An American colleague recently asked me, “What is Canadian music?” Beyond responding that it is music written by Canadians, I had no easy answer to her question. Canadian music, like the Canadian population, is remarkably diverse.

As part of my on-going research on Canadian music in education, I recently asked elementary and secondary school music teachers from across Canada to describe important characteristics of Canadian music. I received a variety of interesting responses, which can be grouped under the following headings.

1. **Variety, diversity**

   One teacher commented: “A defining characteristic of Canadian music is its diversity! We are a mosaic and represent a multitude of music. Quebec seems to have a fairly distinct kind of music as do the Maritimes, but all of this music is connected to other cultures — the lines are blurred.” This teacher considered it “important to seek out an understanding of how this music represents the people and place from which it comes.” Another teacher responded: “I would say one defining characteristic of Canadian music is that it is very multicultural, encompassing such a broad range of traditions and practices it is almost impossible to ‘define’ Canadian music as such.” A third teacher replied: “We have a rich and diverse culture, and music is part of it.” She described Canadian music as reflecting not only the English and French original settlers, “but also representations of the newcomers.”

2. **Regional variety**

   One teacher commented on regional diversity: “Each part of the country is reflected in music from that part (e.g., folksongs of Newfoundland, Celtic influence in Maritimes, etc.).”

3. **Reference to and influence of Canadian folk music**

   One teacher commented on “folk songs (French and English) that are representative of different provinces or ‘chunks’ of Canada. This would also refer to non-vocal music, such as fiddling that is typical of the Maritimes (Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, among others). ‘Spoon’ and ‘Washboard’ playing is often associated with Quebec, to name just a few examples.” Other teachers commented on the rich repertoire of folk music in Canada, reflecting the multicultural nature of our population, and noted that many Canadian composers draw on folk materials.

4. **Reference to Canadian landscape and geography**

   Several teachers mentioned examples of geographical inspiration and references in Canadian compositions. (e.g., “Titles of works that may suggest the Canadian landscape.”)
5. Challenging contemporary stylistic features

One teacher commented: “Because they are mostly 20th century works, Canadian compositions are often rhythmically very challenging for the students.” Another teacher described Canadian music as being “modern,” “flexible,” and “experimental in terms of orchestration and technique, opening up greater variety for musicians at all ages and abilities.”

6. Innovative

A high school teacher commented: “For ‘popular’ styles of music, I think of innovative guitar stylings (e.g., Tragically Hip, Spirit of the West) and virtuosic vocals (e.g., Sarah McLachlan).”

7. High quality

A junior high school teacher described Canadian music this way: “Usually quality is excellent (perhaps because we’ve had to prove ourselves).”

The question of quality is, I believe, very important. When selecting music from any country, teachers should seek repertoire which is well crafted, musically interesting, technically at an appropriate level for student performers, and pedagogically valuable.

There is a wide variety of Canadian music from which teachers can select suitable compositions for their students to listen to and perform. Through the use of this repertoire, teachers can help their students to understand and appreciate the rich diversity of Canada’s music.

I am grateful to the teachers who responded to my questions. I would welcome comments about Canadian music from readers of this column. Please contact me by email (p.shand@utoronto.ca).