

# Bridging Musical Understanding through Multicultural Musics

By Deborah V. Blair and Shinko Kondo

*If we approach both other musical cultures and our own with respect, our students will reap the benefits.*

**M**ulticultural musics offer a wealth of rich musical works for students to explore. Through active engagement with new musical ideas, students learn about the music and about other people. They also often find commonalities with their own music and within themselves as musicians. Teachers know this, and many have a genuine desire to successfully embed multicultural musics into their music curricula, but they may struggle to find ways that engage their students in meaningful ways with music that may sound unfamiliar or strange.

One reason it can be difficult to engage students with unfamiliar music in ways that are culturally meaningful to them is that we also endeavor to present unfamiliar music in a cultural context that is as authentic as possible. The further removed the cultural con-

text of the music from the cultural experience of the learners, the more difficult it is for them to make meaningful connections to the new experience. When teaching music of one culture to members of another, whose culture should be honored? Our teaching practices must be authentic to the people whose music we are teaching, but it is also important that it be authentic to the students we are teaching. This is further complicated by the fact that, to learn, students must make a connection to prior experience. We must seek a delicate balance between honoring and respecting the cultural context of the music and honoring and respecting the culture and the learning processes of students in our classrooms.

## **Connect to Prior Experiences**

For students to learn and grow during all musical experience, they must be able to con-

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nect new ideas to their own past experiences.<sup>1</sup> As teachers, we must realize that each student enters the classroom with a unique set of experiences, skills, and understandings. For example, each student participating in a drumming ensemble for the first time will approach the music in a way that is personally meaningful for him or her, drawing on prior experience with drums and drum music, whether it be playing with a toy drum set, watching a marching band, playing small hand drums as part of a school music lesson, or any of a wide range of other life experiences. Some may focus on the steady beat, while those with a solid understanding of steady beat may listen attentively to a particular rhythmic pattern. Some students with percussion training or the ability to play a variety of rhythmic patterns may be already figuring out how the rhythmic patterns fit together. Each person enters and connects to the experience in his or her own way. From research,<sup>2</sup> we know this to be true of all learning.

One of our responsibilities as teachers is to understand this learning process, enabling our students to connect new experiences to previous experiences. This means that we must not only know our students but must also value what they bring into the classroom as musicians. Starting with what students know, we need to find ways to create experiences that encourage them to think musically, to value new musical sounds, and to be creative as listeners, performers, and composers. By designing intriguing musical problems for students to solve,<sup>3</sup> we enable each student to construct new and enduring musical understandings when connections are made between previously valued experiences to newly understood experiences.

### Honor Music and Learner

It is within this frame of valuing students' musical knowings and the ways they solve musical problems that we address the question of how to teach multicultural music in



Photo by Becky Spray

Bridges between what children know and new knowledge are best made when both cultures are respected.

school settings. We must also respect the importance of the cultural authenticity of a musical work and its process of transmission within its source culture. Teachers, very appropriately, wish to respect the people whose music they are teaching. With this in mind, they tend to believe that the music must be taught exactly as it would be taught in its original cultural context. However, what some teachers forget is that the children of that culture live in that place. They have heard that music daily since birth. They have experienced the activities or celebrations in which this music is embedded, resulting in a rich cultural heritage of previous experiences that informs their understanding of this music.

But we—and our students—are not in that

place. We are in learning environments in our home culture. For many of us, Western music is the music of our lives and the lens through which we frame our experiences with new musics. Although our students may not have an intuitive sense of an unfamiliar music's phrasing, tonality, or mood, our students do have an intuitive sense of phrasing, tonality, and mood in Western music. This understanding will be the bridge for discovering the expressive nature of another people's music.

What we know about music is deeply rooted in our beings, and we cannot erase it when we mentally travel to new musical worlds. All that we hear is influenced and mediated by our Western ears. To ask our students to set aside what they already know about music and the ways they solve musical problems would not honor their musical processes. Asking students to set aside what they already know can prevent them from making meaningful musical connections to the new music. The frame of our prior musical experience allows us to connect to the familiar while exploring and coming to understand the unfamiliar.

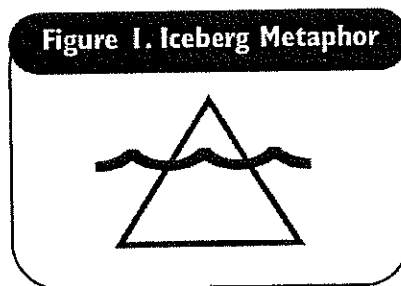
If we teach students music of an unfamiliar culture without allowing them to connect the experience to what they already know about music, we are increasing the likelihood that they will acquire misconceptions, or worse, we create a situation where the potential exists for students to devalue the music. If students are in a situation where they "do" music but do not understand it, the opportunity for a meaningful musical encounter has been lost. We value new things when they connect to us—when they speak to us in a meaningful, personal way.

### Find a Cultural Bridge

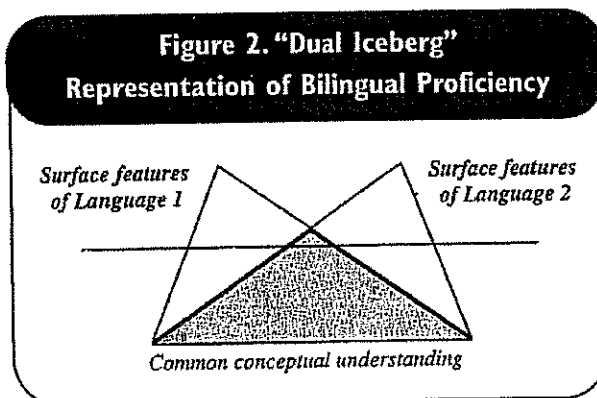
In our desire to so highly regard the culture of the music we are studying, we may be inadvertently disregarding the culture of our own students and the musical knowings that they bring into the classroom. These musical knowings are the link that bridges the gap between musics of diverse peoples—what we share and

know about music. Perhaps it is not necessary to be 100-percent culturally authentic in our teaching. However, it is necessary to be 100-percent committed to enabling our students to understand new music. In this way, we acknowledge the people we are studying by honoring their music and making it possible for our students to make meaningful connections with it.

As we pondered ways of dealing with the challenge of trying to respect both the culture-bearers of the music and the processes of music learners, we came upon a metaphor suggested by an expert in bilingual language education—an "iceberg" metaphor<sup>4</sup> (see figure 1). Imagine an iceberg with the greater portion of the ice submerged under water.



Only the tip is extending out of the water, but it has a huge body of ice underneath. The visible tip of the iceberg represents the formal aspects of language such as pronunciation, basic vocabulary, and grammar. The submerged part of the iceberg represents the aspects of language dealing with conceptual understanding and functional meaning. In supporting bilingual education, this idea is expanded to a "dual-iceberg metaphor" (figure 2) representing bilingual proficiency. The underlying interdependence of conceptual understanding supports the stu-



dents' proficiency in both languages.

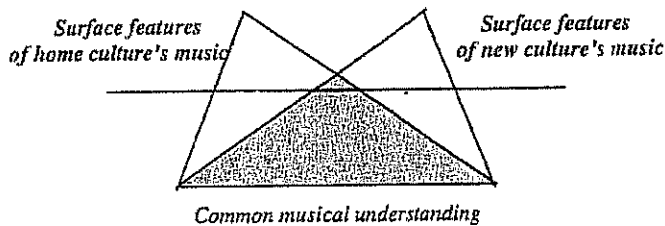
When children are learning through their first language, they are not only learning the surface structure of the language. They are also learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant and later transferred to their ability to function in the second language. For example, pupils who know how to tell the time in their first language understand the concept of telling time. To tell time in the second language, they do not need to relearn the concept of telling time; they simply need to acquire new labels or "surface structures" for an intellectual skill they have already learned.

When we travel abroad, we also bring ourselves—who we are. We compare new experiences to what we know from our own cultural experience, finding a similar human spirit or completely different features in these experiences. We use our existing understanding, connecting new sights and sounds to current knowledge by evaluating, comparing, and shifting images of our world. If we had an opportunity to spend an extended period abroad, we still could not set aside every understanding we have constructed throughout our lives and replace it with new understandings, ignoring the foundation of previous experiences. Rather, we build upon our prior experiences, now enriched by new sights, sounds, and ideas.

The principle of interdependence suggested by the iceberg metaphor can be applied to multicultural music education as well (figure 3). If the tip of the iceberg represents the visible surface of individual musical knowledge and skills, the ice under the surface represents a significant amount of one's conceptual musical understanding from prior multidimensional experience. It is an essential part of our prior musical experience that informs our musical thinking.

When we experience unfamiliar music outside our home culture, we cannot disregard our own musical understanding constructed in our everyday lives. Nor can we forget the nature of music—a vehicle for expression, common to all peoples.

**Figure 3. "Dual Iceberg"  
Representation of Learning Multicultural Music**



When we consider the effectiveness of multicultural education, we must recognize that when children are learning through music in their own culture, they are not only learning this music in a narrow sense; they are also learning concepts that are equally relevant to their ability to function in music from another culture. For example, children who understand Western musical concepts such as melody, rhythm, form, and texture are able to use these ideas to compare ways in which two different kinds of music organize sound.

### **Bridging Musical Understanding**

Embracing multicultural music begins with a foundation in one's own musical culture—and acknowledging what our students and we know about music. Students may not be able to verbalize precisely what they know, but they hear much more than they

can create music through composing and improvising.

Students have experienced many forms of music and in our music classrooms begin to explore its roots and its cultural significance, and to value the meaning it has for their lives. This is our students' Western cultural heritage. It includes all the ways that students have constructed musical meaning and have inherited musical values from their families and communities, including their school community.

When we study music from a culture other than our own, we can acknowledge that we are not present in that culture. We are in school, but we are honoring the music of another culture by exploring and experiencing it through listening, singing, moving, playing, even creating (see the "Sakura" lesson plan). To do this, we may borrow familiar tools that facilitate learning in musics of our own culture. For example, we may listen to

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can tell and are quite sure about what they like and dislike. They also know when things sound "right" or when something is new and interesting. Younger students begin to understand that music has steps, skips, and repeated sounds, that it moves fast or slowly, and can be loud or quiet. In school, students might be invited to represent music through movement or by using graphic representations, form charts, and texture maps. They can find chords that "fit" aurally, and they

unfamiliar music while engaging in a familiar activity like solving a melodic contour puzzle to familiarize our ears to the new sounds. After completing such a task, we may describe ways that the music is the same and different. We may try to determine its form and realize it has similar patterns or a completely new structure, unlike anything we have previously encountered. We may wonder about the tonality, why the music only uses five tones for its "scale," for example, and

work to figure out the notes used. We may think that a given piece is "sad" music because of its minor mode, only to learn that people within its culture of origin consider this sound to be "happy." By using the ways in which we solve musical problems with our own music, we can find similarities between the familiar and unfamiliar, while also discovering the uniqueness of the new sounds. And in exploring the new music, we begin to notice particular qualities in our own familiar music—things often overlooked or taken for granted.

British music educator Keith Swanwick tells this story:

En route once between Boston to Buffalo, I stayed for a couple of days with a former student and her family in Saratoga Springs. On the first evening we sat talking. After listening for a while one of her teenage daughters said suddenly, "Mom, do I have an accent?" My inclination was to make a joke and say, yes, she certainly did have an accent and that the only person present without an accent was me, the visitor from England.

We tend to overlook distinguishing features of our own culture, often remaining unaware that in certain respects we even have a culture. There is a story—probably invented—of an American Indian who spoke five languages. He correctly believed them all to have a grammar, except one—the language he learned as a child at home, his "mother tongue."

Only when provoked by encounters with cultural practices from elsewhere are we likely to pay attention to "accents," including our own. In the same way, we notice how our towns and countryside look when we have spent time elsewhere, perhaps on vacation or working abroad. "Oh, isn't it green," we say from our seat on the plane, as we approach the waterlogged fields around London's Gatwick airport on the way home from sunny Spain.

These observations help to

## A Lesson Plan for the Japanese Song "Sakura" [Cherry Tree]

### Standards addressed:

- Standard 2: Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
- Standard 4: Composing and arranging music within specific guidelines
- Standard 9: Understanding music in relation to history and culture

### Materials:

- Recording of "Sakura"
- Several sets of melody contour puzzle cards for student groups
- One large set of puzzle cards for the board that can be seen from the back of the room
- Picture, video, or audio of a koto (numerous Web resources are available)
- Classroom xylophones and mallets.

### Activity 1: Listening Challenge

- Distribute a set of puzzle cards to each group of three or four students.
- Ask students, "What do you notice in your puzzle?" Talk about their ideas, which will help facilitate their solving the listening problem.
- While listening to the song "Sakura" in its entirety, the students will figure out how to arrange these pieces of paper into the correct order in a way that represents the song.
- When students have the melodic contour cards in the correct order, encourage them to sing along, continuing to trace the contour until all are ready. (This activity permits students to listen to the music several times, becoming familiar with the new sounds before attempting to perform it.)
- The class checks the puzzles, possibly using large melodic contour cards on the board that students put in the correct order using their own cards as a guide.
- Once all puzzles are correctly assembled, students may follow the iconic score by pointing to the part being played and sing the song until all can sing it easily
- Performance through singing is informed by the study of the whole through listening and investigating the parts through the completion and tracing of the puzzle.

### Exploring the Cultural Context of "Sakura"

In Shinko Kondo's experience, when American children first listen to "Sakura," most of them seem to think that it is a Halloween song because it uses an unusual mode with minor intervals. These types of sounds are frequently used in America to represent something sad or scary. The Japanese image of this song is beautiful, peaceful, and joyful. *Sakura* is the Japanese flowering cherry tree. The song refers to *hanami*, blossom viewing, a centuries-old tradition in Japan. *Hanami* is a favorite pastime in Japan during the spring.

At these moments, while students experience the music in a meaningful way, the connections that students make are truly constructed by prior experience in social cultural context and

the history we live. Kondo has discovered that, after introducing the cultural background of "Sakura" to students and showing some pictures of the scene of celebrating the cherry blooms, they have said, "Oh yes, it's like Japanese music." They have entered the new world of sound, shifting and reconstructing their musical understanding in their own minds. This is a very touching moment for a teacher, and perhaps for the students as well.

During this activity, some children will compare what they know about Western music with what they have learned about music from listening to and singing "Sakura," and they will become aware of the differences of the mood. They express their understanding by saying things like, "Ms. Kondo, in this song, the notes are going up and down by step, sometimes by skip and leap just like songs we learned, but something is different—the feeling is slightly different, but why?" This type of discussion can lead to the next activity.

### Activity 2: Analyze the Scale Structure.

Using the large melodic contour map of "Sakura" on the board, and providing the starting pitch and note name, invite students to sing the song using the note names. This will require more than one attempt, and some support will be needed to help students find the correct note at the large skips.

Make a list of the five notes names used. Discuss with your students how only five different notes (plus two octave-down pitches with the same note names) are used. Tell students that a scale using only five pitches is a pentatonic scale. Compare this to a diatonic scale, and figure out which pitches are included and which pitches are missing. Assuming that the song starts on G, the missing pitches would be F and C.

Explain to your students that there are many kinds of pentatonic scales all over the world, but the one used in "Sakura" is called *hira joshi*, one of the Japanese pentatonic scales.

Share with your students that in Japan, people might play this song on a koto, but they will be able to learn to play it on classroom xylophones. Have students find the appropriate pitches on the xylophones, and remove the unnecessary bars. Because there would not be a space on the koto between the pitches, students may move the bars next to each other (just as the strings would be placed or tuned on the koto). Learning to play the song with no skip where our Western ears hear a skip is a way of experiencing how the Japanese perceive this music to be "correct."

At this point in the lesson, allow students to figure out how to play "Sakura." Because of their previous experiences provided by this lesson that enabled students to make strong musical connections through listening and singing, students may spend some time figuring out how to play "Sakura" by ear, supported by their own singing and listening.

### Activity 3: Creating

Now supported by the listening to, performing through singing, and performing through playing "Sakura," students will work in small groups to create an introduction or coda or an accompaniment for "Sakura" using the notes of this pentatonic scale. After having ample time to create and rehearse their music, students will share their arrangements with the class.

bring into view two important truths. One is that the customs and conventions differ. The other is that exposure to other cultures helps us understand something of our own. Musicians, too, have their "accents."

Exploring music from other cultures is essential and valuable because of the bridges of understanding it creates among peoples and because of the expanding world of sound that enriches our musical lives. It allows us to broaden and clarify our musical understanding of the music of our own culture. What students know about music must be honored as highly as the new music and cultural expressions that they are studying—while they are studying it. What we know about music defines who we are as musicians and is the lens or "ear" through which we experience all other musics.

As evidenced by Keith Swanwick's tale, it is only when we encounter other cultural practices that we pay attention

to "accents"—those of others and our own. Bridges that connect us to new musical worlds do not just connect to new places and peoples. They also connect us to each other here, and sometimes bring us back to who we are.

#### NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (Indianapolis, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938)

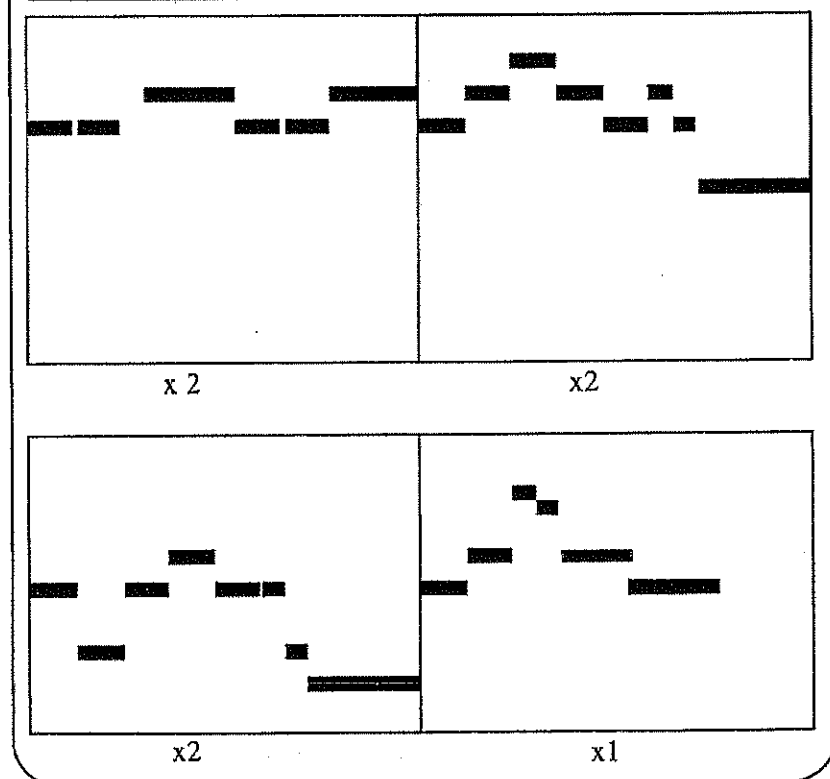
2. Jacqueline G. Brooks, and Martin G. Brooks, *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1993/1999).

3. Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, *Best Practice: Today's Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*, 3rd ed (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005)

4. Jim Cummins, *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy* (San Diego, CA: College-Hill Press, 1984).

5. Keith Swanwick, *Teaching Music Musically* (London: Routledge, 1999), 22 ■

Figure 4. Melodic Contour Puzzle Cards for "Sakura"



Note: The song "Sakura" is included in many music curriculums. Make sure that the puzzle cards that you use match the version of the song that you are using. This puzzle shows the melody without any introduction.

## Multicultural Music

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