to have greater voice and independence in their own music education by providing opportunities for repertoire choice and self-teaching. One possibility is to allow small groups of students to each choose a song to figure out how to perform by ear and/or arrange. Students might bring in their own recordings (provided they are school-appropriate) or choose from a list of appealing teacher suggestions. Then allowing the groups to figure out by ear and arrange their songs on their own provides them with the opportunity to both develop their musical independence and take ownership of their music-making.

## Conclusion

Vernacular music can help reach students who are not interested in or do not identify with the music that is traditionally featured in school music, as well as engage and motivate all students. Vernacular musicianship acknowledges and taps into the years of vernacular music experience students have had in their out-of-school lives, providing a meaningful and relevant foundation for music learning experiences in school. By incorporating vernacular musicianship in school music programs, we can prevent "the cutting-off of many young people from the one opportunity [or, I would add, the most *valuable* opportunity] that they may ever have of exploring their own musicality and acquiring skills of composition and performance while they are in school" (Small, 1983, p. 66). Not only can vernacular musicianship help students explore and develop their own musicality while they are in school, but when combined with a foundation of audiation-based skills and understanding, it may hold the key to encouraging and empowering students to continue on to a lifetime of meaningful, independent music-making and engagement.

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## Bio

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