

Understanding the Global Community through Music

By
Dr. Amy Dunker

As global communications, modern transportation systems and the global market bring us into ever closer contact with each other, it is clear that we as a human race must work ever more diligently towards multi-cultural understanding. As citizens of a global society, professional musicians have always been amongst the first to embrace and celebrate the cultural differences that we have encountered in our nomadic professional wanderings. Why not help our students to understand and celebrate these differences through music?

Must we continue our strict allegiance to the canon of Western Classical Music? Can we accept and explore the musical traditions of cultures that predate our own – such as those of Africa, Asia, India and the Middle East? Can we embrace newer traditions that blend older traditions into something new – such as the Afro-American and Afro-Latin musical traditions?

Certainly the Western musical classical music tradition has embraced the influences of many cultures throughout its long history. Rimsky-Korsakov's **Scheherazade** (a musical story of Arabia), Mozart's "Turkish Rondo" **from Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, K. 331** (imitates the sound of Turkish Janissary bands) and the minimalist movement come to mind. Messiaen and Debussy studied the music of "the orient" and reflected these ideas in their music. Modern composers, such as Chen Yi, Roberto Sierra and Tan Dun, have embraced their own cultural heritages and combined them with contemporary western classical music styles to produce truly hybrid works. Do these hybrid works reflect an authentic experience in the culture or cultures in question?

From a purist's perspective, these cultural borrowings and hybrids do not reflect a purely authentic experience of the culture or cultures in question. Any time you translate

one culture's musical expression into another idiom such as the western orchestra or band, you lose some of the authentic sound and experience of the music. However, throughout history, the music and culture of virtually every group of people have been influenced through both direct and indirect contact with other cultures.

These cultural hybrids can provide a valid and an invaluable musical experience for students performing these works. Furthermore, these works coupled with discussions and assignments geared toward both musical and analytical understanding of the music as well as transference of ideas and concepts from geography and social studies can serve to enhance and broaden your student's global and social awareness.

Questions that could be asked of your students include the following:

- What do we mean by the term culture?
- What do we mean by the term musical style?
- What musical characteristics define this musical style or particular piece?
- How does this music differ from other pieces that we are performing?
- What instruments would this music traditionally be performed on? Who plays these instruments? How are the musicians trained?
- Where or under which circumstances would this music be performed in its original form? How does this differ from a performance in a concert hall? How does this affect the music?
- How has this style's translation to this particular ensemble changed it? What remains the same?
- Do other things change in a society when it comes into contact with another culture?

Integrating these ideas into the rehearsal process does not have to be time consuming or tedious. With creative strategic planning and assignments, these types of projects can be immensely rewarding for teachers, students and audience. Here are a few creative ideas to get you started:

- Assign a question as an essay question. Post the best answers either on a bulletin board or on a web-site.
- Team up with a social studies teacher to have both classes work on presentations for each other. Use the best presentations for the concert.
- Hold short discussions over several rehearsals of the piece.
- Have students create posters on the contents of specific questions. Use them as advertisements for the concert both in school and out in the community.
- Create a take home research worksheet.
- Create a game or word puzzle using the new information.
- Have multi-cultural concerts with pieces from diverse cultures. Compare and contrast the music.
- Have a “multi-cultural night” and include food, art, dancing, clothing, poetry readings selected from the culture being highlighted.
- Create a web-site and post what your students find out about the music and/or the culture the music is associated with.
- Create a bulletin board of newspaper and magazine clippings pertaining to the countries or cultures that the music being studied derives from.

Have fun with a world of possibilities!

*Dr. Amy Dunker is an Associate Professor of Music at Clarke College where she teaches composition, theory, trumpet and conducts the new music ensemble. She is the composer of the **Strings Around the World** series published by Alliance Music, Inc. www.apimusic.org*

www.amydunker.com

