

Foreign Language Songs in the Elementary Music Classroom:  
Benefits, Challenges, and Effective Teaching Methods

Lindsay M. Byers

University of North Carolina at Pembroke

### Abstract

This lecture recital considers the challenges many music educators face in attempting to meet standards for students and on teacher evaluations. The author suggests that music curriculum is sometimes marginalized as music educators attempt to include standards outside of the arts in their teaching in order to meet standards on teacher evaluations. The use of foreign language songs in the elementary music classroom as a means of constructing global and cultural awareness in elementary students demanded by *Common Core State Standards*, and teacher evaluations is examined. Beginning by defining *Common Core State Standards*, and the *North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process* and discussing the challenges their implementation presents for music educators. Following this, the author reviews the benefits, challenges, and effective teaching methods for foreign language songs in the elementary music classroom revealed through study of the current literature on the subject. A description of a case study of two specific foreign language songs for different age and ability levels taught using methods found in the author's research concludes the effective methods section of the study. The classical repertoire performed in the recital portion and its correlation to the study of foreign language songs is also included. The goal of this study is to provide elementary music educators with a guide for teaching foreign language songs effectively while meeting *Common Core State Standards*, teacher evaluation standards and music objectives.

### Research Questions

Are foreign language songs beneficial for elementary music students?

What are the challenges in teaching and learning foreign language songs with elementary music students?

What are some effective methods of teaching foreign language songs to elementary music students?

In recent years, school curricula have become increasingly focused on global and cultural awareness, and cross-curricular learning. Pressure on music educators to help meet rigorous new *Common Core State Standards* frequently leads to the marginalizing of music curriculum. Music objectives are replaced by objectives from the Common Core State Standards in reading, writing, and math. The majority of educators in the United States of America are required to implement *Common Core State Standards*. According to [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org), “Forty five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the *Common Core State Standards*” The National Governors Association for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed the *Common Core State Standards*, published and copyrighted in June of 2010. The standards set forth by the NGA Center and CCSSO aim to clearly communicate what is expected of students at each grade level to prepare them for success in college and in a modern workforce. A description of students who are college and career ready is included in the introduction portion of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. According to their description, successful students “come to understand other perspectives and cultures” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 7). Successful students also “establish a base of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter by engaging with works of quality and substance” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 7).

North Carolina public school educators are expected to evidence teaching multiculturalism, global awareness and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills within their teacher evaluations. The rubric from the *North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process* outlines in detail the actions and attributes of developing, proficient, accomplished, and distinguished teachers. The second of five standards in the rubric reads “teachers establish a respectful environment for a diverse population of students”. Within this standard, a proficient teacher “displays knowledge of diverse cultures, their histories, and their roles in shaping global issues”, and a distinguished teacher “promotes a deep understanding of cultures through the integration of culturally sensitive materials and ideas throughout the curriculum...” and “...capitalizes on diversity as an asset in the classroom” (NCSBE & McRel, 2012).

Music educators view the issue of meeting new standards, both from the *Common Core State Standards* and teacher evaluation systems, in a variety of ways. Some music educators believe that music is intrinsically interdisciplinary and promotes global and cultural awareness simply by including multicultural songs or pieces in music lessons (Lansonen, 2010, p.49). Other music educators feel pressure to plan their curriculum around the *Common Core State Standards*. These standards require that graduating students have an advanced level of cultural awareness. As a result, lessons of music teachers in the latter group tend to be more focused on objectives and standards outside of the music curriculum. The key solution to these issues is a balanced approach in which musical objectives are met while objectives from the *Common Core State Standards* are

approached tangentially rather than directly. It is possible for music objectives to be the main focus of the lesson, while still addressing the *Common Core State Standards*.

Utilized in the elementary music classroom, foreign language songs could assist in a balanced approach to building the cross-curricular connections demanded by the *Common Core State Standards*, and the *North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process*. Beyond the demands of standards and evaluations, cultural awareness is valuable on an intrinsic level. Experiencing foreign language songs of various cultures allows students to virtually travel, developing a deeper understanding of peoples across the globe (Pascale, 2011; Trinick, 2012). Although many educators would agree that exposure to world cultures is important, they are sometimes intimidated by the task (Blair & Kondo, 2008, Volk, 2006) for a wide variety of reasons. Depending on their musical background and training they may not be comfortable when teaching students a foreign language (Lansonen, 2010; Macias, 2008; Trinick, 2012). The fear of an unauthentic performance or learning experience, or disrespecting another culture unintentionally can cause elementary music educators to hesitate when attempting to plan a lesson with a foreign language song (Blair & Kondo, 2008). Another reason for teacher discomfort may be that their students disengage during multicultural music lessons (Blair & Kondo, 2008). The goal of this study is to provide elementary music educators with a guide for teaching foreign language songs effectively while meeting *Common Core State Standards* and music objectives.

This qualitative study examines the benefits, challenges, and effective teaching methods for foreign language songs in the elementary music classroom through review of

existing research. In particular, how are foreign language songs beneficial in the elementary music classroom, what challenges do elementary music educators face when using foreign language songs in their classrooms, what are effective teaching methods for foreign language songs. In the action research portion of the study, the author uses methods found in their research with students in a classroom in the southeastern region of the United States of America. This analysis of the current literature on foreign language songs written by pedagogical leaders and experts will provide a useful guide for elementary music educators seeking meaningful and effective teaching methods which increase students' musicality as well as their global and cultural awareness. Ways in which foreign language songs can be used to help students and teachers reach *Common Core State Standards* in global and cultural awareness will also be discussed.

Within this study, foreign language songs will be defined as any song not written or sung in American English. Most of these songs are of the folk variety, but the term 'folk song' is challenging to define, especially in elementary school music, where most songs referred to as folk songs are being referred to in transcribed (written) form. In the case of this study, folk songs are songs created, performed, and passed from person to person by untrained musicians, though they may have been transcribed at some point after their creation ("Folk Music", 2001). A few of the songs referenced in this study are of the composed variety, but also in a language other than American English.

The elementary music classroom is defined as the space and time in which a section of students from a grade level Kindergarten through Fifth grade receives musical instruction. At the time of this study, the researcher was teaching in an elementary school

in Fayetteville, North Carolina, United States of America. According to the Public Schools of North Carolina, in the 2011 – 2012 school year the total population was 394 students, which was approximately 50 students less than the average elementary school in the Cumberland County district, and about 100 students less than the average elementary school in North Carolina (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2012). Although the population of the school was relatively small, the class sizes were approximately the same as the district average, with a kindergarten class size of 19 students (PSNC, 2012). The 4<sup>th</sup> grade was the only group with a significant class size difference; there were 26 students per fourth grade class at the school, seven more students than the district average and five more students than the state average (PSNC, 2012). The data shows that although the presenter was teaching music to less students than the average music educator in North Carolina, the student groups taught were the same size or greater than the state average. According to the Public Schools of North Carolina (2012), class size can influence the amount of time the teacher spends with each student and the level of classroom discipline. The presenter found that the larger classes of older students were no more or less challenging to manage than any other class.

End-of-Grade test scores in reading were slightly higher than the district and state average (PSNC, 2012). End-of-Grade math scores were slightly higher than the district average and fractionally lower than the state average (PSNC, 2012). A significant portion of the student population is economically disadvantaged, and therefore the school was designated Title I. Title I is a federal program which provides funding for high poverty schools to help students who are falling behind academically, or at risk of falling behind



(PSNC, 2012). The effects of living in poverty affected some students' readiness to learn in music and other subject areas. Overall, the average and above average test scores combined with the high population of students living in poverty are evidence of the highly qualified and dedicated faculty at the school. The presenter found the school climate to be warm, welcoming, supportive, and positive.

The presenter's teaching situation during the study was similar to many elementary music educators in that each class received 30 – 45 minutes of music instruction once a week, or approximately thirty six times per school year. Third, fourth, and fifth grade classes attended music classes in the morning for 45 minutes each. Kindergarten, first, and second grade classes attended music classes in the afternoon for 30 minutes each. This schedule meant that the presenter had less time with lower elementary students, and therefore it took more class sessions to work through a foreign language song than it did with the upper elementary students who had a longer class period. The presenter's physical teaching environment at the time of the study was a temporary classroom behind the main school building. This was an advantage, as sounds from music classes rarely disturbed other classes. It was a disadvantage because the room was small with less storage space. Instrumentally, the music room was equipped with a range of classroom percussion, pitched and un-pitched, an acoustic piano, recorders, guitars, and auto harps. In terms of media and technology, there was a dry erase whiteboard, a digital projector, a CD player, a laptop, and wireless internet. To provide ample space for movement there were no chairs, students sat on an oval shaped carpet in the center of the room. Visual aids included a world map, and a map of the United States

of America, a word wall (mini pocket chart), instruments of the orchestra chart, and a composer of the month bulletin board. The maps were useful in showing students the origins of songs, next to the maps were laminated cardstock with grade levels written on them where the students kept track of which countries they had traveled to in music class. The laptop, wireless internet, and digital projector were also used in building background knowledge about the songs being learned in music class.

### **Benefits of teaching foreign language songs**

Foreign language songs, in particular, folk songs, can be used to develop: cultural (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Hoffman, 2012; Blair & Kondo, 2008), global (Pascale, 2011), and environmental awareness (Costigan & Neuenfelt, 2011), social and interpersonal skills (Trinick, 2012), life skills and sense of community responsibility (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2011, Trinick, 2012; Hoffman, 2012), foreign language skills (Abril, 2003; Kramer, 2001; Mora, 2000), and musical skills (Oliveira, 2006; Reynolds, 2005; Volk, 2006). The majority of these are listed as 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills within the *North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process*. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are usually taught through all subject areas, and are general competencies, which help students to succeed in modern workforce and a global economy.

Through foreign language songs, students can experience cultures represented in their classroom (Abril, 2003; Hoffman, 2012), as well as cultures around the world (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2002). Robyn Margaret Trinick, a member of the Department of Education faculty at the University of Auckland, asserts that: “Songs provide a rich context for recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity”(Trinick, 2012,

p. 6). While Trinick's view may be valid, it should not be assumed that students gain cultural or global awareness simply by hearing, singing, or playing a foreign language song (Blair & Kondo, 2008, Fitzpatrick, 2012). Exploration of the meaning of the song and its context within the culture from which it is derived is essential to building cultural and global awareness (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2011). For example, if a class is introduced to a song from Russia, it is important to share more background information with a class than the song is from Russia and it is about a hedgehog. In order to gain cultural knowledge while learning a Russian song about a hedgehog students will need more information about: hedgehogs, Russia, the context in which the song is used or who the song is sung by and for, and a true translation of the words. The combination of this information with the music creates a balanced approach to teaching foreign language songs: a learning experience that is both musically and culturally enriching. Translation and context add depth and meaning to an aesthetically pleasing and educational musical experience. Kapua Gutchen, a Torres Strait Islander who teaches indigenous music, dance, and language, believes that understanding the meaning of a song is vital, saying,

That's what my job in the school here now is to try and get kids to understand [our indigenous language]. So when they sing hymns and choruses [and participate] in island dance sorts of things, they know what they are singing about. (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2011, p. 5)

While ability to recognize and respect diverse cultures around the world is an attribute of students who are prepared to work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, appreciation of cultural diversity within the classroom is also vital to student success. For many elementary

school students, experiencing a classmate's culture may be the moment they realize that cultural diversity exists. Choosing foreign language songs from cultures represented in a class introduces diversity while including the familiarity of classmates. Treating students as experts in their respective cultures exemplifies that each individual has something to offer. Students who speak a language other than English at home, or who are from a cultural minority within a classroom or elementary school, can be empowered by the chance to teach the class something while proudly sharing their cultural identity.

Foreign language folk songs are a part of cultural identity, and must be taught to children for the culture to survive (Pascale, 2011). It is during turbulent times of war and transition that these important parts of culture are often lost and forgotten (Pascale, 2011). Louise M. Pascale was a member of the Peace Corps, stationed in Afghanistan from 1966-1968. While teaching in Kabul, she collected the songs of the Afghani school children. Upon hearing about the incredible loss of life and traditions that the Afghani people were suffering at the hands of the Taliban, she vowed to return the songs to the children of Afghanistan. Today there are over 10,000 copies of the songbook in Afghan elementary schools. Teachers and children alike are delighted with this resource, which is used for many purposes in sparsely funded Afghani schools. Most importantly, the Afghani people are delighted to be able to give their children a sense of national identity (Pascale, 2011). Khaled Hosseini, author of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Kite Runner*, was born in Afghanistan. *He* comments on Pascale's work saying,

This wonderful songbook is a small treasure that connects today's Afghan children with generations past. My own children have already memorized these

songs, as I had when I was a child. With all the destruction the Afghan children have witnessed, it is my hope that this collection brings them a sense of joy, belonging, and identity. (Pascale, 2008, back cover)

The testaments to Pascale's work clearly evidence the importance of folk songs to a group of people. Frequently, these songs are valued not only as part of a tradition, but because they reflect the values of the culture. Singing folksongs in elementary music classrooms can help students see what is important to another culture. Understanding cultural values is key to building genuine global and cultural awareness.

Foreign language folk songs also teach children about the natural environment in which they are being raised. The simple, yet descriptive, nature of many of these songs makes an excellent springboard from which to learn about similarities and differences between the natural environment American students have experienced, and the one which children in another part of the world experience daily. Comparing and contrasting is a part of a higher order thinking skill set, which the *Common Core State Standards* aim to develop in students. These nature songs provide excellent cross-curricular connections to science and environmental awareness standards. A children's folksong from Thailand, *Chang*, describes an Elephant's physical features (Volk, 2006). *Kiraro*, teaches children of the Torres Straight Islands about the creatures that inhabit the jungles around their villages (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2011). A Korean folksong mentions the both the importance of leaving the flowers on the bean plant so it will sprout beans, but also admonishes the bluebirds for knocking the flowers down (Bowman, 2008). Although these may not seem very complex, or academic subjects, they connect well to the pre-

existing background knowledge of elementary school students. These songs are excellent building blocks in learning more about natural climates worldwide.

Sometimes foreign language folk songs teach children of a specific culture necessary skills or help them understand their world. *Paret Amili*, a song from the Torres Straight Islands, teaches the importance of keeping the village clean. The lyrics repeat the importance of sweeping the fallen leaves and rubbish into a heap and removing them to make the village tidy. The accompanying dance uses both a broom and a beno (a flat woven basket used by the villagers to collect leaves) to mimic the motions of sweeping and carry away rubbish. When children perform the dance they are not only reinforcing the importance of keeping the village clean, but also practicing how to use the equipment needed to keep the village clean (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2011). Academic knowledge is also a subject of some foreign language folksongs. In Afghanistan, children and teachers to encourage literacy sing a song about the importance of books and reading. Many cultures, including the Afghani and Maori people, also have alphabet songs to teach children their letters. Another Afghani chant about bread and water teaches cause and effect and chain of events (Pascale, 2008). Learning that children across the world also have to be responsible and learn how to read creates a meaningful connection for elementary music students learning the song. Meaningful connections create an authentic learning experience in which students are truly engaged; keeping their minds and ears open to the experience at hand as well as future cultural experiences.

Singing in groups increases social skills and sense of community among the singers (Trinick, 2011). This is especially true in the case of many foreign language folk

songs, which were created by adults to help teach children daily tasks, and most importantly, how to work together. The importance of family and community is a frequent subject of folk songs in many languages. In *Salaam, Salaam*, Afghani children sing of their love for their family members (Pascale, 2008), and *Wu Nee Pen Wun Gerd* is sung in Thailand to celebrate a birthday (Volk, 2006). As mentioned earlier, *Paret Amili*, reinforces community responsibility in reminding villagers on Erub, of the Torres Straight Islands, how to keep the village clean (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2012). The act of singing as a group reinforces not only the importance of working together, but also the joy of being part of a community. “Music’s role, particularly the regular use of song, in reducing the effects of anxiety and fostering feelings of well-being and connectedness is a theme that clearly emerges from a study of literature in the field (Costa, 2008, pp.27-28; Woodford, 2005; Wylie & Foster-Cohen, 2007)” (Trinick, 2011). The subject of the song and the act of singing together create and reinforce feelings of connectedness in a group of people. This is just as applicable in a classroom as it is in a village in Ghana. The *Common Core State Standards* demand that students “vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 7). In order to genuinely experience other cultures, elementary students in particular must have a meaningful connection to the music. Although the subjects of the songs may be simple, students are able to build meaningful connections to these ideas, because they too have chores, birthdays, and schoolwork.

Some foreign language songs directly promote good character, whereas others admonish bad behavior, often in the form of cautionary tales. In Ghana, game songs are

especially for children, because they teach a wide variety of things including ethics and morals (Reynolds, 2005). *Nsa ni o*, an Akan game song, is a cautionary tale about someone who drinks too much liquor and becomes very ill (Reynolds, 2005). Children may not think very much about the lesson of the song while they are playing the game, which includes a complex clapping pattern, but the message is repeated each time they play the game. An Ewe story song, *Kofi Kple Ama*, is similar to the western nursery rhyme, Jack and Jill. In the case of the Ewe story song, however, Ama throws herself on the ground in anguish after her brother's accident, instead of "tumbling after". This is presumably both a song for children, and also a way for adults to teach children the appropriate reaction to a serious accident (Reynolds, 2005). Knowledge of a culture's moral code helps students to understand different perspectives on world issues without imposing their morals on people of other cultures.

Simple songs (such as folk songs) used in the foreign language classroom can be used effectively to practice basic vocabulary and grammar (Kramer, 2001; Legg, 2009). This is also applicable to students learning English as a foreign language (Mora, 2000). This gives more importance to the simple songs and rhymes elementary educators use with young students. Foreign language is more approachable for young students when introduced through song, particularly if it accompanied by hand signals or visual aids representing musical elements or specific vocabulary (Abril, 2003). Folksongs are simple in structure and allow students the ability to practice vocabulary words and short phrases without being overwhelmed by learning an entire language. Using foreign language folk songs in the elementary music classroom to introduce snippets of new languages can help



build student curiosity regarding foreign language and reduce intimidation associated with the process of learning a new language. An attribute of college and career ready students according to the Common Core State Standards is the ability to “communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, pg. 7). Students who are comfortable with foreign languages possess the skills necessary to begin to communicate effectively with people of diverse cultures.

Musically speaking, songs of other cultures often contain specific repeated or prominent musical elements, such as melodic or rhythmic patterns, tonalities, and forms (“Folk Music”, 2001; Oliveira, 1997). Korean music often uses triplets, 5/4 meter, and harmonies in 4ths, 5ths, and octaves (Bowman, 2008). African music is so varied that typically it cannot be categorized, but a good portion of folksongs native to Africa are performed with polyrhythmic accompaniment (Reynolds, 2005). Bahian folk songs from Brazil are usually four phrases in length, with an octave range (Oliveira, 1997). Thai music is composed of stratified melodic variations as opposed to a melody with harmony parts, as in western music (Volk, 2006). Once identified (either by teacher prompting, or by direct instruction) these elements provide the student with a specific focus when listening to the song. As students learn the song, they simultaneously practice the musical element (or elements) identified while listening. Musical elements are more prominent in folksongs because they are often relatively simple: strophic and predictable in form based on the origin of the song (“Folk Music”, 2001). This is not to say that all folk music is the same. The simple structure of folk songs facilitates student focus on one prominent musical characteristic, instead of several at once.

Current nationwide and state level standards require teachers to create positive nurturing learning environments that celebrate diversity (NCSBE & McRel, 2012; NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Music educators can utilize songs of other cultures, including foreign language songs, to aid in the creation of such an environment (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Hoffman, 2012). When this positive environment is combined with a culturally rich curriculum that promotes global awareness, students develop a deeper understanding of a variety of subjects from social studies, to foreign language. Furthermore, they build connections to prior knowledge and experiences; help them to better understand the cultures of the world, their classmates' cultures, and even their own culture (Blair & Kondo, 2008). Students in these learning situations also begin to build 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills such as: effective communication, ethics, cultural sensitivity, active listening, personal responsibility, social responsibility, and people skills (NCSBE& McRel, 2012; NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Foreign language songs and foreign language folk songs not only promote all of these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, but also help to foster a diverse and dynamic learning environment.

### **Challenges in teaching and learning foreign language songs**

Music educators may be intimidated by foreign language music depending on their training and background (Lansonen, 2010). Music education students begin their teacher training with varying levels of exposure to cultures outside their own. Multicultural expertise, as Johanna Lansonen explains, is based on awareness of one's native musical culture, combined with formal musical training, and the sensitivity required to adapt to different environments (Lansonen, p. 47, 2010). For example, music

education students who study voice have more experience in singing foreign languages therefore they would likely be more comfortable teaching a foreign language song.

Another issue in teaching foreign language songs is selection, and choosing which cultures to represent (Hoffman, 2012; Volk, 2006). Song selection depends on a variety of factors from educator expertise (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Lansonen, 2010) to student interest (Ogawa & Yoshitomi, 1999), and developmental level (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2002). Often music educators and music publishers inadvertently fall into a pattern of over representing some cultures, and under representing others (Volk, 2006). According to Kate R. Fitzpatrick, cultural diversity (or lack thereof) in the curriculum has a direct affect on how students perceive and value themselves. Fitzpatrick offers this example: “When a student sees, for instance, that the music he or she enjoys and values at home or with friends is ignored and degraded by institutions, such as schools, it creates cultural conflict” (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 54). This cultural conflict leads to the next challenge in teaching foreign language songs, loss of student engagement.

Student engagement is driven primarily by motivation to learn. Students are most actively engaged when they are intrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation typically occurs when the subject is meaningful to the student (Kassner, 2002). Engaging students in foreign language songs in a meaningful way is challenging to many teachers (Blair & Kondo, 2008). According to Deborah V. Blair and Shinko Kondo, this is a challenge because often music educators strive to “...present unfamiliar music in a cultural context that is as authentic as possible.”(Blair & Kondo, 2008). They assert that the further the cultural context is from the culture of the students, the more difficult it is for them to

make meaningful connections, and stay engaged. Music educators want to create an authentic experience that honors the culture and traditions the music represents. Students must be able to make connections to prior knowledge to learn. Understanding students' cultures and prior musical experiences is essential in teaching foreign language music. Both the culture of the students and the culture of the music must be respected in order to create a meaningful learning experience (Blair & Kondo, 2008).

### **Effective teaching methods**

Meaningful learning experiences bridge the students' cultures, experiences, and musical skills with that of the foreign language song. These experiences keep students engaged, personally connected to the music and culture studied in music class (Blair & Kondo, 2008). Success in teaching and learning foreign language folksongs is determined by students' enjoyment, appreciation, and understanding of musical and cultural knowledge gained from the learning experience. In order to meet the criteria for success, key steps are: song selection, presentation/modeling and learning, building background knowledge, rehearsing, and performing.

Foreign language song selection can start from a few different sets of criteria. The music educator may wish to find a foreign language song on a particular subject, such as the moon. Songs can also be found by searching for a specific language, culture, or area of the world. Searching by musical elements, such as song with only two pitches, or a song that includes triplets, is another possibility. Songs may be selected for a particular occasion such as a holiday or life event. Keep in mind the musical background and prior knowledge of the student population (Blair & Kondo, 2012). Straying too far from their

musical roots, especially on the first foray into foreign language music, may cause them to feel lost (Sakai, 2011; Blair & Kondo, 2008). For example, teachers with a large population of ESL or ELL students from Mexico, should start with a Spanish language folksong first (Abril, 2003). Even if the song is not from Mexico, or is a Mexican song they have never heard before, the small thread of familiarity with draw them in.

Once the song has been selected, the way it is presented to students depends on the lesson objectives. In the case of foreign language folk songs, by rote is perhaps a more authentic process. This method also serves students well when the rhythms or pitches would be too difficult for them to read, at least at first. Begin by singing (modeling) the song as the students listen and perform a movement to the steady beat: patting, clapping, snapping, swaying, etc. There should be several repetitions so that students can begin to feel the music. After a few repetitions, stop and practice speaking the lyrics in rhythm. Break the song into manageable chunks and have the students “echo” or sing after the teacher models a section of the song. Establish clear communication: “First I will sing a section, then you will be my echo!”, or “When my hands point to my ears you listen, and when they point to you, sing what I just sang!”. Practice this process with beginners using simple phrases such as “Hello!” and “How are you?”, or phrases in the language of the folk song the class is learning. Learning a song “echo style” may take several repetitions, depending on the complexity of the melody and lyrics. Once students have a fairly solid grasp on the song, sing the song several times in its entirety as a class (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2002).

If the lesson objectives include reading notation, then notation can be presented first. Using notation in elementary school requires that the students have had experiences using most of pitches and rhythms in the song they are learning. It is best to use the notation of a folksong to introduce one new rhythm or pitch, at most. The students should be able to decode it fairly easily, once the teacher has broken the notation into decodable sections. Begin with reading the rhythm in sections and then rehearse the entire rhythm, next add pitch syllables and repeat the process, practice the pronunciation of a section, then practice pronouncing that section's lyrics in rhythm, then sing the section with correct pronunciation, repeat for each section until the entire song has been learned. In order to be successful, students must enjoy the process of learning a song by reading notation. The students' current ability, the complexity of the song selected, and the lesson objectives should determine the teaching/learning method. For students who are able to read on their own, a transliteration of the lyrics may be displayed on the board as a reminder. As the teacher sings with the students they may choose to add another element to keep it interesting, depending on the developmental level of the singers in the class. Clapping patterns, rhythms played on stylistically appropriate instruments, even whole body movement, are all appropriate things to add. The two methods of song introduction, rote and note, can be combined, starting rote and ending by singing and following notation. Enthusiasm and clarity are both required with any method of introducing a foreign language folk song to students. As is good practice for any music educator, memorize the song and understand the style, before presenting it to a group of students (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2002).

Building background or giving the students more information on the language and culture from which a foreign language song is derived can happen both formally and informally. Giving students background knowledge should never take the place of an entire music lesson. The amount of time spent on background knowledge should be at most a third of the lesson time. Always begin and end with music, and place information on the culture and geography of the songs origin in the middle of the lesson. In the introductory lesson, details can be added informally, as students ask questions. The location of origin can be shown on a map (or found on the map) by one of the students or the teacher. Photographs of the landscape and people will also help create meaning for students. More detailed background information should be introduced in the second lesson. Nonfiction texts can be introduced to establish a clearer picture of the culture, landscape, and daily life. Fictional texts such as myths, legends, or folktales from the same culture as the song are also helpful in understanding the cultures' belief system. The specific translation and meaning of the song used in class should also be discussed or reviewed. As cultural teacher Kapua Gutchen has said, "So that the kids have got an actual feeling what a song is about." (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2011).

Comparing their own culture with the culture the song is from is an excellent way to illicit higher order thinking from students. This is not only a great link to the rigor demanded by the Common Core Standards, but also a thinking exercise with lifelong benefits. Deepening understanding of similarities and differences between two cultures creates greater appreciation of all people and cultures encountered in their future lives.

**Kindergarten lesson: *La ranita cri***

Elementary music educators may have qualms over using foreign language songs with younger students. Their concerns may be that students will have trouble pronouncing the lyrics, or that the students will not be able to comprehend the meaning of the song. These obstacles can be easily overcome by choosing a short song with a repetitive melodic pattern, and relatively simple lyrics. In my teaching experience, I have discovered that Kindergarten and First Grade students can learn songs in a variety of different languages if presented and rehearsed appropriately. I selected *La ranita cri* because the melody was composed of four simple phrases. The first three phrases are ascending scales from Do to So (Do Re Mi Fa So). The fourth phrase is a descending line from So to Do (So Fa Mi Re Do). The lyrics are in Spanish: La ranita cri, El sapito cro, Salen de su casa, Salundando al sol. The translation: Little frog says cri, Little toad says cro, Coming from their house, They greet the sun.

Students began by listening to the teacher sing *La ranita cri*, and watching as the teacher moved their hands upwards and downwards to show the melodic direction. The students listened carefully to try to determine the language the teacher was singing. Most students guess Spanish right away, thanks to its rising presence in American culture. For a further challenge, I asked if they knew what the words meant. Often students who speak Spanish at home with their families will be able to answer this mostly correctly. It also gives some ESL students who may not be confident enough to answer questions in reading class a chance to show their knowledge and share their culture (Abril, 2003). Finally the teacher asks the students what they were showing when moving their hands. Most students will say “Up and down!”, “Higher and Lower!” or “Going higher and



lower!”. I explain that I’m showing when the melody is going upwards (moving my hands up, and sliding the pitch of my voice higher as I say it), and the melody going downwards (moving my hands down and sliding the pitch of my voice lower as I say it).

Students were given a frog puppet (a frog die cut attached to a popsicle stick), and I asked them to listen again and use their frog to show when the melody was moving upwards, and when the melody was moving downwards. I used a frog puppet to model how they should use their puppets as I sang the song again. Students then learned the song phrase by phrase by echoing the teacher. We continued to use our puppets during this part of the lesson. If students were struggling with the Spanish lyrics, the students echoed my speaking the lyrics phrase by phrase. Finally, we synthesized our knowledge and sang the song together while moving our puppets to show the melodic direction.

In the following segment of the lesson, small groups of students were assigned pitched percussion instruments to play the ascending and descending lines as they sang them. One group had glockenspiels and the other had five students with one boom whacker each, seated in pitch order (lowest to the students left, like a keyboard). The boom whackers proved too challenging for most classes because of the timing involved. Glockenspiels allowed for more student success and made it easier to assess which students understood how to play ascending and descending melodic lines.

In the end, there were three roles: instrumentalists (glockenspiels), director (pointing to lily pads drawn on the board), and singers/puppeteers. Each group of students was given two repetitions of the song before switching roles. If the singing group grew restless, I would stop, collect the puppets, and show them a game to play

while they were singing. The students would make a line at one end of the carpet and one student at a time would hop across the carpet (like a frog) on the ascending melody line, on the descending melody line, all three students would hop back across the carpet and walk to the end of the line.

Build background knowledge in the second lesson for younger students. Open the second lesson by singing the song as a class. Ask students to recall details about the song, such as: language, country of origin, translation. Questions should be phrased using vocabulary a kindergarten or first grader would understand. Following the questioning, I introduced pictures of Puerto Rico in the form of a Smart Notebook presentation to the students, to help them develop a deeper understanding of the location, geography, climate, and culture of Puerto Rico. I also made sure to include videos (prescreened) of traditional Puerto Rican musical performances. Audio recordings work too, but a video recording allows them to actually see the instruments and performers. Folktales from the same culture as the song being used in class are a fantastic literacy connection. The stories of Juan Bobo (of which there are many different illustrated versions) are a developmentally appropriate folkloric connection to Puerto Rican culture for elementary students. The closing activity should include comparing similarities and differences between cultures, as well as sharing exciting things students have learned about Puerto Rico. The final activity should be performing the song again as a class, and encouraging students to share their new learning with family and friends outside of the elementary music classroom.

**Fourth grade lesson: *N sa ni o***

Fourth and fifth graders have always proven the most challenging to motivate in my teaching experience. When selecting songs foreign language folksongs for upper elementary school students, I look for musical elements that they are naturally interested in such as: rhythmic accompaniments, movements, clapping games. Choosing songs with student interest in mind builds the lesson on intrinsic motivation. Students will actively participate because it involves elements that they find interesting.

While there are many foreign language songs that involve games and rhythmic patterns, some of the more complex and fascinating of that group are African in origin. There are a multitude of resources available on African folksongs. From these resources you can choose a song by geographical region, theme, difficulty level, and even type of song. In my search for a specific song, mentioned in an article on African song in the classroom, I discovered a downloadable copy of *Let Your Voice Be Heard! Songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe*, on the Plank Road Publishing website. The advantages of downloading include: instant access, ability to reprint the material if necessary, and MP3 files of songs already on your device after download. The disadvantages are mainly that you supply the paper, and that printing double sided on most printers is still a bit time consuming.

*Nsa ni o* is an excellent example of a Ghanaian game song, it combines singing, syncopated clapping, and a rhythmic accompaniment on a Ghana double bell. The catchy melody combined with the syncopated clapping pattern seems to create an irresistible challenge for upper elementary level students. Musically speaking, game songs are used to help Ghanaian children practice complex rhythms, usually with syncopation, clapping

or playing one rhythm while singing another (Reynolds, 2005, p.18). These are the exact musical concepts learned and practiced in class using this song. The translation of the lyrics is roughly, “I have turned into a drunk, I will die of too much drinking.” While this may seem an inappropriate concept, many educational programs regarding drug abuse resistance and healthy lifestyle choices, start in elementary school. The students will ask what the words mean and it is important to give them an honest answer. Ask them to think about why a children’s game song might have those lyrics, the answers may be surprising. Clarify that the purpose of the lyrics is to warn children about the dangers of alcohol abuse, not to encourage its consumption.

Begin, as always, with the music. Before modeling the song, I ask students to think about where the song might have originated while I am singing it to them. When I have finished singing the song in its entirety, they may raise their hands to guess the origin of the song. After a few guesses, I tell them where the song is from, and ask for a volunteer to locate it on the map. The geographer uses two pointers to show the class where Ghana is, and our location. This is a good time to go over very basic information about the song such as purpose and translation.

The students learn to pronounce the lyrics appropriately by echoing the teacher speaking the text out of rhythm. Students then echo the teacher speaking the text rhythmically. Students will then echo the clapping pattern after the teacher several times. Students then perform it as the teacher sings the song. Since singing the song and performing the clapping pattern simultaneously are the culmination of this song study,

and the biggest challenge, students will not perform them jointly until the second or third lesson depending on their success level.

Learning the melody is the focus of lesson two. The students must have the words and melody memorized correctly to be able to add the syncopated clapping pattern to their performance. Students echo the melody phrase by phrase as the teacher sings. After going through the entire song twice, sing the entire song together as a class. Once the students are able to sing the melody independently, the teacher may add the syncopated clapping pattern. If that does not go as well as anticipated, have students clap the steady beat while they are singing, as the teacher performs the clapping pattern and sings.

Turn the song in to a game by forming two concentric circles facing each other. This should occur by the end of the second or third lesson. Explain to the students that this time we will clap each other's hands instead of our own hands. Modeling with a student volunteer and comparing it to American clapping games such as "Mary Mack" can help students conceptualize the game. Give students a minute or two to work out the clapping pattern with their partner. While the students are clapping and singing, the teacher sings along and plays the clapping rhythm on claves as a quiet reminder of the rhythm pattern. Students were the most fascinated and self motivated during this portion of the lesson.

Adding instrumental accompaniment on Ghana double bells is the final step. Once the class is confident with singing and clapping different rhythms simultaneously they are ready to learn the first of the two bell patterns. Sing the song while clapping the steady beat. Use visual aid with numbers one through eight and x's above the beat numbers to

represent the rhythm patterns. Using a pointer to follow the beat of rhythm pattern one, ask the students to clap when they see the x. Eventually ask a volunteer (who seems to have a handle on the pattern) to play the pattern on the double bell as the class sings and claps the same pattern. Have the bell player continue as the class sings and switches to the original clapping pattern. Repeat this process with the second bell pattern, until the class is able to sing and clap while the accompaniment is played. This is a significant challenge, even for fifth grade students.

My fourth grade students were able to sing and clap the syncopated rhythm after about two to two and a half lessons. By the time we reached the end of lesson three, I could see that they needed a break from the song. It is better to move on to a different song or musical activity before students disengage. If students are not enjoying it, they most likely are not learning. If it had not been the end of the school year, we would have returned to the song later and added the bell patterns.

Comparing and contrasting using prior knowledge and new knowledge is one of the higher order thinking skills demanded by *Common Core State Standards*. Upper elementary students have the ability to make connections and comparisons between American and Ghanaian culture, and in doing so they meet also meet “9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture” (MENC, 1994) as well as “8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts” (MENC, 1994). A Smart Notebook, Power Point, or Prezi presentation including pictures, videos, and facts about Ghana’s culture builds students’ background knowledge and provides a basis for comparison of American and Ghanaian cultures.

Choosing a song based on students' musical interests created the intrinsic motivation needed for them to rise to the challenge of performing a song with multiple syncopated rhythm patterns played and sung simultaneously. The rhythmic pattern did prove more of a challenge than I had anticipated and in the future I would start this song earlier in the school year, and learn the elements separately adding to the song in between other lessons, rather than trying to master the complete performance in two or three lessons. This also would leave more time to explore the background of the song. Overall, I was pleased with the level of participation my fourth grade students showed while learning *N sa ni o*.

### **Recital selections**

Foreign language songs exist in many genres from rock to hip-hop to pop and beyond. Many people believe that the meaning of the song can be conveyed even if the translation isn't known. Whether or not that is true, the ability to keep an open mind and ear to foreign language music opens cultural doors for people of all ages. Appreciation for foreign language music can lead to greater understanding and relationships between groups of people, as well as a greater understanding of history.

The final portion of my presentation is the result of lifelong appreciation and study in the area of foreign language music. I always loved to sing as a child, and can be found dancing and singing in the background of many of my family's home videos. I was also consistently interested in cultures other than my own, seemingly out of natural curiosity, although I am sure my parents insistence on their children becoming well-rounded individuals was a factor in my multicultural interests. Throughout my

elementary, middle, and high school years, I became progressively more fascinated in learning songs of diverse cultures. Eventually the love of foreign language songs and knowledge of the cultures from which the songs were derived became so closely intertwined that it was hard to tell which interest had preceded the other, or which was more interesting. In high school, I began studying voice outside of school and thus began the transition from singing foreign language folk songs in music class and chorus to classical repertoire in a variety of foreign languages. During my undergraduate studies, I began to select pieces outside of the traditional Italian, French, German, and Latin, and also performed pieces in Spanish and Hebrew. The result of my interest in foreign language songs is that I am still curious about other cultures, and foreign languages. The goal of the *Common Core State Standards* is that students will have significant background knowledge of a variety of world cultures and be able to communicate with people from a variety of backgrounds (NGA&CCSSO, 2010, p. 7). Instilling a life long appreciation of diverse cultures can begin in elementary school with foreign language songs and folk songs and continue throughout a lifetime. To display the musical results of my lifelong appreciation of foreign language songs I will present a recital of five pieces: two German, one French, one Spanish, one Italian, and conclude by teaching the audience one song.

The two German pieces are *Die Mainacht* by Johannes Brahms, and *Seit Ich Ihn Gesehen* by Robert Schumann. Both composers, but especially Brahms, have been known to use folk melodies in their compositions. Both songs have themes transcending the boundaries of time and language. *Die Mainacht* portrays of the joy of love, the pain of its



loss, and hope of its return. *Seit Ich Ihn Gesehen* describes the momentary blindness caused by meeting the love of one's life.

Following this will be a French piece by Georges Bizet, *Ouvre ton Coeur*, illustrating the attempts of a gentleman to woo a young woman. Interestingly, although this piece is in Bizet's native French, the style of the music exhibits his fascination with Spanish music. The following piece, *Del Cabello* by Fernando Obradors, is a Spanish love poem of sorts. Using exquisite metaphors, the gentleman describes his profound longing to be near the woman he loves.

"Stride la vampa" is a dramatic aria from Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. After the merriment of the instantly recognizable "Anvil Chorus", an older gypsy woman, Azucena, approaches the fire. She describes in graphic detail her mother's gruesome death on the day she was burned at the stake. Although this is a fictional work, what is most important about this piece is that the meaning does in fact transcend the language barrier. The combination of the music and the singer's acting, and the appropriately heavy and nearly menacing musical score, convey the message of the song perfectly. Though you may not understand exactly what event Azucena is describing, it is clear that it is something devastatingly horrible that continues to haunt and transfix her.

The final piece will be a foreign language folk song from South Africa, *Nampaya Omame*. I will begin by modeling the song with motions first. I will ask the audience what part of the world the song is from, and what the song is about, based on its sound and the motions. I will answer those questions and provide a bit more background information on the song to the audience. I will teach the audience (or willing volunteers

from the audience) the pronunciation of the Zulu lyrics phrase by phrase. Then I will teach the melody phrase by phrase with motions. The concert will close with a group performance of the song, and closing remarks based upon the conclusion of this paper.

### **Conclusions**

As elementary music educators strive to help students meet *Common Core State Standards* and meet standards on teaching evaluations, music objectives are sometimes marginalized. Foreign language songs and folk songs can be utilized in forming a balanced approach to meeting *Common Core State Standards* and music objectives. Elementary music educators can utilize foreign language songs and folk songs as a foundation on which to build musical knowledge and cultural awareness. In order for students to be intrinsically motivated to learn about another culture, they must first be able to make a meaningful connection. Meaningful learning experiences with foreign language songs and folk songs open the door to world cultures for students by helping them to connect with the cultures they are studying. Connections are made as students discover bits of familiarity in the song they are studying drawing them in and driving them to understand more about the music and the song's culture of origin. Students carry the cultural knowledge they have gained through repeated meaningful learning experiences with them throughout their lifetime, thus creating the college and career ready students described by the *Common Core State Standards*.

Foreign language songs can assist music educators and their students in meeting both the *Common Core Standards* and *National Standards for Music Education*. More importantly, they help students and teachers connect with each other in their music

classrooms. Above all, they give students the key to understanding perspectives and cultures other than their own. As elementary students grow, frequent meaningful learning experiences, in which they explore and connect with other cultures, open their mind to new cultures and ideas. It is hoped that this study will encourage elementary music educators to utilize foreign language folk songs in their classrooms to meet *Common Core State Standards*, and provide a guide to creating meaningful musical and cultural learning experiences for their students.

## References

- Abril, C.R. (2003). No hablo Inglés: Breaking the language barrier in music instruction. *Music Educators Journal*, 89 (38). doi:10.2307/3399918
- Adzenyah, A.K., Dumisani, M., & Tucker, J.C. (1997). *Let your voice be heard! Songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe(Rev.ed.)*. Wauwatosa, WI: World Music Press.
- Blair, D.V., & Kondo, S. (2008). Bridging musical understanding through multicultural musics. *Music Educators Journal*, 94 (50). doi: 10.1177/00274321080940050111
- Bond, J. et. al. (2008). *Spotlight on music: Grade one (teacher ed.)*. New York: McMillan/McGraw-Hill.
- Bowman, B. G. (2008). Korean folk music in your curriculum. *Music Educators Journal*, 95(1), 48-53. doi:10.1177/0027432108321189
- Campbell, P.S., & C. Scott-Kassner (2002). *Music in childhood: from preschool through the elementary grades (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Schirmer, Thomson Learning, Wadsworth Group.
- Costigan, L., & Neuenfeldt, K. (2011). Kapua Gutchen: Educator, mentor and innovator of Torres Strait islander music, dance and language at Erub (Darnley Island), Torres Strait. *Australian Journal Of Music Education*, (2), 3-10.
- Fitzpatrick, K. R. (2012). Cultural diversity and the formation of identity: Our role as music teachers. *Music Educators Journal*, 98 (53). doi: 10.1177/0027432112442903

- Folk music. (2001). In D.M. Randel (Ed.), *The new Harvard dictionary of music* (Rev. 2nd ed., pp. 315-319). Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Goetze, M. (2000). 87(23). Challenges of performing diverse cultural music: Although many ensembles perform multicultural music according to the western musical, there are ways to achieve multicultural performances on their own terms. *Music Educators Journal*, 87 (23). doi: 10.2307/3399673
- Hoffman, A. R. (2012). Performing our world: Affirming cultural diversity through music education. *Music Educators Journal*, 98 (61). doi: 10.1177/0027432112443262
- Kassner, K. (2002). Motivation and management (chapter 3). In Campbell, P. S. & Scott-Kassner, C., *Music in childhood: from preschool through the elementary grades* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 45-69). Belmont, CA: Schirmer, Thompson Learning, Wadsworth Group.
- Keskin, F. (2011). Using songs as audio materials in teaching Turkish as a foreign language. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology - TOJET*, 10(4), 378-383. Retrieved from <http://www.tojet.net/>
- Kramer, D. (2001). A blueprint for teaching foreign languages and cultures through music in the classroom and on the web. *ADFL Bulletin*, 33(1), 29-35. Retrieved from EBSCOhost

- Lasonen, J. (2010). Internationalization of higher education: A case study on college music teachers' intercultural expertise. *International Education, 40*(1), 39-54.  
Retrieved from: [http://cehhs.utk.edu/publications/IE/general\\_information.html](http://cehhs.utk.edu/publications/IE/general_information.html)
- Legg, R. (2009). Using music to accelerate language learning: An experimental study. *Research in Education, 82*(1), 1-12.
- Macias, E. (2008). *Music and songs in the classroom: Techniques to aid the language learning process.*
- Mora, C. F. (2000) Foreign language acquisition and melody singing. *ELT Journal, 54*(2), 147-60.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA), & Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2010). *Common core state standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.*  
Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/thestandards>
- North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE), & McRel (2012). *North Carolina teacher evaluation process* (Rev. ed.). Retrieved from  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/effectiveness-model/ncees/instruments/teach-eval-manual.pdf>
- Ogawa, Y., & Yoshitomi, K. (1999). Preference for bouncing rhythm in Japanese folk songs by young generation. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education, (141)*, 124-28. Retrieved from  
<http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/bcrme.html>

- Oliveira, A. (1997). A frequency count of music elements in Bahian folk songs using computer and hand analysis: Suggestions for Applications in Music Education. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, (133), 105-109.
- Pascale, L. M. (2008). *Children's songs from Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.
- Pascale, L. M. (2011). Sharing songs: a powerful tool for teaching tolerance and honoring culture. *General Music Today*, 25(1), 4-7. doi:10.1177/1048371310393504
- Public Schools of North Carolina: State Board of Education & Department of Public Instruction (2012). *Education first: NC school report cards*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>
- Reynolds, G. (2005). Ghanaian folk songs: training ground for music and social skill development. *General Music Today*, 19(1), 17-21. doi:10.1177/10483713050190010  
105
- Sakai, W. (2011). Music preferences and family language background: A computer-supported study of children's listening behavior in the context of migration. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 59(2), 174-195. Retrieved from <http://jrm.sagepub.com/>
- Speh, A. J., & Ahrahmjian, S. D. (2009). Teaching without a common language: Synchronicities between the pedagogies of music and second language acquisition. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University Of Brasov, Series VIII: Art & Sport*, 2(51), 53-58. Retrieved from <http://webbut.unitbv.ro/bulletin/Series%20VIII/Series%20VIII.html>

Trinick, R. (2012). Sound and sight: The use of song to promote language learning.

*General Music Today*, 25(2), 5-10.

Volk, T. M. (2006). An application of Thai music for general and instrumental music

programs. *International Journal of Music Education*, 24(3), 243-254. doi:10.11

77/0255761406069660