

**The use of folk songs in the beginning orchestra ensemble:  
Creating context for greater connections**

by

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## **Abstract**

The lessons included in this report focus on the use of folk songs in the beginning strings ensemble. In the first lesson, the general concept of a folk song was introduced, and students were given the opportunity to select solo literature. As the lessons progressed, students were involved in unison playing of folk songs, developing aural skills, engaging in call and response activities and analyzing multi-part literature based on common folk songs. The unit concluded with a final research-based project in which students chose a folk song to research and present to an audience. I designed these lessons with the intention to attempt more aural-based exercises with my students, as well as to include more multi-cultural music in my programming.

Throughout my time in the Graduate program at Kansas State University, I have been involved in many discussions concerning the role of multicultural music in the school ensemble. In studying the music philosophies of Kodály and Small specifically, I began to consider the rich tradition of folk songs and aural-based learning included in elementary music classrooms. However, this tradition and practice does not always translate to the secondary level in traditional pedagogy.

I have always held a very constructivist-based approach to music teaching. I have seen my role as a teacher to provide the knowledge, skills, resources and model for students to use and apply to future music-making. Although this is a tenant of my teaching philosophy, this final report challenged me to design activities in which students would have the opportunity to engage in student choice and self-directed learning. I believe that the strategic use of guided practice and “productive struggle” allowed for greater understanding and solidification of concepts and skills. I also began to incorporate more peer modeling and peer feedback. I began to realize that the “More Knowledgeable Other” as presented by Vygotsky did not always need to be myself, and

that students could learn collaboratively and from their own trial and error. Ultimately, I used this unit based on folk songs to test my personal philosophies and to see how students would react to time spent studying folk songs more in depth. I found that lecture-based lessons and research activities did not seem to motivate students. However, activity-based lessons and student-led exploration led to greater motivation and deeper connections to both the repertoire itself and to the act of music-making.

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# Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

## Introduction

The reason learning theories vary greatly is due to the fact that there are several factors that affect student learning. The learning styles, socioeconomic status, underlying beliefs, developmental levels, and other factors will affect the motivation and ability of students to be successful in learning. Ultimately, the goal of music education is to facilitate positive music making experiences that help students to make connections within the music classroom, as well as the world around them.

## Student Learning

My personal philosophy surrounding music learning includes a constructivist approach which would define learning as “the residue that remains in the learner’s mind after the learning event is completed” (*Learning as the Construction of Schema*, 1997). Especially in music learning, the process of making connections may leave a variety of “residue”, including learned physical skills, a new understanding of a concept, or a positive music-making experience. All these results are valid and reflect an effective musical experience. I consider learning to be an assimilation of various knowledge bases and skills. Concepts should be introduced sequentially, allowing for students to sort them into schema. The process of scaffolding includes drawing on what is already known, and yet reaching beyond that “known”, which in turn causes students to grow in their knowledge, understanding and ability to make connections (“Social Development Theory,” n.d.).

I believe that motivation is one of the most important (or detrimental) factors in student learning. A student’s belief about their own intelligence, ability to learn, or passion on the subject matter, greatly influences the quality of their learning and performance. One of the theories I find to directly speak to student motivation is Growth Mindset Theory. I believe that implementing growth mindset activities, including lessons on brain plasticity and the power of positive attitudes, can lead to student achievement and resilience (TED, 2014). Particularly in the music field, a fixed mindset can take root quickly and lead to perfectionistic tendencies and performance anxiety (Adams, 2019). This approach defeats the purpose

of creating authentic musical experiences in which students grow at their own pace and in a collaborative environment.

Learning occurs when there is evidence of knowledge or skills gained through experience. Therefore, assessment of learning should be designed to give students the opportunity to demonstrate the end result of their experience. Evidence of learning can take many forms, and should directly reflect the nature of the learning activity. In addition, assessment should be individualized to show growth of each student in their musical journey (Masters, 2013).

### **Role of the Teacher**

Learning experiences should be facilitated by both the teacher and the student. For this to work well, teachers must give student choice. In doing this, students have the opportunity to set individual learning goals. Although I do believe that a teacher is a guide toward musical exploration, I believe that music teachers specifically should also be trained musicians. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory of the "More Knowledgeable Other" ("Social Development Theory," 2014). However, the music teacher also is about the business of creating experiences, rather than disseminating information. The music teacher draws from their own musical experiences, whether in their childhood or in their professional training, to create a well-rounded musical experience from a place of deep understanding. Music learning is also inherently a collaborative process in which learners engage in activities that allow them to share information, experience and insight.

In any culture, you will find traditions being passed down to the next generation. Music is one of those cultural pillars that is inherent within a society. However, our world is becoming increasingly multicultural, particularly within the United States of America. As a music educator, the place of multicultural music is important in instilling a sense of pluralism, understanding, sensitivity and cultural awareness. Within social identity theory, individuals may exaggerate their differences between themselves and other groups. I believe that music can be an avenue in which participants can uniquely

find belonging within a group, regardless of cultural background (*Social Identity Theory -- Britannica Academic*, n.d.).

## **Conclusion**

Every musician is an individual and should be respected as a complex individual who is capable of learning in their own unique way. However, in order for this to be an effective learning experience, learners must set individual goals as well as a commitment to the music making group - whether that be a particular ensemble to the community at large. I believe that music learning occurs in many different formats, but includes the basic components of building on previously learned knowledge and skills, expanding beyond one's comfort zone, taking risks in the creative process and developing a community of other music makers.

## **How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching**

In this final report, I have sought to explore specifically the impact of folk songs in introducing the concept of multicultural music to young string players. My philosophy does include the idea that music-making experiences are often the context in which students learn, and the lessons in this final project seek to provide space for student choice and exploration within the context of structured musical experiences.

Through my study, I had been contemplating the concept of the "More Knowledgeable Other" of Vygotsky, and was challenged to put this concept into practice through the final lesson of this report. Traditionally, I had provided the majority of the modeling myself. However, when I fractured my left elbow in mid-March, I quickly made the transition to peer modeling in many rehearsals. This had always been something I wanted to incorporate but had never developed a structure for teaching peer modeling. I was very pleased with the impact that peer modeling had in my students' independence and in the community-building atmosphere that developed as a



result. In the future, I would like to incorporate peer modeling even earlier in the school year and make peer modeling an inherent component of my students' orchestra experience.

## Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan(s)

### Lesson Plan 1

#### **Objectives:**

Students will select solo literature based on contextual and technical factors.

Students will understand the basic characteristics of a folk song.

#### **Standards Being Addressed (NAfME, 2014):**

MU:Pr4.1.E.5a Select varied repertoire to study based on interest, music reading skills (where appropriate), an understanding of the structure of the music, context, and the technical skill of the individual or ensemble.

MU:Re7.1.E.5a Identify reasons for selecting music based on characteristics found in the music, connection to interest, and purpose or context.

MU:Pr5.3.E.5a Use self-reflection and peer feedback to refine individual and ensemble performances of a varied repertoire of music.

MU:Pr6.1.E.5b Demonstrate an awareness of the context of the music through prepared and improvised performances.

#### **Materials of Instruction:**

Solo packets, from Suzuki Method Book 1 (Suzuki 1978), instruments, pencils, etc.

#### **Lesson Sequence:**

*Entry Activity/Transition:* Teacher will explain the upcoming Solo and Ensemble Festival event and hand out permission slips and schedule information.

### ***Activity #1: Solo Listening***

1. Students will listen to the teacher (or a video) demonstrate each solo found in the solo packet. As the students listen, they will follow along in their music and put a star by songs that appeal to them or that look within their playing ability. They can also put question marks by passages with technical elements that look difficult or that they do not recognize.
2. After listening to examples of potential solo selections, students will go back through the packet to identify technical components of the pieces (notes, rhythms, key signatures, etc.) to ensure that it is appropriate for their level. Students can use our “investigation” model of asking a stand partner for clarification, a third person, or the teacher. This allows for exploration as to the possible answers to the technical elements they do not understand.
3. Students will engage in individual or partner practice time to try playing solos.

*Assessment:* Formative assessment through observation and teacher support in choosing level-appropriate solos, as applicable.

*Transition:* Teacher will point out that most of the solos in the packet are labeled as a “folk song”. The Teacher will briefly explain the use of folk songs in culture and why they are appropriate for a Solo and Ensemble event.

### ***Activity #2: Folk Song Research***

1. Students will find folk songs in their method book (or online) to practice independently. They will keep playability guidelines in mind (notes, rhythms, key signatures, bow techniques, etc.)

2. Students will suggest folk songs from the method book to play as a class. As a class, we will compile a list of folk songs to rehearse over the next two weeks. (This became a weekly “Folk Song Friday” activity).

*Closure/Summative Assessment:* Students will select a solo to practice for the next few weeks in preparation for a playing test, as well as potentially for the local Solo and Ensemble Festival.

### **Reflection**

Through this lesson, I sought to give a very general understanding of folk songs to my students, while using the context of our Solo and Ensemble Festival structure. One of the goals I had for this unit was that students would not only understand the concept of a folk song, but that they would also engage in individual choice of repertoire with which they connected. Although it is not always possible to allow for this in concert programming, I did want our Solo and Ensemble Festival to be an opportunity for students to choose a piece as their “personal project” and to connect with the context of that piece. For those not attending the Solo and Ensemble festival, they were still given the opportunity to explore folk songs from the method books or solo packets to play for future assessments.

I believe that my students learned about selecting repertoire based on both technical considerations and playability, as well as on the context and style of the piece. One of my students even did her own study to select a piece for Solo and Ensemble, and found “Jasmine Flower”, a Chinese Folk Song. She was able to use this piece to connect with her own culture and share her culture with the others around her.

In the future, I would like to make this an even more routine element of my teaching practice and class structure. We included a few instances of “Folk Song Fridays”, in which students engaged in further practice of folk songs found in their method books, as well as folk

songs they found through online resources. However, I would like to bring in more reliable and knowledgeable sources on folk songs to ensure accurate information and authentic cultural context is being represented.

## Lesson Plan 2

### Objectives:

Students will learn about folk songs and be able to articulate the distinctions of a folk song.

Students will demonstrate aural skills through call and response exercises.

### Standards Being Addressed (NAfME, 2014):

MU:Re7.1.E.5a Identify reasons for selecting music based on characteristics found in the music, connection to interest, and purpose or context.

MU:Re7.2.E.5a Identify how knowledge of context and the use of repetition, similarities, and contrasts inform the response to music.

MU:Re8.1.E.5a Identify interpretations of the expressive intent and meaning of musical works, referring to the elements of music, contexts, and (when appropriate) the setting of the text.

**Materials of Instruction:** Slides about “Go Tell Aunt Rhody” (Row, 2015); Instruments

### Lesson Sequence:

*Entry Activity/Transition:* The teacher will remind students of the folk songs we have played in solo packets and the method book

### **Activity #1: Go Tell Aunt Rhody Folk Song Study**

1. Use slides to describe what a folk song is and how it can be found regionally. (This folk song is from Missouri!).
2. Use slides to define vocabulary words found in the song “Go Tell Aunt Rhody”. Use vocabulary words to dissect the context, possible scenarios and reasons why this folk song was common.

*Assessment:* When reading through the lyrics of the final song, ask for clarification on vocabulary words, what a folk song is, etc.

*Transition:* To prepare for aural activities, remind students that many people learned folk songs from call and response or listening and joining in.

**Activity #2: “My Turn Your Turn”, with patterns from Go Tell Aunt Rhody**

1. The teacher will play a 4 beat pattern for students to echo. The teacher will start with simple open string patterns, with rhythm variations.
2. Before adding fingered notes in this activity, the teacher will play on open strings the rhythm patterns found in “Go Tell Aunt Rhody”.
3. The teacher will play one measure at a time through “Go Tell Aunt Rhody”, in D Major. Repetition and use of verbal note naming can be used, if necessary.
4. After playing through the patterns aurally, show students the sheet music and allow them to partner practice through the song.

*Assessment:* Students will be able to echo patterns heard from the “My Turn Your Turn” activity, both with open string patterns as well as fingered patterns in D Major.

*Closure/Summative Assessment:* Students will independently (or with a stand partner) practice “Go Tell Aunt Rhody”, as found in their packet. Students will be able to explain the context of the folk song.

**Reflection**

In the previous lessons and “Folk Song Fridays”, students were given the space to explore independently. Through this lesson, I wanted to offer a more structured opportunity to “deep dive” into one folk song and to further reinforce the importance of vocabulary, context and the overall concept of a folk song. I chose the song “Go Tell Aunt Rhody” because it is from our

home state of Missouri, and because it was an option in the solo packets. I also had a personal connection to it, as it was the first solo I performed as student.

For this lesson, I used slides from David Row's (2015) Folk Song lessons (purchased from TeachersPayTeachers). I found this resource to be thorough in introducing the overall concept of a folk song, as well as the vocabulary and historical context of this specific folk song. The students found it entertaining and informative, when considering the historical setting and potential need for a goose for a feather bed!

Our activity of "My Turn, Your Turn" is one with which my students are familiar. I play a 4-beat pattern, and they echo it. We generally only do this on open strings and use it as a warmup, but through this activity, I wanted to stretch them to include fingered patterns that are found in the song "Go Tell Aunt Rhody". In the future, I would engage in more preparatory exercises in this area of ear training and would push them to keep trying to play each pattern without helping them by saying the note names or helping them with the technical difficulties.

Overall, I believe that this lesson helped my students to understand more about the history and use of folk songs. They articulated the fact that folk songs were often learned through oral tradition, were found regionally or nationally, and that many times folk songs evolved throughout time.



## Lesson Plan 3

### Objectives:

Students will define “call and response”.

Students will be able to identify call and response structure within a piece of music.

Students will engage in peer modeling.

Students will be able to identify the cultural context of “The Banana Boat Song”.

### Standards Being Addressed (NAfME, 2014):

MU:Re7.2.E.5a Identify how knowledge of context and the use of repetition, similarities, and contrasts inform the response to music.

MU:Re8.1.E.5a Identify interpretations of the expressive intent and meaning of musical works, referring to the elements of music, contexts, and (when appropriate) the setting of the text.

MU:Pr5.3.E.5a Use self-reflection and peer feedback to refine individual and ensemble performances of a varied repertoire of music.

MU:Pr6.1.E.5b Demonstrate an awareness of the context of the music through prepared and improvised performances.

### Materials of Instruction:

Sheet Music of “The Banana Boat Song” (Halferty, 2017); Instruments; Project and sound;

<https://www.jwpepper.com/The-Banana-Boat-Song/10752112.item#.YokHGPPMI6E> (J.W.

Pepper, 2022).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L9angh4KdQ> (BalticSeaChris, 2012).

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/harry-belafonte-explains-the-story-behind-calypso/> (Park, 2018).

## **Lesson Sequence:**

*Entry Activity/Transition:* In lessons prior to this, students will engage in dotted quarter note study and practice, will continue study of folk songs in method books and will continue “My Turn Your Turn” aural exercises.

***Activity #1: Listening to “The Banana Boat Song” (Each listening activity will take place as an introduction on a different day of this unit).***

1. Students will listen to a recording of our Orchestra arrangement (J.W. Pepper, 2022) of “The Banana Boat Song” by Frank J. Halferty (2017).
2. Students will then listen to a recording of Harry Belafonte singing “The Banana Boat Song” (BalticSeaChris, 2012). They will compare the lyrics to their sheet music to try to identify the “call” and “response” parts.
3. Students will watch the video of an interview that CBS News had with Harry Belafonte (Park, 2018). They will discuss the origin and meaning of the folk song, and how Harry Belafonte brought the song to prominence in the United States. Through this video, they will also gain a better understanding of the greater context of “Calypso” music.

*Assessment:* Students should be able to articulate the meaning and context of the Banana Boat Song, as well as identify the “call and response” structure found in the lyrics.

*Transition:* Students will engage in a couple weeks of rehearsal and individual practice of the Banana Boat Song. This will specifically include student of dotted quarter note rhythms, review of note names, practicing in instrument sections, etc.

***Activity #2: Call and Response activity***

1. After students have engaged in some practice of the Banana Boat Song, we will further reinforce the call and response structure of the piece.

2. Students will engage in class discussion of what measures/sections include the call or the response. They will also identify which instrument sections play the call, the response or both.
3. Students will engage in peer modeling of the call and response structure by having one student (or a small group of students) play one of the “call”, 2- measure patterns, and the rest of the class will play the “response”, 2 measure pattern. This can occur by mixing and matching call and response sections, or by working through a confined section of the repertoire.

*Closure/Summative Assessment:* The students should be able to identify when they are playing either the “call” or “response” part and should be able to respond in the context of the piece. This should stem from a greater understanding of the cultural context and lyrics of the piece itself, and from the structure of the arrangement that we are studying.

### **Reflection**

One of my goals in studying the “Banana Boat Song” was to introduce my students to a folk song that originated from outside of the United States. We were also working on “Appalachian Hymn” by Soon Hee Newbold (2015), so had discussed Appalachian music and its impact on folk music in the United States. The Banana Boat Song is one that is often heard also in the United States, but its origin is of Jamaica. I wanted my students to understand that there is often more to a song than our own experience of it, and that the context matters to understand what the song may mean for someone else! Listening to Harry Belafonte’s perspective on a song that he grew up with and the popularity that the song received in the United States began meaningful discussion for my students.

Originally, I also intended to use this song to reinforce the concepts of call and response and to continue to engage in “My Turn, Your Turn” activities to reinforce aural skills. I ended up needing to alter my lesson plans, as I fractured my elbow in March, which is when we began to rehearse this piece. This obstacle pushed me to rely on my students to be peer models, instead of myself as the teacher being the primary model. This is seen in the lesson plan that eventually was used, in which students demonstrated the “call” part for one other, and others responded with the “response”, within the context of the arrangement of the Banana Boat Song that we had been rehearsing. I found this activity to be extremely successful, and students seemed to understand the structure and form of the piece much better in subsequent rehearsals.

Throughout this semester, students explored folk songs in a variety of ways, and ultimately performed these at either Solo and Ensemble, or our Spring Concert. As a reflection piece, I had students prepared a “Concert Presentation Project”, in which they researched one of our concert pieces and wrote a synopsis of the piece. A few selected students then presented their speeches at our Spring Concert as introductions to these pieces. The project gave students the opportunity to synthesize their learning and share with others, whether with our class or a greater audience.

## **Chapter 3 - Reflections**

### **Introduction**

The Master's Program at Kansas State University has propelled me to consider my own teaching in the light of how music impacts students. I have seen growth in my own understanding of educational philosophy, pedagogical practices, music program development and creating authentic musical experiences, all of which have made a direct impact in the lives of my students. When I began the master's program, we were in the very beginning of a global pandemic. Many educators and policy makers were restructuring every aspect of music education and pushing the boundaries, but only because we had no other option. Although that difficult time did force educators to be creative in the ways in which we taught our students, I believe that it also helped to solidify *why* music is important in the lives of students and the value of the community that it creates. Throughout my program at Kansas State University, I have found community with other educators and have come to a better understanding of the community that I would seek to create in my classroom. The experience that I have had with music throughout my life has proved to be true – music is created within community.

### **Philosophy and Pedagogy**

One of the ways in which I have been challenged through this program has been through evaluating my own personal teaching philosophy. In the past, I had considered the study of music philosophy to only pertain to collegiate study. However, I have been challenged to consider the implications of my own “hidden philosophy” in my teaching and pedagogy. What I believe about music and what I believe about how students learn directly impacts my teaching. Specifically, I have begun to a more explorative and aurally based approach in my classroom, as opposed to the very “technical” and formal education that I had in my own education. I also have

seen the impact of providing students opportunity for peer modeling and gathering their own knowledge from their resources. My students have taken ownership of their own learning, and even by the end of the first year I have been able to “sit back” and watch them grown and learn independently. I am very proud to have played a part in developing *learners* as they continue their journey in orchestral education.

The Upper Strings and Lower Strings Pedagogy courses included in my coursework at Kansas State University have been some of the more practical courses I have ever taken. In the past three years, I have especially been exploring the areas of pain prevention through the area of Body Mapping. The Pedagogy courses gave me the context to explore and practice these ideas, while comparing and contrasting body mapping principles with various traditional pedagogical techniques. Although this is an area in which I always hope to be growing, I have noticed that my students play with more confidence, and I am having fewer set up issues each year.

## **Community**

As a teacher of 6<sup>th</sup> grade Beginning Orchestra, I have made it a primary goal of mine to improve in the recruitment and retention of students. The discussions I had with colleagues and professors during my Master of Music Program at Kansas State has given me ideas and resources to pull from to enhance my recruitment and retention efforts the past two years.

Almost all my retention efforts this past year developed out of class discussions in my Organization and Administration of the School Music Programs course that I took this past year. Because I teach all the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in my district that feed into two different 7-12 programs, it can be difficult to retain students as they transition to a new teacher and program. This year, we made an incredible effort to retain students between the programs. Before enrollment, we had several discussions and daily “Reasons for you to be in Orchestra!” that

covered the various statistical benefits and future opportunities that are afforded to music students. We also had a “switch day” with each 7-12 director, in which the teacher came to teach the 6<sup>th</sup> graders for a day, and I went to teach their students in preparation for their Contest performances. This also helped me to continue my connection with my previous students and create a district wide community among our orchestra staff and students. After enrollment, we made a folder with a welcome letter from the 7-12 directors, a handwritten note from an older student, 7<sup>th</sup> grade sheet music, and a ribbon to represent the middle school they would be attending in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. For our Spring Concert, we entitled it our “Legacy Concert”, and the students hung these ribbons from the scrolls of their instruments to represent the middle school they were attending the next year. We also had a photo booth with a banner of the middle school they were attending the next year. Ultimately, these efforts resulted in the highest rate of retention that we have had in the past 5 years.

### **Programming and Multicultural Music**

The last major development that has impacted me in my time at Kansas State has been the discussions and coursework I have completed surrounding the topic of multicultural music in the string music program. I have always feared that, in an attempt to program more multiculturally, I would not be able to do so in an authentic way. However, many of the class discussions and reading I did on this subject helped to ease my fears and give me practical steps to begin programming multicultural music.

Ultimately, this is what inspired my final report. I wanted to introduce multicultural music in an authentic and simple way for first-year orchestra students. Folk songs instill in students the basic understanding that music is inherent within all of us, and yet that each culture may have their own preferences due to the familiarity of their own folk songs. This year I

programmed “The Banana Boat Song” (Halferty, 2017), which is popular within the United States, but is originally a Jamaican Folk Song. We discussed the origin of banana boat workers and their conditions, and the use of “work songs” throughout history. We also programmed Appalachian Hymn (Newbold, 2015), which is not ultimately a folk song, but that does represent a specific region and people group with its own history and culture. Seeing the contrast of these two styles of music, and yet the impact that both have made on our current musical culture, began to open the door for even further discussion on the styles of music available to string players. In the future, I would like to continue making multicultural music and folk songs a primary tenant of my orchestra program.

### **Conclusion**

The Master of Music program at Kansas State University has given me the knowledge, tools, resources and motivation to continue to seek the best for myself as a music educator. It can be easy to do what “always has been done”, but I want more for myself and for my students. I desire to model for my students the excitement and joy that can come from seeking new ways to approach string-playing, while also appreciating the rich tradition of orchestral music. I believe that I am starting to understand the kind of musician, educator and person that I want to be in the context of Orchestral education, and the priority of opportunities and learning that I want to provide for my students.



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