

Sharing through Song: Resources for Singing Migration Stories

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The 2020 NWACDA conference title was “Sharing our Story.” I love it when my students are able to tell their own stories through song. My problem, though, is that I teach in a school where the stories aren’t that diverse. How, then, can we use song to tell someone else’s story? Ignoring migration narratives is not an option in 2021 if we are to be relevant. In this article, I will provide resources for teachers and directors interested in using music to teach choirs and audiences about immigration.

I came to this project by accident. Every other year, I commission a local rock musician to write a concert-length program for my students to perform alongside a rock band and then take the show on tour. I use this material to teach my students about the business of music from local industry professionals, and the students end up writing press releases and booking the opening acts for the show. This year, we worked with Luz Elena Mendoza from the band, Y La Bamba. Mendoza wrote an incredible piece titled “El Agua De Mi Ser” centered on the story of her parents’ immigration from Mexico. Upon delivering the score, Mendoza urged me to teach my students to understand the truth of immigration stories rather than

the political narratives they may have been more familiar with.

As you already know, immigration is a huge topic! Fortunately, so is love, beauty, hope, music, or any of the other topics that we tackle on a regular basis in our choirs. If I want to center a concert on love, I would much rather engage with a first-person text in which my students are singing love songs rather than singing about love. This is the magic of choir. Our choristers get to try on emotions rather than just describing them. To teach about immigration, then, I sought out first-person narratives of the immigrant experience, in story and song, with musical textures that matched the emotions of the text. At the end of this article, I will include a list of music that meets these criteria, including all voicings and levels of difficulty.

My primary source for this project was *The Immigrant Story* (www.theimmigrantstory.org). Sankar Raman runs this incredible project, which publishes short immigrant biographies online and hosts live storytelling events. The mission is to expand Americans’ understanding of the stories of immigrants.

The Immigrant Story has begun developing a curriculum

for teachers to engage students in oral history and journalism to tell the story of immigrants in their own communities. They are offering tremendous assistance to schools and teachers who would like to use the curricula, including months of lesson plans and editorial assistance. Though my school is in a predominantly conservative community, my students were eager to explore the stories of their neighbors who have immigration stories to tell.

Strategies and Resources

- We began the semester with Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, an excellent book (and corresponding young person's edition) that tells a comprehensive story of America through the eyes of each group of immigrants throughout history.
- I partnered with six teachers at my school from a variety of subject areas to offer *The Immigrant Story* curriculum to a broad swath of our student body. Several classes succeeded in conducting interviews with immigrants in our school community and writing their stories for publication. Our journalism program produced a full-length special magazine issue on the subject.
- I brought in performers from our community whose immigration stories inform the music they perform.
- I partnered with the English Language Learners program at our local community college to bring an adult English discussion group to my school. Together, we facilitated an intercultural discussion that also served as an English language practice session for some students.
- I put together an Immigrant Story Panel featuring immigrants in our community from every continent and generation. Each panelist told his or her story. Students were able to ask questions to deepen their understanding and gain empathy.
- We used role-playing games from *The Line Between Us* by Bill Bigelow. It was a curriculum guide for teaching about the US/Mexico border. There are powerful activities in this set that really helped my students understand their roles in the forces that drive immigration.
- Finally, we held many sessions with Luz Elena Mendoza, our featured composer, in which she told her stories and her parents' stories that inspired the work.
- Before the pandemic canceled everything, we were planning on performing "El Agua De Mi Ser" for several majority-Hispanic populations plus conducting dialogues with the audience on what we had learned and how the music resonated.

My students gained a tremendous amount of empathy for everyone they encountered and an appreciation of the breadth and depth of the immigrant stories they don't regularly hear on the news. This was an incredibly gratifying project that I imagine will continue to be relevant in the foreseeable future!

Many other choirs have undertaken similar projects. I put together repertoire and curricula by researching the groundbreaking work of other choirs. Here are just a few:

<https://www.vocalescence.org/what-we-do/learning-and-engagement-programs/cantare/>

<https://www.resonancechoral.org/safe-harbor>

<https://ourtonality.org/borderline/>

<https://bordercrossingmn.org/>

<http://www.melissadunphy.com/composition.php?id=72>

<https://carolineshaw.com/tothehands/>

One notable example of a project with similar goals was a performance of Caroline Shaw's magnificent work, "To the Hands," by Cleveland and Grant High School Choirs in Portland, OR in the spring of 2020. These choirs were also fortunate to have worked with the Pulitzer prize-winning composer in preparation for a performance and tour. Here are a few of the resources those schools used to understand the topic:

<https://theconversation.com/us/topics/displaced-people-35687>

<https://www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/refugees-and-displaced-people>

<https://www.internal-displacement.org/>

<https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm>

Repertoire & Resources

Here are a few of the resources I might explore if I had more time or was working with a different ensemble:

- Children's books on immigration such as *The Matchbox Diary* by Paul Fleischman or *I'm New Here* by Anne O'Brien
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TED Talk titled *The Danger of a Single Story* https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
- Vortex Magazine article on undocumented musicians—<https://medium.com/@PoorforaMinute/building-a-bridge-over-troubled-waters-da832ecca2ad>
- *Rethinking Globalization* by Bill Bigelow
- *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn
- *A People's History for the Classroom* by Bill Bigelow
- *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen
- *Harvest of Empire* by Juan Gonzalez
- *Nosotros: The Hispanic People of Oregon* edited by Erasmo Gamboa
- *Troublesome Border* by Oscar Martinez
- *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* by Erasmo Gamboa
- *Mexicanos in Oregon* by Erlinda V. Gonzales-Berry and Marcela Mendoza
- Claudio Castro Luna – WA poet laureate speaks at schools. <http://www.castroluna.com/>

- Teaching Tolerance curricula. https://www.tolerance.org/search?query=mexican&f%5B0%5D=facet_content_type%3Alesson
- Oregon Multicultural Archives: Latino People and Culture. <https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/oma/latino-a>
- 5 Books for High School Mexican-American Studies Class. <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/5-books-for-high-school-mexican-american-studies-class/>

Below is a list of music I selected for the NWACDA Repertoire Spotlight Session on the Music of Migration:

Children/Youth Choirs

- Laura Hawley – *Vivre, Aimer, Partager*
Michael Bussewitz-Quarm – *Lamiya's Song*
Francisco J. Nuñez – *De Colores*
Diana Sáez – *Vidalita*

SAB/Middle School

- Miriam Sonstenes – *I Am Leaving*

Treble

- Carlos Guastavino – *Pueblito, Mi Pueblo*
Lee Kesselman – *Skye Boat Song*
Cristian Grases – *La Paloma*

Bass/Tenor

- Francisco J. Nuñez – *El Aire Lloro*
Stephen Smith – *Chi Mi Na Mor-Bheanna*
Fenno Heath – *Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child*
Derek Myler – *Three Polish War Songs*

Jackson Berkey – *Cibola*

Jorge Cózatl – *Luz y Sombra*

John Leavitt – *Bashana Haba'ah*

Jesús López Moreno – *En Paz*

Jesús López Moreno – *Velero de Papel*

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina – *Super Flumina Babylonis*

Stephen O'Smith – *Skye Boat Song*

SATB

Kathleen Allan – *Distancia*


Abbie Betinis – *Journey Home*

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco – *Romancero Gitano*

Estanislau Gubiotti – *Immigrant Son*

Mark Sirett – *Cliffs of Dooneen*

Mack Wilberg – *Ah el novio no quiere dinero*

Finally, please contact me if you are thinking of taking on a project like this one! I would love to help with advice or information I might be able to provide. 

Here is some reasonably topical, seldom-performed music I encourage you to check out. Many of these works can be found online. If you need any help, I have perusal copies for most works.

Caroline Shaw – *To the Hands*

Theresa Koon – *Mother of Exiles*

Allan – *Tu Voz*

Calixto Alvarez – *Lacrimosa*

Carlos Chavez – *Llamadas*

Nicholas Cline – *She Took His Hands*

Jorge Cózatl – *Pasar La Vida*

Jorge Cózatl – *Xtoles*

Jesús Echevarría – *Cantare!*

Gaspar Fernandez – *Xicochi*

Dessa and Jocelyn Hagen – *Look Out Above*

Chris Hutchings – *The Wall*

Heinrich Isaac – *Innsbruck, Ich muss dich lassen*

Lilia Vázquez Kuntze – *Nido de Amor*

Julio Morales – *Dos Cuerpos*

Jesús López Moreno – *Barquito de Papel*