

Repertoire & Resources

World Musics and Cultures



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Addressing Contextual Information in Multicultural Choral Repertoire

by Tiffany Walker

There is an ongoing need to help choral music educators make informed decisions about how to select culturally responsive music. Teaching music from diverse cultures is part of state and national music standards, but it needs to be approached knowledgeably, beyond picking a song in a different language. Julia Shaw refers to culturally responsive pedagogy as a way of teaching music from diverse cultures using prior knowledge, frames of reference, and diverse performance styles to make the learning experience more relevant to students.¹ Without this cultural meaning, repertoire selection and performance could fall victim to cultural appropriation, which happens when “people

from a more powerful culture adopt the art, symbols, or elements of a less powerful culture without understanding or respecting the context or history of that material.”² Knowing more about the multicultural music arrangements we choose to perform may spur the developing of prior knowledge and frame of reference needed to practice culturally responsive pedagogy.

Why is it that choral music educators shy away from programming diverse music? Some choir teachers may feel uncomfortable adding multicultural music to their concert program because they lack training or exposure to the genre and they fear being inauthentic or falling victim to cultural appropriation.³ On the other hand, there may be teachers who are not afraid to program music in a variety of languages, but lack cultural responsiveness by not delving further into the cultural meaning of the music. Sometimes an arrangement inaccurately includes instruments creating an entertaining affect instead of creating an authentic musical experience. My intention is to help guide a choir director towards knowing how one could select repertoire that validly represents the music of diverse cultures. This includes ways to inform the study and pro-

gramming of cultural music, examples of trusted publishers, and describing what to look for in octavos.

Programming Diverse Cultural Music with Meaning

It is not enough to perform songs in different languages and feel that it suffices for culturally responsive teaching. Even knowing the rationale for teaching multicultural music, there still needs to be instructional goals and validation for learning about a culture behind the piece. According to Kertz-Welzel, “Instructional goals range from simply getting to know musical cultures to fostering intercultural understanding or tolerance.”⁴ A key learning goal should be to ensure that the music we choose aligns with both the country the music came from and our students’ culture. Repertoire selection is crucial for finding quality representation of a culture. You can start by choosing a culture that relates to your students, and find experts within that culture to obtain more information. These experts are also called culture bearers or informants. They can range from known researchers in a specific culture to the very students in your choir or their families. In 2012, Sharon Da-

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vis Gratto provided a limited list of ACDA State and Division Ethnic and Multicultural Chairs and other known informants based on culture, language, or genre.⁵ The people on that list may or may not still hold their indicated position today, but the resource still provides a name to search for online. You can also rely on colleagues who may have more experience with diverse cultural music for their opinions on authentic world music.⁶ Networking allows us as music educators to gain exposure to many multicultural works. We then have the opportunity to teach those valid choral representations and give students a meaningful cultural learning experience.

Quality Representation of Cultural Music Repertoire

The number of published choral arrangements of folk and multicultural music has grown tremendously over the last twenty-five years. However, with this abundance comes a varying degree of cultural authenticity.⁷ Repertoire may include arrangements of traditional songs, compositions that feature the style of a diverse culture, and compositions by people who are indigenous to the culture.⁸ When choosing music, we must work hard to use our best judgment. Effective tools for selecting quality repertoire includes Abril's suggested construct of "awareness, knowledge, and understanding."⁹ We should be aware of cultural va-

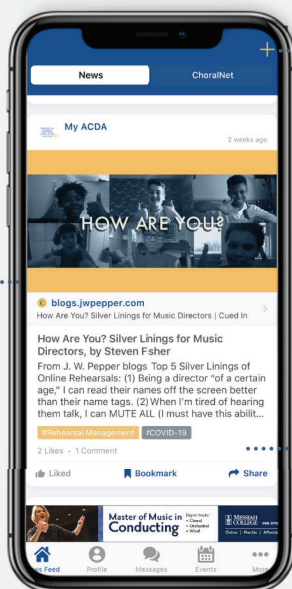
lidity, our biases, and practicality for the ensemble. We should seek knowledge about the surrounding context of a piece, including knowing the means by which the music is taught and performed. As students learn the piece, there should be an understanding of why the selection validly represents a particular cultural group. Following Abril's suggestions can better equip teachers with tools to pick appropriate multicultural repertoire.

Limitations of Western Notation

Using choral octavos may seem like the best way to present world music to students, but there are

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limitations to presenting music in only that way. Just because a piece is published “does not guarantee cultural validity or quality.”¹⁰ Mary Goetze brings up an additional angle to think about published music. Published music of diverse cultures is already vetted through a Western musical lens¹¹—composers and arrangers use their training in Western classical music and notation to portray their perception of the music from a different culture. Choral arrangements using Western notation potentially take the cultural source far from the original musical context in order to make it more accessible.¹² Some scholars also warn against indigenous music being transcribed or adapted for performance purposes or commercial exploitation.¹³ However, they also claim that there are published arrangements that adhere to cultural validity.


Trusted Publishers

A good place to start finding repertoire is through trusted publishers that exercise care and integrity in their editing practices when publishing choral representations of world music. These publishers tend to feature works by people who lived within the country of origin, but received Western musical training, or arrangers who have done their research on a culture. Examples of reputable publishers include earthsongs, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, and Walton Music. There are publishers that focus solely on one particular culture, such as Musica Russica for Russian music, Transcontinental Music Publications for

Jewish music, and Musica Baltica for music from the Baltic states.¹⁴ The American Choral Director’s Association (ACDA) website also has a tab

for multicultural repertoire that is linked with the JW Pepper publisher site. However, sometimes uncontextualized publications can make its

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way into the catalogs. We still need to determine the published work's validity by looking at the provided contextual information.

What to Look for in an Octavo

Goetze states in a different article that most publications “provide only a translation and pronunciation guide, with minimal or no background information.”¹⁵ Scores should contain contextual information about the piece, usually about a page long with notes about the culture from which the song is derived, performance suggestions, and composer or arranger background. This brief context creates a starting point to becoming more informed about the music. For example, knowing that a piece is a religious or ritual song versus a folk song or dance form informs whether the piece is appropriate to program according to the theme of your concert. Other helpful information includes performance notes such as whether there should

be other instruments or physical movements. Scores from composers or arrangers who would take the time to include all that information would be worth deeming as quality repertoire because it shows some effort in providing authenticity.

Language

Music using foreign languages often include a pronunciation guide, and some formats are more reliable than others. Language pronunciation is better guided if given in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) rather than phonetical spellings of syllables that could still be mispronounced. Some scores offer a pronunciation chart of vowels and consonants, which could be useful if one is not yet comfortable with IPA. A literal translation of the lyrics into English is also an indicator of a piece with well-provided language context. A poetic translation under the original lyrics is not always accurate because the editor is trying to make sure the text underlay flows smoothly rather than conveying the

real meaning of the original text. Be wary of songs that incorporate a different language into a mostly English song. How much of the song is in one language over the other? Is there enough context to represent the non-English culture, or is a cultural phrase merely appropriated to make the song more interesting? Be even more skeptical of songs that use nonsense syllables to sound like a language or have instructions to sing in a noncontextualized style.

The Role of the Teacher

The next step in culturally responsive pedagogy slightly changes the teacher's role away from the traditional teacher-as-master paradigm. Parr recommends that the teacher get out of their comfort zone and lead through participation.¹⁶ The teacher also does not have to feel like they have to be an expert, or attempt to cover every culture superficially, especially as a gimmick or a show piece. Instead, bring in the expert informants, whether in person, through video conferencing, or via YouTube, and let them give the cultural meaning. Then, be the facilitator between the ensemble and the informant.¹⁷ When it comes time to perform the piece, consider the possibility of performing the piece without a conductor, especially if that more closely replicates the conditions within which the music is normally created. Show respect to the culture by performing it with integrity and re-creating the music as best as you can.¹⁸ Share the music with the cultural communities and




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especially the audience. You can do this through program notes, or having them sing along, if the piece was meant to be participatory. The role of the teacher is to facilitate people's musical learning, building bridges between the group and its many diverse communities locally and globally.¹⁹

Conclusion

Making the effort to program valid representations of multicultural music is necessary to provide students with more meaningful cultural experiences. The pieces we choose to teach may offer a first encounter of a culture, or it could provide a deeper understanding of cultures already encountered. We need to work harder to ensure that any cultural information and access offered is as valid as possible. The global COVID-19 pandemic has pushed everyone worldwide to connect with each other remotely. As we grow more accustomed to video conferencing, it will be easier than ever to reach out to culture bearers who can help provide background information on folk songs, give diction coaching, or introduce works. With the ease of online access, it is all the more imperative for us, as teachers, to be facilitators and guides to encourage students' independent learning and encounters with various cultures. Our efforts towards authenticity can only bring richer artistry and a deeper connection to singers across the globe. 

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NOTES

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- ² Ryan Cho, "Cultural Appropriation and Choral Music: A Conversation That Can Make Both Our Music and Community Better," *Choral Journal* 55, no. 10 (2015): 59.
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- ⁴ Alexandra Kertz-Welzel, *Globalizing Music Education: A Framework* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 91.
- ⁵ Sharon Davis Gratto, "Ethnic & Multicultural Perspectives: Informed World Music Study and Performance: Who Can You Ask?" *Choral Journal* 53, no. 4 (2012): 63-64.
- ⁶ Hilary Apfelstadt, "First Things First: Selecting Repertoire," *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 19-22, 46.
- ⁷ Carlos R. Abril, "Music That Represents Culture: Selecting Music with Integrity," *Music*

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- ⁹ Abril, "Music That Represents Culture: Selecting Music with Integrity," 38.
- ¹⁰ Shaw, "The Skin that We Sing," 77.
- ¹¹ Goetze, "Repertoire as Pedagogy".
- ¹² Clayton Parr, "Eight Simple Rules for Singing Multicultural Music," *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 1 (2006): 34-37.
- ¹³ Mary Goetze, "Challenges of Performing Diverse Cultural Music," *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 23-25, 48; Riekie van Aswegen and Hetta Potgieter, "Folk Music for Children's Choirs: The Challenges and Benefits of Cultural Diversity," *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* 7, no. 1 (2010): 51-78.
- ¹⁴ Woods, "Alleviating the Difficulties in Teaching Multicultural Choral Music", 56.
- ¹⁵ Goetze, "Challenges of Performing Diverse Cultural Music", 24.
- ¹⁶ Parr, "Eight Simple Rules for Singing Multicultural Music", 37.
- ¹⁷ Goetze, "Repertoire as Pedagogy".
- ¹⁸ Cho, "Cultural Appropriation and Choral Music"; Goetze, "Challenges of Performing Diverse Cultural Music"; Goetze, "Repertoire as Pedagogy".
- ¹⁹ Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Music, Education, and Diversity: Building Cultures and Communities*, ed. James A. Banks (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018).