TEACHING CANADIAN MUSIC

Patricia Shand

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My fall 2002 column reported elementary and secondary school music teachers’ answers to the question: “Why do you include Canadian music in your curriculum?” Because I am interested in hearing the personal experiences of teachers, and interested also in sharing those ideas and reactions with other teachers, I encouraged readers to contact me with their stories. I was very pleased to receive several emails following the publication of that column. I am grateful to the two teachers whose comments I quote below, with their permission.

The first teacher described her use of Canadian music within the context of a French school. “I recently read your very interesting article on teaching Canadian music in schools. You asked for other teachers’ input on the matter. My situation is different from the ones described in your article. I am a French teacher in a French school in Toronto. I teach a 2-3 split grade, and direct a school choir. The challenge of teaching in a French school in a minority environment is such that any cultural element you can add is crucial. The children almost only listen to English radio and watch English media outside of the school environment. It is therefore extremely important to let the children be exposed to French music and songs in the school to show them that French is not only a language of studies, but also of living. I teach them traditional French Canadian folk songs, as well as songs of living singers, such as Angele Arsenault, who herself was born in a minority French environment in P.E.I. The children love being in the choir, and enjoy the experience of singing. Parents have told me that their kids come home the afternoon after choir rehearsal singing them the new songs they have learned. What better sign that I am having an effect on those young kids’ lives, one that I hope will encourage them to explore the French culture after their studies are over.”

The second teacher works at the elementary school level in Ontario. “I couldn't get to my computer fast enough after I read your article in The Canadian Music Educator. I am a new teacher (although not a young teacher!). The first class I taught, three years ago, was a Grade 5 music class, and this assignment came to me on the heels of my own completion of a History of Canadian Music course at Wilfrid Laurier. I was dizzy with the richness of our music, and wanted to share it with my 9 and 10-year olds. I could hear R. Murray Schafer’s stinging words leap off the pages of various journal articles -- Canadians do a lousy job of supporting Canadian music and Canadian musicians, and therefore do a lousy job of encouraging the growth of Canadian culture (I paraphrase, but that was certainly the tone of his invective, and I took him seriously).” She describes a summer of listening to a variety of Canadian compositions, including some by John Weinzweig, in preparation for her first year of teaching. “I practically wore out a videotape borrowed from the London Public Library entitled Weinzweig's World, which includes the live performance of the composer’s choral piece Hockey Night in Canada. My kids loved it, I loved it, my husband loved it, and I knew that I had the perfect introductory composition for my Grade 5 class of budding music appreciators. We worked our way up to the video in all the usual ways, with sessions of listening to and identifying orchestral instruments, constructing orchestra seating plan options, working on key signatures and correct note placement, singing regularly....until the magical day when I introduced to them the grand patriarch of
Canadian composition, Dr. John Weinzweig. I don't know that they appreciated the subtleties of the harmonies, but they sure understood his wit and love of the game. After one viewing, they wanted more, and they were hooked, committed Weinzweig fans. There was no question about it -- we crafted considered, reflective comments and mailed these to the composer, and in due time, we were rewarded with a glossy, 8 x 10 photo and a personal letter typed by the octogenarian on a manual typewriter. It was a music unit I'll never forget.”

Although she is not currently teaching a music class, she includes Canadian music in her Social Studies curriculum. “I have recently settled on An Ojibway Lullaby, representative of the Algonquin nation, and one of my favourites, An Iroquois Lullaby (Ho, Ho, Watanay), both contained in Volume I of Reflections of Canada, 1 45 two-part arrangements of Canadian folk songs by Bray, Telfer and Wuensch, to enrich my Grade 6 First Nations Unit. Class research times were enhanced by the playing of First Nations artist Jerry Alfred's CD Jerry Alfred and the Medicine Beat as background music.”

Why does she teach Canadian music? “As you report in your article, I too am a teacher who shares Canadian music when I get the chance because I enjoy it. I get such enjoyment because the music is good, and makes me proud all over again to be a Canadian. I thank you for the chance to reflect once again on the benefits of introducing students to Canadian music.”

I would welcome comments about teaching Canadian music from other readers of this column. Please contact me by email (p.shand@utoronto.ca).

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1 Published in 1985 by Frederick Harris Music Co.