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by Karen Howard

Equity in Music Education

Cultural Appropriation Versus Cultural Appreciation—Understanding the Difference

Abstract: To avoid cultural appropriation, music educators need to take the time to explore the source culture and approach the traditions of others in a respectful manner so the people and musics studied are neither demeaned nor exploited. Students can be part of this exploration and share what they learn from their research with the class.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, culture, intellectual property, musics, research, respect

How can you share a wide variety of music and cultures with your students in a manner that respects and honors these traditions?



Photo of Karen Howard courtesy of author

A familiar scene is repeating itself in numerous school music settings. We might see a choir director who is uncertain how to prepare a meaningful discussion with his singers about the history related to the African American spiritual they will begin learning next month. It could also show an elementary music teacher wanting to include songs related to the Mexican holiday Día de los Muertos, but she feels that she does not have the time to learn about the holiday with all the other demands put on her schedule. Next up might be a middle school orchestra teacher wishing to include a melody from the Native American community in his region, wondering what steps to take to receive permission before proceeding. These situations depict music educators attempting to work with diverse musics representing a wide range of cultures without engaging in cultural appropriation.

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The term *cultural appropriation* as it applies to music education is frequently misunderstood due to the complexity of having open discussions addressing culture, race, privilege, and power. It is easy to feel uncertain about whether one is engaging in appropriative pedagogy when presenting diverse musics or attempting to celebrate cultures. The purpose of this article is to offer a clear definition of cultural appropriation in order to recognize it, understand it, prevent further misunderstanding of it, and develop strategies that instead work toward cultural appreciation in music education.

To better understand pedagogical practices that do not engage in cultural appropriation, it is helpful to have a clear definition of both *culture* and *appropriate*. Two working definitions of culture as it relates to music education are

1. the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.
2. the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends on the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.¹

The term *appropriate* as an adjective means “suitable or proper in the circumstances,”² with synonyms such as *fitting*, *apt*, or *right*. When we change *appropriate* to a verb, it means “to take (something) for one’s own use, typically without the owner’s permission,”³ and has synonyms such as *seize*, *commandeer*, *annex*, or *hijack*. When the two terms are put together, cultural appropriation is defined as

- taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission.
- harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive.⁴

Unpacking cultural appropriation is not a matter of telling music teachers

what music to listen to, program, perform, or represent. It is a matter of helping music teachers consider that we do not teach and learn music in a vacuum and that there are many social and historical implications to teaching and learning music from marginalized cultures. Cultural appropriation can be taken personally by those whose culture and history are trivialized or overlooked. This can cause harm to members of a community, and it can model oppressive behavior and a lack of respect. Disrespect can lead to social bias that includes

- Prejudice—an attitude about another person or group of people based on stereotypes;
- Discrimination—an action or behavior based on prejudice;
- Racism—the systemic conditions that provide some people more consistent and easier access to opportunities based on race or ethnicity.⁵

In terms of music education, cultural appropriation usually refers to the taking of non-Western and nonwhite genres and performance practices and carries connotations of dominance and exploitation. In the United States, cultural appropriation most often happens across racial lines. For music educators, this typically features white teachers using elements of a marginalized culture without demonstrating an understanding of the historically and emotionally significant elements of the music culture.

N. Bruce Duthu, a member of the United Houma Nation of Louisiana and the chair of the Native American Studies Program at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, described the harm caused by culturally appropriating from historically marginalized Native American culture “as if it’s part of the public domain, as if one can simply go into this reservoir of stereotypical images and draw from it without any kind of limitation or concern. When lands have been lost and cultures have been decimated, one of the last things left to be appropriated from Native cultures is their very dignity. It reflects our historical amnesia.”⁶

To dismantle cultural appropriation, we first need to recognize it. Students in music class as early as elementary school are able to grapple with the complexity surrounding appropriation.⁷ They are able and eager to engage in meaningful and at times difficult conversations regarding particular music genres. A 2018 study described a class of fifth-grade students and their teacher exploring the complicated status of Puerto Rico while learning about *plena* music.⁸ After singing a song that seemed on the surface to be simply about a flag, they engaged in discussion about the importance of the song and the fact that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens but with different rights than the students’ parents enjoyed, such as not being allowed to vote in presidential elections. They learned of the history and the people for whom the song was created. The students came to know the deep symbolism of the song rather than only engaging with the sonic features.

Sometimes, the situation is more complex, such as the choir director looking for meaningful ways to engage in discussion about spirituals. The sensitivity surrounding the teaching of a spiritual differs depending on the race of the music teacher. This may sound provocative, but it is an unavoidable reality. An African American music teacher whose ancestors were enslaved has a different connection to spirituals than that of white music teachers. This racial dynamic causes tension, but that should not deter us from engaging in difficult conversations with our fellow educators and students. This tension is a call to action requiring that we as music teachers grow our understanding and respect for the people and histories of the music we share.

Viewing the performance of a spiritual as a form of flattery or solely as homage to a great musical art form is based on the misconception that race relations exist on a level playing field. There cannot be an equal and free flow of practices as long as the group in power in music education (white people) maintains power and privilege over another group. It is imperative that in a

field consisting of approximately 90 percent white teachers⁹ that a better understanding is developed of the roles that cultural appropriation and social bias play in music education.

Creating learning environments that examine sensitive topics like appropriation might reveal what at first appears to be blatant discriminatory practices between culture groups. Through facilitated discussions, it may be possible to discover a complex socio-musical process involving competent recreation of musical practices and a global musical cultural flow between cultures. Teachers and students can piece together questions of ownership, the realities of wandering tunes, “borrowed” songs, and music that has indeed been appropriated. Bringing forward the sociocultural and sociohistorical meanings of the music creates fertile ground for provocative discussion of just such musical traffic between different cultures.¹⁰

Engendering Cultural Appreciation

One of the many responsibilities of a music teacher is to navigate cultural traditions without crossing a line into an experience that can be viewed as exploitative or unaware of the source culture. Intentionally designed teaching and learning experiences coupled with reflective practice for the teacher and students can help illuminate a path through this complicated territory. Music educators can engage students with performance and a knowing of the people behind the music, what the music means, and how it functions.¹¹ Students can demonstrate a multicultural sensitivity toward others in response to thoughts and emotions that are provoked through their musical experiences. Multicultural sensitivity is defined as the “desire or motivation to understand, appreciate, and accept the differences between diverse cultures.”¹¹ Students may also express discomfort over the power that some groups hold

Sidebar 1: Checklist for Repertoire Selection

- What is the plan for teaching/performing music from this particular culture? If it is selected because it fills certain objectives related to notation literacy or the feel of it fits a programming need, it is beneficial to take the time to study the background of the piece, the composer, and the culture. Finding the story can be a process of discovery with the students.
- Is there an opportunity to work with/speak to an expert in particular cultural traditions who can advise and work with both the teacher and students? This may be a person from the culture in question or a community artist-educator that has expertise in the artistic traditions of the area. They might visit in person or via a video call.
- Does the music teacher model for the students that the culture of origin is understood and respected? By modeling curiosity about cultures, it demonstrates that these traditions are worthy of space and time in the curriculum.
- Can students demonstrate what they understand about the culture of origin and the process of musical traditions moving in and out of a culture? Are students allowed a chance to express what they have learned, perhaps including what they used to think and what they now understand after engaging with the music?
- How might someone from the culture feel about the representation of and pedagogical approach to the music?

over others whether through music, education, or politics.

There is no one-size-fits-all for working ethically with music from cultures that have experienced marginalization and oppression. Each music culture has its own history and performance practices. To work toward cultural *appreciation*, the checklist in Sidebar 1 is offered as a starting point for teachers keen on creating learning experiences that engage diverse musics and cultures in a respectful manner.

NOTES

1. “Culture,” defined in the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>.
2. “Appropriate” (adjective), defined in *Merriam-Webster Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/appropriate>.
3. “Appropriate” (verb), defined in *Merriam-Webster Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/appropriate>.
4. Susan Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
5. Johann LeRoux, “Social Dynamics of the Multicultural Classroom,” *Intercultural Education* 12, no. 3 (2001): 273–88.
6. <http://flavorwire.com/344807/what-a-native-american-expert-thinks-about-that-controversial-no-doubt-music-video>
7. Karen Howard, “The Emergence of Children’s Multicultural Sensitivity: An Elementary School Music Culture Project,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 66, no. 3 (2018): 261–77; Félix Neto, Maria da Conceição Pinto, and Etienne Mullet, “Can Music Reduce Anti-Dark-Skin Prejudice? A Test of a Cross-Cultural Musical Education Programme,” *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 3 (2015): 388–98.
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9. National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2017* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144>
10. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, “Introduction: On Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music,” *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. G. Born and D. Hesmondhalgh (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 1–58.
11. Howard, “Emergence of Children’s Multicultural Sensitivity.”