Canadian Music:

The World’s Music in Microcosm

Canada was colonized by the French and British, and even today French and British influences remain strong in Canada, representing the predominant colours in the Canadian mosaic. Yet waves of immigrants from all parts of the world have come to Canada, and those immigrants have brought with them their cultural heritages. As a result of immigration, the Canadian mosaic has become and is becoming increasingly complex and varied, and Canadian music now represents, in a very real sense, the world’s music in microcosm.

The music which Canadian children hear in their homes, community centres, and churches, and the music being composed in Canada, grows out of the varying ethnic backgrounds of Canada's people. Music educators have a responsibility to help their students understand and appreciate the rich diversity of Canada’s music.

The teacher seeking to include Canadian music in a program of study, may well choose to begin with Canadian folk music. He or she will quickly discover that the currently available collections of Canadian folk songs focus on the heritage of Canada's two founding peoples, the French and the British. There are abundant examples of fine folk songs, particularly from Quebec and the Maritimes, which have grown out of our French and British heritages. There are also many Canadian compositions which have been based on this folk material, and these compositions can provide challenging material for performing and listening. But the teacher should seek additional repertoire growing out of the heritages of other ethnic groups which make up the Canadian population. For example, the music of the aboriginal people of Canada — the native Indians and Inuit — should not be ignored. Teachers should be aware that some Indian and Inuit songs have begun to appear in Canadian music education texts and some Canadian compositions have been based on or inspired by native music. Teachers should also be aware of the richly varied ethnic make-up of their communities, and should seek ways of including in their music programs examples of the music of the various ethnocultural groups found in Canada.

The teacher must, however, proceed with caution and sensitivity, for it is a disservice to present ethnic music which is not authentic in content or style of performance. Music educators cannot be expected to be experts in all the types of ethnic music found in Canada today, but fortunately, recordings, films and videotapes are available which the teacher can use to present authentic performances of a variety of ethnic music. In addition, teachers can call on local performers to demonstrate their music. Students and their parents can provide valuable links to their ethnocultural communities.

A recent conference at the University of Toronto on multicultural music education emphasized that there are important social as well as aesthetic justifications for including the music of Canada’s various ethnocultural groups in the curriculum. “When we educate in music, we are constructing an important part of society’s view of itself… When we fail to teach "

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about all music, we are not just ignoring musical forms and modes of expression. We are ignoring the people for whom these forms and expressions are meaningful." The conference, co-sponsored by OMEA and the University of Toronto Faculty of Music, provided opportunities for teachers to participate in music-making sessions led by performers from eight local ethnocultural groups. Included in the published proceedings of this conference are useful lists of resource materials (books, recordings, films) which were distributed to conference participants.

When teaching music composed in Canada, teachers should make their students aware of how this music, like our folk music, grows out of the Canadian multicultural mosaic. Many of Canada's composers have written music which reflects their own ethnic background. For example, Healey Willan and Godfrey Ridout were clearly influenced by their British heritage, while Claude Champagne's music reflects his French background. Srul Irving Glick's compositions reveal his Jewish roots, while Alexina Louie's music grows out of her Chinese-Canadian heritage. Yet at the same time, many composers, like composers in much of the Western world, have moved toward more experimental styles, and have shown "a stronger allegiance to the international school of experimental music." John Weinzweig's serial compositions, Barry Truax's electroacoustic music, and R. Murray Schafer's aleatoric pieces are obvious examples. The music written in Canada since World War II "is astonishingly rich. Every modern trend is represented and many composers strive for wide diversity within their own output."

In developing music programs which reflect the wide diversity of folk and composed music in Canada, teachers should be concerned to preserve the individual details of the Canadian multicultural mosaic, while at the same time helping students understand and appreciate that it is all the details which together form that mosaic. As students gain understanding and appreciation of Canadian music, they may also gain insight into the world's music.

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1. For example, Reflections of Canada, Vol. 1 (Oakville, Ontario: Frederick Harris, 1985)
4. ibid., p. 115-116.