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The Integration of Music and Tradebook Teaching: Creating a Greater Passion for Music through the Use of Reading Skills

by

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As a student in junior and senior high, I participated in choral classes, such as mixed chorus and madrigal choir. The choral directors taught students how to perform songs through rote memorization and by practice of musical methods. Although we were taught how to sight-read certain pieces of music and naturally had to read the music (words, musical notes, symbols, etc.), little or no reading skills were consciously taught in these music classrooms.

As a teacher, I now look back on that time and think how much more meaningful the musical experiences could have been if supplementary materials from tradebooks had been incorporated into the instruction. We certainly performed each piece in a top-notch manner; we had fun learning the music. Our teachers demonstrated a “passion” for the musical pieces that were being taught. But to this day, I can tell you nothing of any real content concerning the songs we sang. All I remember is that we had a good time.

After each musical piece, I did a “data dump,” having learned nothing more than how to perform. When one performance was finished, the class went on to prepare for the next. NOTHING was taught of the history of songs or their creators. Why the song existed or how it came into being was totally ignored. Tradebooks were never used. Had they been, my musical experiences would have been more satisfying and fulfilling. I would have developed a greater passion for learning through the integration of tradebook teaching, reading, and music in the classroom.

Children learn in different ways, and the synthesis of music and tradebook teaching provides a greater repertoire of learning experiences to student learning preferences. Imagine a child coming home and exclaiming, “I learned about a cool book in music class today!” or “I learned about a cool song in reading class today!” Just because a teacher is not a specialist in reading or music does not mean that reading cannot be used in the music classroom or that music cannot be used in the reading classroom.

Teachers of music and of reading and literature would do well to articulate their mutual concerns and methods and put forth a deliberate effort in bringing these subjects together. Once accomplished, the likelihood for student success will be greatly enhanced (Tucker 1980).

Music and reading have many common links. According to Lloyd (1978), in both music and reading, students must be able to perceive similarities and differences in symbols, sounds, and shapes. As in reading, music is taught from top to bottom, and from left to right. In fact, musical notations may be easier to read than the alphabet since notes are constant with the sounds they represent.

Numerous strategies can be used to incorporate reading into music and vise versa. Three possibilities are vocabulary, poetry, and comprehension.

In the area of vocabulary building, a useful tradebook is Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts (1970). Each chapter discusses various aspects of music. The chapter “What Makes Music American?” could be successfully combined with choral or instrumental selections written by early twentieth-century American composers. The music teacher could teach the content of that chapter to the class as an introduction to the musical piece under consideration. Such an method not only makes the musical selection interesting, but it also creates a passion for learning the song.
In this unit on “What Makes Music American,” teachers might begin the lesson by introducing the following vocabulary words:

- nationalistic
- Congo drums
- chanting
- mazurka
- reel
- goulash
- symphony
- jazz
- rhapsody
- syncopation

A class discussion concerning the vocabulary used in the chapter would ensue. With the presentation of “syncopation,” identified as a unique ingredient of jazz, the teacher could have the class demonstrate it through a jazz song, further solidifying the concept in the students’ minds. Such teaching shows what an excellent tool vocabulary building can be in combining music and reading.

Poetry is another device that music and reading teachers may use to demonstrate how rhythmic texts and music correlate. For example, steady beat and rhythm are common features in poems, rhymes, and chants (Jacobi-Karna 1995). Reading/literature teachers often focus on these elements whenever poetry is taught. A fun traditional song to employ is *Frog Went A-Courting*—a 1956 Caldecott Award winner. Here are a few of the lines from this award-winning book:

Frog went a-courting, he did ride, Sword and pistol by his side.  
When upon his high horse set, His boots they shone as black as jet  
He rode right up to mouse’s hall, Where he most tenderly did call: “Oh, Mistress Mouse, are you within?” “Yes, kind frog, I sit to spin.”  
He took Miss Mousie on his knee, “Pray, Miss Mouse, will you marry me?” “Without my Uncle Rat’s consent, I would not marry the president!”

As you read the poem, can you feel the rhythm? Can you feel the beat? Did you hear the rhyme? But wait a minute, is this poetry or song? It is actually both.

It is easy to see how music and literature/reading teachers can energize the teaching of poetic elements not only through the use of traditional folk songs, but also through modern hip-hop and rock.

Finally, comprehension is another area that benefits from the integration of music and tradebook teaching. To capture the attention of adolescents, creative literature/reading and music teachers may easily plan a unit around the legendary folk character Robin Hood. There are many retellings of Robin Hood, with possible sources such as: *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* by Howard Pyle and illustrated by Lawrence Beall Smith (Legacy Press, Inc.); *Robin Hood* by Paul Creswick and illustrated by N. C. Wyeth (Charles Scribner’s Sons); *Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest* by Ann McGovern and illustrated by Arnold Spilka (McGovern 1968); *Sherwood* by Parke Godwin (Godwin 1992). Along with these classics, a more popular version which may appeal to adolescents is the movie *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and its novelization by Green (1991). All of these sources recount the life and adventures of Robin Hood, who, with his band of followers, lived as an outlaw in Sherwood Forest. He and his men vowed not only to bring woe to both the greedy rich and those without mercy, but also to help the innocent and good-hearted (McGovern 1968).

As the literature/reading teacher connects the modern version to the traditional literature, the music teacher could make connections with the literature through music and drama. *Robin Hood: The Musical* (Kelly 1990) is an excellent source that can be used. There are also many sources containing musical ballads of the many adventures of Robin Hood. Kids love learning about such outlaw heroes as Robin Hood. Imagine how exciting Robin Hood becomes when both the literature and music about him are combined. As students read about Robin Hood in the literature class, and sing and perform songs about Robin Hood in the music class, choice learning moments and experiences develop, causing comprehension to soar and the passion for learning to increase.

For example, Robin Hood’s great love was Maid Marion. As students read about the
relationship between Robin Hood and Maid Marion, the music teacher not only could discuss the *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* theme song “Everything I Do, I Do It For You,” performed by Bryan Adams, but the teacher could also connect the modern movie to the more traditional music found in the above mentioned Robin Hood ballads and musicals. By the same token, as the music class concentrates on the music, the literature/reading teacher could have the class study the lives of those who wrote the words, composed the music, and sang the songs of both the traditional and modern versions of Robin Hood. As a culminating activity, the actual movie *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* could be shown, or the students themselves could perform the Robin Hood musical.

The format of this Robin Hood unit provides a model for teaching other literary works that lend themselves to combining music, text, and recent movies. For example, the Shakespearean plays of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *A Mid-Summer’s Night’s Dream* all have related musicals and movie that could be integrated with the written literature. Even Jane Austin’s classics *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* both have been made into movies with accompanying music.

Not only can teachers integrate literature with music, but they can also combine American folklore and music into other content areas. In their book *Gonna Sing My Head Off!*, Kathleen Krull and Allen Garns combine story, song, and pictures into a delightful collection of American folk songs for children to sing along with piano and guitar accompaniments. One song in particular, “Joe Hill,” would be quite useful for teachers of history and social studies. Joe Hill was a labor activist and songwriter. As he traveled across America, he helped organize workers into unions. The songs he wrote are considered by many to be America’s first protest songs. During his travels, he was convicted of a murder he swore he did not commit. Despite pleas from President Woodrow Wilson and other sympathizers the world over, Joe Hill was executed by a Utah firing squad in 1915. His life was put into both song and story by Alfred Hayes and Earl Robinson and later immortalized by Joan Baez, with the song “Joe Hill” becoming one of her most requested songs (Krull & Garns 1992).

The above examples illustrate how music can be integrated with literature. Through both story and music, students learn about heroic characters; gain an appreciation for classical literature; and learn about musical instruments, famous compositions and even careers in music and writing. Such integration exposes students to the people behind the music and the way music affected their lives.

Scott McBride, the executive director of the Young Keyboard Artists Association and an associate editor of *Keyboard Companion*, points out there are many children’s histories of music and many biographies of composers. He likes to use books that are anecdotal in nature because students need to realize that not only do composers create music, but they also need to eat, dress, and cope with problems, etc. (McBride 1995).

McBride further states that an excellent source to which a teacher can refer is *Lives of the Musicians: Good Times, Bad Times (And What the Neighbors Thought)* written by Kathleen Krull and illustrated by Kathryn Hewitt (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich). The book reveals interesting anecdotes that bring to life the composers of the classical music we listen to today. For example, students learn from the book that Vivaldi had red hair and that Brahms threw his clothes on the floor every night. Children also gain a better understanding of why the music of Beethoven sounds as it does when they learn that Beethoven was the victim of child abuse by an alcoholic father (McBride 1995).

A literature search produced a number of excellent sources for teachers who wish to integrate music with tradebook teaching. At the end of this article is a sampling of such sources and possibilities (Jacobi-Karna 1995). For a more comprehensive list, refer to “The Reading Teacher”, vol. 49, No. 3, November 1995.

Some educators have reported the successful integration of music and tradebook teaching. Lillian Johnson uses disco, rock, country, and gospel music as a means of integrating reading and music. She encourages her seventh-graders to
find lyrics for songs, transcribe them, and use the vocabulary from them. Assignments include alphabetizing, defining, syllabicing, writing the words in sentences, and performing choral readings of the musical pieces. They also find and develop synonyms and antonyms for more difficult words (Johnson 1982).

In Phillipsburg, Pennsylvania, a class of second-graders preparing to hear Snow White were surprised to see a box of musical instruments in the front of the room. Each child was given a name tag for each character in the story. The children were asked to think about their character and then choose an instrument whose sound would best represent their character. As the story was read to the class, whenever a character was mentioned, the student with that assigned character would play his or her chosen instrument. By having the class interact with the spoken story, students sharpened their listening skills and developed a greater appreciation for the literature presented. The second graders clearly identified themselves with the characters they played, illustrating a continued recall of identity and the plot of the story (Kerston, 1996). Surely this demonstrates how musical learning can be a meaningful and lasting experience through the integration of tradebook teaching and music in the classroom, creating a greater “passion” for learning within the student!

A synonymous term for “the integration of tradebook teaching and music” could be “the language experience approach in the content area classroom.” Here are some further examples:

--the teacher plays a recording of a musical selection...After students discuss the mood created, they dictate their ideas which are written on a ditto master to help them remember the work.

--the teacher plays a melody on the piano....Students create lyrics which would fit the tempo. The lyrics are then copied and given to all students to sing.

--when students are learning a selection in music which is related to a folk tale or other stories, (such as Robin Hood as discussed earlier) the teacher may ask students to write the story for a chart or poster. A script is then developed for choral reading to be used in the next music class as an introduction to the song... (Dupuis 1989, 255)

“Harmonizing” musical and tradebook teaching in the classroom enhances the learning experience for both students and teachers. Should further research be done? Yes! Should parents push for greater integration of disciplines? Yes! Teachers must collaborate and create links and bridges to learning. The teaching of reading/literature and the teaching of music should not remain on islands unto themselves on the sea of learning, as they have in the past. Harmonizing both music and reading in the classroom carries the passion for learning into the hearts of our children and prepares them for careers and greater achievements into the twenty-first century.
Bibliography

Selected Children's Books for Use in Teaching Music

**Illustrated Songs**


**Fiction**


**Repetition**


**Cumulative**


**Poems & Rhymes**


**Picture Books**


**Non-Fiction**


