WHY TEACH CANADIAN MUSIC?

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I recently asked selected elementary and secondary school music teachers from across Canada why they chose to include Canadian music in their curricula. I received a variety of interesting responses.

Most of the teachers mentioned the importance of making students aware of Canadian culture and of their Canadian cultural heritage. For example, a high school teacher wrote: "I have used Canadian pieces to develop a sense of ownership, a sense of belonging to a tradition, a pride in sharing a common land, history and stories, moods, heroes. Including material of one's homeland deepens a sense of self and how one fits into the picture." An elementary teacher, herself a recent immigrant to Canada, indicated that she teaches Canadian music "because we are Canadian. Students need to understand the 'main-stream' society, their culture and the place where they live." Another elementary teacher, also a recent immigrant, reported: "I believe Canadian music should be an integral part of Canadian music programmes. We value all other cultures here and we need to learn to appreciate our own." A secondary school band teacher wrote: "It is important for students to have an understanding of Canadian heritage and to understand the role that music has played in Canada, as well as in other cultures/countries."

An elementary teacher working in an inner city school reported that she is especially interested in finding native Canadian materials since her school includes a high proportion of aboriginal students. However, she has concerns about finding suitable aboriginal music for school use, given her own lack of background and experience with such music. Whenever possible, she brings native performing groups to the school, and an aboriginal elder has presented a session on native music for the students. She stresses that context and sharing are important considerations with native music, and she is sensitive to the ceremonial nature of much aboriginal music. She is concerned that native knowledge is being lost in the urban environment.

Linked with the general need to make students aware of Canadian culture was an awareness among teachers of the importance of supporting Canadian composers. For example, an elementary teacher wrote: "As a Canadian, I think it is vital to sing the repertoire that represents our incredible heritage in Canada. For our heritage to flourish and continue for future generations, we must support, encourage and pass on the music written by Canadian composers. Our children should be proud of and experience our living heritage in Canada." A high school band teacher wrote: "I want to support Canadian composers. If educators don't, then our students will never be exposed to 'serious' Canadian music. They will always identify Canadian music with the 'pop stars'." A grade seven and eight band teacher reported: "I include Canadian music in my program because it is important to support Canadian musicians, writers, publishers, etc. and because it is important for students to be aware of Canadian artists (especially in their own musical culture, i.e., popular music)."

Several teachers mentioned the importance of supporting local composers and of making students aware that there are composers active in their own communities. For example, an elementary music specialist reported that she intentionally teaches the music of local composers, because there may be opportunities for her students to meet these composers. She feels it is important for students to realize that some composers are alive and active in
communities, and to be aware that some people have careers as composers. Some children
might decide to follow this career path. A Toronto area high school teacher wrote: "I think a
sense of community is important and I introduce my kids to the music of Toronto for this
purpose. I guess working as a musician for 15 years in Toronto has made me very grateful
for what we have right here, which is some of the finest music and musicians anywhere. I
bring Toronto musicians into my school. We listen to their music and we play some of the
music of Toronto musicians."

Several teachers mentioned that studying the music of Canadian composers helps to
encourage students in their own creative work. An elementary teacher reported that her
students do their own composing and arranging. The study of Canadian composers helps
validate what the students do. They can feel the excitement and passion of living
composers. A high school instrumental teacher reported that she likes "to showcase a
student's composition" as part of the music program.

A number of the teachers indicated that they teach Canadian music because of its high
quality. For example, an experienced high school choral specialist reported teaching
Canadian music because "it's good. (Quality of the repertoire is important.)"

Several teachers simply indicated that they teach Canadian music because they and their
students enjoy it. For example, a high school band teacher wrote: "Our music is distinctive.
I like it," while a secondary school choral teacher reported: "The students enjoy it and make
a connection to it."

A recent graduate, in her first year of teaching at the high school level, reported that she
includes Canadian music "to extend the variety of music which students should be exposed
to in a multicultural society."

Only two respondents mentioned administrative reasons for teaching Canadian music. One
teacher noted that "Administration usually like to see some Canadian content," while
another teacher stated: "The Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines require us to look at
different cultures, especially Canadian music."

Music teachers make important decisions about curricular content, decisions reflecting their
own values and interests. I am grateful to the responding teachers for providing
information about factors influencing their decisions. I would be interested to hear from
readers of this column about their own choices concerning the inclusion of Canadian music
in their curricula. Please contact me by email (p.shand@utoronto.ca).