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# Teaching Musical Skills in the Co-Curricular Elementary Classroom

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# Teaching Musical Skills in the Co-Curricular Elementary Classroom

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**research article**

## **Teaching Musical Skills in the Co-Curricular Elementary Classroom**

—**Jessica West**

In co-curricular teaching, a popular technique in the modern classroom, teachers of several subjects focus learning activities on a common theme. The challenge for these teachers is to convey information from their subject area and, at the same time, information about the common theme. Since multiculturalism is increasingly emphasized in school curricula, this common theme is often a foreign culture. For an elementary music teacher, this means finding musical materials, developmentally appropriate to the students, which also explore the role of music in the chosen culture.

### **Finding the Music**

Can a music teacher easily find songs and chants that contain information to help students develop musically and find information to teach students about another culture? That is the question I set out to answer by designing my research project to reflect a situation common to elementary music educators. In this scenario, an elementary classroom teacher decides to teach a co-curricular unit centered on a certain country, such as Ghana. S/he asks the music teacher to come up with music that relates to life in Ghana, so the students can better understand and appreciate the culture. Meanwhile, the music teacher wishes to teach appropriate musical skills and needs music containing certain musical elements. Can the music teacher find adequate musical material to accomplish both sets of goals?

To make my project realistic, I used the Fenwick Music Library at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. This modest-sized library is open to the public, and is therefore representative of what most music educators could expect to find in a local music library. I first spent time surveying the amount of music, both written and recorded, available for various countries and cultures. I then chose countries and cultures that had a good amount of recorded material.

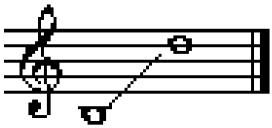
To narrow the list further, I selected countries and cultures that employed traditional Western music, more familiar to American music teachers than Eastern music. Teachers who have experienced nothing but Western music would most likely have difficulties reproducing Eastern notes, melodies, and rhythms. Since live music is extremely important because it allows teachers to interact with students and the musical elements, I restricted my search to Western music. My final list comprised 3 cultural units and 5 separate countries or cultures: a Pacific rim unit of Japan, India, Indonesia and Bali; a Spanish unit of Spain and Mexico; an Andes unit of Peru, Ecuador and Columbia; and Ghana, Uganda, Romania, Ireland and Native America.

## Musical Criteria

Once I found the countries and their music, I turned to musical criteria for selecting the songs and chants I would use. My first concern was to find music developmentally appropriate to the age range I was interested in, kindergarten through fourth grade. “Developmentally appropriate” refers to information and skills suited to the age and developmental level of the students. For example, you would not expect a first grader to learn algebraic functions before mastering the concepts of addition and subtraction. Similarly, music has certain information and skills that should be learned in a certain order, especially at the elementary level.

The prime time for musical learning through exposure happens from birth to age 9. At age 9, musical aptitude levels stabilize and cannot be pushed higher even through further study (1, 2). Unfortunately, the time from birth until entrance into elementary school has become less and less musical in American culture. Many students in kindergarten and first grade have never heard an adult sing *live and in person!* Because of the lack of early exposure, music educators are working with students already behind in their music learning abilities. Therefore, songs and chants containing good, appropriate musical information are a must in the elementary music classroom.

The next consideration for choosing any song was its range of notes, that is, the distance between the highest and lowest note in the song. Children need to develop their vocal range naturally. Certain song ranges are healthy for children, while others may strain their voices. I used the range requirements for the average second-grader as a guideline. I chose the second grade range because it is towards the middle of the kindergarten to grade four age group. Younger voices may only be capable of a slightly smaller range, and older voices a slightly larger range, but the range shown in Figure 1 could certainly be considered safe for the average elementary school child.



**Figure 1:** Musical range of the average second-grader after teacher-led warm-ups. The range is made up of the highest and lowest notes a child can safely sing (3).

I also looked for songs in which the majority of notes fell in the middle of the student’s range and could be most comfortably sung. This grouping of notes in a song is its *tessitura*, which is smaller than its range. Therefore, I made sure the songs I chose had the tessitura shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Musical tessitura for the average second-grader (3).

Another factor to be considered in keeping children’s voices healthy is to choose songs and chants not requiring specialized vocal techniques. Some cultures use a certain tone or extra, quick notes to ornament the basic melodies. If these ornaments were central to the melody or rhythm, I chose not to use the song. The ornaments normally found in Eastern music would be difficult for a Western-trained teacher to accurately reproduce. If they are taught or performed incorrectly, many of these specialized techniques can hurt the voice. Unless the teacher is well-trained in the technique, using it in the classroom could be very dangerous to the children’s voices.

The length of the songs and chants also had to be considered when choosing appropriate music. Elementary students should learn songs and chants by rote and be able to memorize them. Reading musical notes or lyrics will only take their attention away from proper vocal and musical technique. I chose songs and chants I felt were long enough to contain good musical information but short enough to memorize.

## **Cultural Criteria**

In order for the songs and chants to be useful in co-curricular activities, I included cultural criteria in my search. All cultures have music in some form and often use it for similar purposes. Songs and chants for co-curricular units should, therefore, contain cultural material either in the lyrics or in background information about ceremonies that accompany the music or about the music's origins. Reviewing the songs and chants I found, I looked for those associated with daily rituals, work or school, seasonal ceremonies, and historical events. These categories, which I termed "universal themes," transcend cultural boundaries and can be related to by any group of peoples.

Working with these criteria, I found up to five songs and chants for each culture that contained both musical and cultural information. The final list comprised twenty-eight songs and four chants, listed by country or culture. I then sorted the songs and chants into groups according to their universal theme, or typical cultural use of that music. The nine groups I defined were Lullabies and Cradle Songs, Games and School Songs, Family Songs and Street Ballads, Dances, Songs of Emotion, Work Songs, Religious Songs and Observed Celebrations, Court and Orchestral Music, and Historical Events. For each song and chant, I wrote a few sentences preceding the musical notation giving the cultural background of the piece. That fulfilled the cultural portion of my project, namely finding songs and chants that could be used to introduce children to other cultures. To complete the musical portion of my project, I had to be sure the materials provided a mixture of musical elements. The two main elements music educators are concerned with are tonality and meter. Tonality is a complex term made up of many musical aspects, such as the type of scale used. Suffice it to say that most American folk songs are in what is called a major tonality. The well known "Yankee Doodle" is an example. Meter refers to the musical pulse, or beat, which underlies the rhythm of a piece. The prevailing meter in folk songs is duple meter, that is, two pulses or beats to a measure. "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is an example of a folk song in duple meter.

Most of the songs and chants children hear at home before (and often while) they attend elementary school are in major tonality and duple meter. However, these are by no means the only or most important tonality and meter. That is why it is extremely important to expose children to different tonalities and meters. Research shows that students exposed to different tonalities and meters will become more comfortable with a wide range of musical elements and thus increase their musical aptitudes (1, 2). Because aptitude stabilizes at age 9, it was an important part of my project goal to have songs using a variety of tonalities and meters. To this end, I created an index in which the chosen songs were listed by tonality, and both songs and chants were listed by meter. I included this information in subheadings so the music educator could tell, at a glance, the tonality and meter of each song and chant. That way, a music teacher looking up music for Ghana would know immediately the basic musical structure of the song or chant and could choose the best one for a particular class, depending on their musical development.

## **Results**

The final product for each song and chant was a section containing the title of the piece, a couple sentences about its cultural significance, the culture the piece belongs to, its tonality (if a song) and meter, and, finally, the musical notation itself. Figure 3 is an example from the catalogue I created.

**Figure 3:** *A chant from Ghana*

“Agbekor Song”; Meter: Mixed; Chant; Universal Theme: Historical Events

The Agbekor songs were created by the Ewe tribe of Ghana to prepare for battle. The lyrics glorify warriors and their past victories. Modern times have turned these battle songs into recreational music performed by highly skilled groups. This rhythm is from a song originally used to tell households to prepare for the Agbekor procession.



(4)

The end result of my project was a portfolio of music grouped by culture and by universal theme, and indexed by tonality and meter. The implications of such a catalogue are numerous. Using public musical sources, such as a library, music educators can gather songs and chants for use in co-curricular activities without sacrificing the musical elements necessary to the music curriculum. Teachers who do not participate in co-curricular activities could also benefit from such a portfolio because it adds a dimension of diversity to the music classroom. In a world where it is becoming more and more important to relate to peoples of different countries, the music classroom could become a place where students are introduced to new cultures through the exciting medium of music. As my experience has shown, the diversification of music education can be done without sacrificing musical integrity.

*Many thanks go to Alan Karass, the head librarian at the Fenwick Music Library at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, for all of his help in gathering research materials. I received many valuable insights about multicultural music while working with him at the library. I would also like to thank Dr. Susan Hatfield, my mentor and music education professor at UNH. My research has been shaped greatly by her interest in music learning theory, and I am lucky to have the chance to work with a person so passionate about her subject.*

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### **Author Bio**

*Jessica West says that her research project opened her eyes and ears to how fascinating music from other parts of the world can be. Jessica, a Leicester, Massachusetts native, graduates in May with a degree in Music Education.*

*In a course on teaching music at the elementary level, Jessica learned about Music Learning Theory, which had a profound effect on the shaping of [her] research and understanding of music learning. A Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship grant in 2004 allowed her to apply this theory to her research. Although she had an immense amount of material to sift through, which become tedious at times, she found the research process incredibly rewarding.*

*Jessica's life goal is to be an elementary music teacher at the forefront of music learning research. She states, "This project has shown me that music can effectively be used as a co-curricular tool," further revealing that, through music, children can gain a better understanding and acceptance of diversity.*

### **Mentor Bio**

*Jessica was inspired and assisted in her research by her mentor, Instructor of Music Susan S. Hatfield. Hatfield teaches for both the education and music departments at the University of New Hampshire. She specializes in Music Learning Theory and Research. Hatfield found Jessica to be an independent and thorough thinker, and was pleased with her topic of music in co-curricular activities. Hatfield states, "The problem is universal to our field, and Jessica's findings offer practical, meaningful solutions for elementary music teachers and their students."*

*Hatfield added that Jessica's editorial work with Inquiry editors has been invaluable, stating that, "Because Jessica's topic is familiar to me but not to those with whom she has been revising her article, [Inquiry's] suggestions for defining vocabulary and concepts for a potentially non-music education audience have been necessarily eye-opening for both Jessica and me."*

*Hatfield's work with Jessica was her first mentoring experience. Since then, two other students have asked her to mentor their research projects.*